SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

Barnardine's Straw: The Devil in Shakespeare's Detail

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> He is coming, sir, he is coming. I hear his straw rustle.
> (*Measure for Measure*, IV. iii. 30.)

AT THE BEGINNING of *Love's Labour's Lost* four young men step into the world of academe with just a hint of vainglory: they look forward to a three-year banquet of the mind accompanied by the mortification of the body, while King Ferdinand imagines an announcement on his gravestone that he has made Navarre in his time, like the Florence of the Medici, 'the wonder of the world'. A theatre practitioner passing through the portals of the British Academy today does so for an evening only and looks forward to a more corporeal banquet, but still with a certain hangdog bravura, if there is such a thing, particularly if he is, as far as I know, the first of his tribe to be given the opportunity of speaking in this way. Let me be unequivocal here—today's honour is considerable and felt. We are, after all, continuing to celebrate a truce that has come about within my lifetime between two Shakespearian constituencies—scholars and practitioners—as a result of which the latter bask in a certain intellectual credibility, not always deserved, while the former show an enthusiasm for spit and sawdust that quite takes one aback. In theatre Green Rooms these days you can hear talk about the *ur-Hamlet* and Shakespeare's Foul Papers while most actors know a 'good' quarto from a 'bad'; and if I visit my friends at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford, the preferred talk amidst the congenial popping of corks might well be some long forgotten piece of stage business that I intrigued them with twenty years ago.

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There's little need, of course, to dwell any further on this. But in the last few days I have turned, as I suppose anybody might, to Mrs Frida Mond's original brief to the Academy in 1910: 'An annual lecture to be delivered on or about 23 April on some Shakespearian subject, philosophical, historical or philological, or some problem in English dramatic literature and histrionic art, or some study in literature of the age of Shakespeare'. There it is, a needle's eye to slip through—'histrionic art': fine word, 'histrionic'. It allows me to brandish for credibility, like some Quixotic lance, the figure, reached by the roughest of estimates, of some 20,000 hours spent thus far actually performing Shakespeare, leaving aside the greater length of time rehearsing, thinking and talking about him. Perhaps it will be helpful if I start by explaining briefly how this extraordinary circumstance has come about. What, in fact, was the true beginning of my end?

Like trying to establish the moment when one first stood up and walked, it is hard for many of us to remember when Shakespeare first entered our lives; but my own memory is extremely precise. Shakespearian verse hit me like a hammer when I was eleven. It was *Macbeth*, rolling off the stage of the Old Vic:

> My way of life
> Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf . . .[1]

The yellow leaf? It was the beginning of winter, and this was familiar—it was what I had shuffled through a couple of hours before in our street in North London under the equally yellow streetlamps, on my way home from school. I didn't know what 'sere' meant, but I heard its tearing sound, just as even now there are many words in Shakespeare whose weight and power in the theatre are gathered more readily than their meaning. And underneath it, that heavy beat of the verse, this new thing softly pounding. An hour or so earlier, I had jumped out of my skin with Lady Macbeth as she heard a sound during the murder, catching the jagged contrast between the onomatopoeic 'shriek' of the owl and the solemnity of the 'stern'st goodnight', the two phrases jammed up against each other like a wild swoop on the saxophone. I had already imagined a naked new-born babe doing what sounded like the work of a giant, striding the blast of trumpets; and later on I had been warned that

> Light thickens, and the crow
> Makes wing to the rooky wood.

[1] *Macbeth*, V. iii. 22–3.

> Good things of day begin to droop and drowse
> Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.[2]

Nowadays I know that there was no strict need for 'crows' as well as 'rooks' in Shakespeare's picture—he was ever prodigal, two words where one might do; also that a large part of what makes this great speech work is that ominous rhyming couplet, its brooding abstracts rolling out from under the astonishing verbal photograph that precedes them. At the time, all I seemed to hear was a great flapping somewhere above my head in the dark auditorium, added to the distinct sensation that I was growing up fast. Not to mention, of course, wanting that evening to know how they did the blood, and how exactly that empty seat at dinner had suddenly got filled.

The impact was such as to make me run home and read the play out loud, just as I'd heard it, to see whether the language would still stand up and walk in the same way. And, you know, it sort of did. So the first lesson was learned: this new sound belonged to me, too, and it was more like discovering sex than reading a book.

So it was that I embarked on a thoroughly narrow-minded adolescence, in which I saw most of the plays, and then bustled home to re-play myself everything from the Bawd in *Pericles* to Old Adam, from Titus Andronicus to Falstaff's Page; which, I suppose has saved a lot of time learning the lines later. And it could have been worse: at least my childhood wasn't as slyly dominated by Shakespeare as was that of John Mortimer, who as early as he can remember became used to being asked by his bardolatrous father 'Is execution done on Cawdor?'—which as he says is a difficult question to answer when you are four. He also came to assume that Hubert's instructions to the attendants in *King John* to tie up the boy Arthur for blinding concealed the name of a rather shady firm of solicitors, Rushforth and Bindtheboy.

I recount these merry memories to point out an absolutely unavoidable preconditioning. Not even the experience of going on to study *Macbeth* at O-Level, taught as indifferently as Shakespeare generally was in the late 1950s, could affect my inability, confronted with a passage of Shakespeare, to keep my mouth shut. I knew natively that its clamour and insinuation, its appeasements, its high music and its astonishing simplicities were like an electrical circuit connecting in a single moment the nervous systems of a man long dead, a group of people on a platform, and as wide a variety as possible of listeners; and that the connection between the three was

[2] *Macbeth*, III. ii. 50–3.

presumably vulnerable to any number of adventitious short circuits which could kill the whole thing dead in a moment.

And in fact forty years of application to these texts, those 20,000-plus hours of identifying what mechanics call the Snap Bang Pop of the engine, have really been for me a prolonged attempt to recapture and pass on the intoxication of sound, meaning and physical presence that caught me like a lethal cocktail that night. If that first experience was rhapsodic and inflammatory, practice has made it inquisitive, strategic and structural, in the sense that the study of a complex machine is structural. The playing of Shakespeare is now explicable to me more in athletic terms than aesthetic, and I hope it is more than an evasive conceit to compare the rehearsing of Hamlet to the planning of a long-distance race, and the moment preceding any performance of it—the dimming of the lights, in fact—to the gathering of attention that you can see in the face of a high jumper as his feet begin to shuffle tremulously on the ground. Something of this is perhaps what I can most usefully hope to convey today. The complex patterns of tension and release in Shakespearian verse, of lightness and weight, impetus and reflection, not to mention the equally taxing architecture of his prose, calls for an attention which, though musical in a general sense, is also somewhat akin to studying the torque of an engine, or rather of thirty-seven slightly different engines.

The inquisitiveness I mentioned extends of course to contemplating the man behind the writer. His colleagues John Heminges and Henry Condell commented about Shakespeare that 'his mind and hand went together, and what he thought he uttered with that easiness that we have scarcely received from him a blot on his papers'. They seem to be saying this was not a man who would relapse in your company into introspective silences; and I would add that he was an author who wrote no introspective characters, not even Hamlet, but rather men and women with the most urgent need to speak, defining their ideas in the very act of uttering them: in fact they hardly know what their ideas are until they open their mouths, whereupon they achieve the most remarkable fluency and precision. Very occasionally we meet in Shakespeare a slow-witted character, and get the sneaking feeling that he is operating at something like our speed—hence our instinctive affection for Sir Andrew Aguecheek, or for Constable Dull in *Love's Labour's Lost*, who, accused by the schoolteacher of having 'spoke no word all this time', admits that he has 'understood none neither'.[3] For the general clamour is continuous: and when at

[3] *Love's Labour's Lost*, V. i. 161, 162.

a great moment in *Coriolanus* the hero gives in to the persuasions of his mother, and Shakespeare provides a unique stage direction: 'He Holds Her By the Hand, Silent',[4] the effect is as shocking as if a symphony had stopped in mid-bar. When Hamlet, the most voluble of all Shakespeare's creations, dies with the ironic words 'The rest is silence', it is not only a life that we watch end but a whole possibility for language.

As to the manner how: it is interesting to set against Heminges' and Condell's beguiling photograph of Shakespeare a parallel glimpse of one of his great exponents; George Bernard Shaw, describing the Hamlet of Johnston Forbes-Robertson, said that the actor had played 'as Shakespeare should be played, on the line and to the line, with the uttering and acting simultaneous, inseparable and in fact identical'.[5] In my much later working life the fashion in which this unique material is handled has moved hither and thither. A rough assessment of verse-speaking styles at around the time that I encountered my first *Macbeth* in 1955 can be caught from John Gielgud's contemporary recording of *Hamlet* with the Old Vic Company, many of whom were also in the *Macbeth*. Leaving Gielgud himself aside for the moment, what you can hear is a manner very typical of the decade or so after the Second World War: a brisk and genteel prettiness in the women, and the men a bit officer-class, but muscular, direct and, as Shaw would probably acknowledge, on the line. Thus Claudius's opening address to the Danish Court might sound a little like this:

[The lecturer demonstrates Act I Scene ii, lines 1–7, in the manner described.]

There a sort of no-nonsense practicality here, a lack of preciousness, staunch, heterosexual and classical. Its brisk assertiveness may have been a compensating mechanism for an innate English reticence and distrust; it delivered the goods without fuss, if also without much nuance. But in some sense the outward manner set limits on the interpretation rather than being formed by it. Claudius acknowledges the recent losses but urges the troops, especially that young man in black, to pull themselves together and get behind him in his new coalition, which logically enough includes the widowed Queen. Almost the key word in the speech becomes 'discretion'. What the young man in black, always our moral litmus, would be objecting to in this, even before he has anything more to go on, would be the absolute lack of any other sensibility in his elders than the self-confident; what would be

[4] *Coriolanus*, V. iii. 183.

[5] *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* (New York, 1906; London, 1907).

attracting Gertrude, meanwhile, would be the oddly potent male mixture, like a strong tobacco, of aggression and homeliness.

Within ten years of this recording John Barton and Peter Hall had instituted at the newly formed Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon something of a revolution. In their verse work with the actors, the nub was argumentation, the ironic tension of thought against thought, and for a character like Claudius, a grasp of realpolitik in the day-to-day that might quite possibly, once in a while, involve a certain blurring of ethic. Certainly, the slightest actorish tremolo, the merest sense of poetic enjoyment, was vigorously engineered out in the interests of explication:

> [The lecturer demonstrates the same speech in this new manner.]

What, from the outset, Hamlet would have objected to in this Claudius would be the sheer professionalism, the slightly 'spun' rationale, a sense of general approximation—not to mention the fact that, logically enough, the whole louche process was being lubricated by a great deal of hard drinking and sexual *oeillade*.

As a point of interest, these two great originators in the matter of verse-speaking have, forty years later, diverged almost completely in their advice. Barton's current teaching, if I represent it rightly, is that the desired end—a blend of forensic accuracy, antithetical thought and a precise level of metaphor—is justified by whatever means the actor finds to achieve it; while Hall, who cheerfully describes himself as an iambic fundamentalist, insists on certain practical standing orders which would be proscriptive, were they not tempered by a good pragmatic knowledge that the theatre is not, after all, rocket science. Thus, for example, you must never breathe within a blank verse line, but must always do so, if only for a nanosecond, at its end. To become anecdotal for a moment, I found myself playing Claudius for him a few years back. By this time I myself stood for a certain approach—I had for some years been running the English Shakespeare Company, an outfit that despite its modernism clung in its own fanatical way to the metrical disciplines of the verse, but added an occasional dash of libertarianism. Hall and I faced each other on the first day of rehearsals with much affection: we had worked together a good deal by then, though never on a Shakespeare, and there was going to be the question of whether we would see eye to eye on these matters. He immediately, in a move worthy of Claudius himself, declared to the company that his verse methods were non-negotiable, and turned to me for a demonstration of them. My colleagues young and old leaned

forward to hear an exemplar of correct breathing and phrasing. I hope I can still do what I remember doing that morning:

[The lecturer demonstrates the same passage, without drawing a breath.]

This Cheshire Cat performance—which drew, incidentally, on the dictum of an earlier director, Tyrone Guthrie, that you should be able to do half a dozen lines of verse on a single breath—allowed everyone to draw whatever moral they pleased. And in fact, in the serendipitous way of such things, it gave me a clue as to how I would eventually play the part. To my existing conviction that Claudius runs a Court so brazenly dazzling that you have to shade your eyes to see clearly, I now added the complete impossibility, in the face of his virtuosic fluency, of getting a word in edgeways even had etiquette allowed it. He literally silenced the opposition by starving them of the oxygen to speak. So a chance encounter that morning between directorial doctrine and actor's expediency had begun to create a character for me.

Running alongside all these debates, of course, and in many ways summing them up, is the great and unavoidable figure the centenary of whose birth we celebrated last week—John Gielgud, who for a large part of last century seemed to be seen somewhat as Shakespeare's personal representative on earth. I say that even though I was startled once to find myself in the company of Princess Margaret when she declared after a charity concert that Gielgud was quite the worst verse-speaker that she had ever heard. Well, there we are. There's little doubt in most minds that for a good half-century he was the undisputed leader of the field. His style is often described as refined, or tasteful or aesthetic; and certainly what he released into the sturdy world of Shakespearian acting in his time was sensibility—his physical grace was exceptional, and his personal fastidiousness far removed (he was part Slav, after all) from the class limitations of many of the actors around him. But more important than the beauty of his speech, and in fact making its beauty possible, was an effortless and thrilling speed of thought that neutralised any sentimentality and came not from the frontal lobes but directly from the solar plexus. His was not a style packed with testosterone like Laurence Olivier's, but one that declared itself as implicitly bisexual; here was an actor who wept copiously while sounding trumpet-tongued. I have never known a performer put so much visceral passion into the act of speech as John Gielgud; he spoke Shakespeare with an unashamed emotional gusto, and you felt that the language had passed through a fire within him to emerge in the God-given tonalities of a lyric tenor.

So in a way he completes a triangle for us, of which the other two sides are Heminges' and Condell's memory of Shakespeare himself and Johnston Forbes-Robertson's acting by the account of Shaw. Gielgud too seemed to think and speak at the same rate; and the banal equivalent of this in his own life was his legendary ability to offend because of a more or less complete inability to think before he spoke. Of all his legacies, his impetuosity as actor and man may well be the greatest.

There is however a reason that this great figure is beginning to recede into history at last, and why the epithet 'Gielgudian' would hardly any more be seen as a compliment. There are a number of things he simply didn't do—and some of them are what, in quite different times, we seek. For one thing he didn't really 'characterise' in the contemporary sense—not in Shakespeare, though he certainly did in the plays of Harold Pinter and elsewhere. It is perilous in many ways to talk of 'character' in Shakespeare—he wouldn't have understood the modish word: it might be better to speak of the telling detail. Audiences now, especially the younger ones, look not only for the heroic march of ideas, the actor as conduit for an unmatchable flow of language, but for something that matches what they can see every night in ruthless close-up on the screen. Our new habit is to eavesdrop, interpreting the intricacies of human behaviour—the revelation of a motive, say, or some minute change of heart—from the flick of an eyebrow or from some momentary hesitation in speech: these are the things that seem to take us to the heart of our intimate dilemmas, even if they involve taking risks with the formality of written words. Gielgud might have said that this was non-Shakespearian, but I don't believe that one thing excludes the other. If you listen now to his version of Mercutio's 'Queen Mab' speech, it is a riot of invention and colour and that is all, its only justification; it is striking how little he bothers with the way Mercutio's mood deepens and darkens as his inventive demons take him over, so that his friend Romeo perhaps has to save him from his own racing mind. A Mercutio who didn't allow us to see that, or something like it, would not be critically appreciated now, even in the unlikely event he spoke as gloriously as Gielgud.

He would have been equally wary of certain psychological novelties, and in his generation he was certainly not alone. When Laurence Olivier decided in 1938, having read the work of the psychologist Ernest Jones, Freud's biographer, that Iago nursed a repressed sexual desire for Othello, he horrified and disgusted Ralph Richardson, who was playing the Moor. Olivier, however, was in his own way ahead of his time, expressing what most of us now see as quite likely, not only between those characters but

in the relations of Hector and Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida*, Aufidius and Coriolanus and even Hotspur and Prince Hal.

The other thing John Gielgud did little of, as anyone who heard him attempt Sherlock Holmes's magnificent mimicries can confirm, was the common man. It didn't matter so much then; but as society has changed we have become sceptical about such limitations in our actors, and less impressed by seeing Shakespeare's aristocracy being played by a theatre aristocracy. We rather expect our artists to be classless. Listen to your favourite Shakespearians now and you may hear the reassuring trace of an accent, some tough grain nestling under the high sensibility; our mantra is that Shakespeare, like the buildings in which he is performed, must above all be accessible, and it is a reactionary drama school that still encourages its students, as most would at one time have done, to start by getting rid of their natural accents.

Among the plays themselves, we may also be less beguiled than we once were by those that function only in terms of the individual's tragic destiny, and correspondingly intrigued by those that allow us to glimpse a political context, however remote. We are accustomed, after all, to criticising the policies of our leaders day by day while remaining very interested in the human stress of the job they do. One of the pleasures of a good production of *Hamlet* is the nagging sense that Claudius, guilty as he is, may be better for Denmark than either the belligerent old King Hamlet or his over-complicated son; and we can see that young Hamlet's atavistic mission leads simultaneously to his own catharsis and to the destruction of his country. The body politic, in other words, at least makes a bid to become an equal partner in our attention with its famous hero. One of the challenges in playing the part of Richard II—the way that that particular engine works, in fact—is to push to an extreme degree the sense in which the King is repellent as both monarch and man, up to but not beyond the point where it becomes impossible for the actor to recover enough good will to accompany him in his downfall. And this balance is affected (as in another way it is in *Richard III*), by whether the production forms part of the entire cycle of Histories, in which case it will veer away from lyrical tragedy in the sense that Gielgud saw it, and involve an ongoing political critique.

I suspect also that I am not only speaking for myself in feeling a change in our perception of Shakespeare's women—undoubtedly helped by the public articulacy of many of our leading actresses. One of the few criticisms that could be aimed at Harley Granville Barker's series of Prefaces to Shakespeare, written between 1927 and 1947, is a general shakiness in

this area: he sees Gertrude as a 'pretty, kindly, smirched, bedizened woman' and Paulina in *The Winter's Tale* as 'Plucky Paulina—what a good fellow!' In a 2004 article Professor Gary Taylor has proposed, impartially I think, that women serve as props only in Shakespearian tragedy, which is a male genre in which women are mainly present to do men's crying for them.[6] Though he admits that Desdemona does die herself, twice in fact, it is only in order that her tragic husband can exquisitely suffer for having killed his innocent wife; Juliet and Cleopatra meanwhile are trophy wives, responding appropriately to their men's tragedy, their lives becoming meaningless without them. He doesn't mention in this context Lady Macbeth, Isabella, Hermione, Goneril or Regan; and without knowing how far into his cheek the good Professor's tongue is here—he was writing for *The Guardian*, not preparing a learned paper—I would ask him to look a little further off the beaten track. For instance, within an unusually prolific twelvemonth around 1595, Shakespeare moved from *Love's Labours Lost* through *Richard II*, *Romeo and Juliet* to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Richard, Mercutio, Berowne and Oberon are wonderfully over-equipped males whose brilliant articulacy creates a mute awe all around them. However, they are limited by a disastrous inability to use their talents for any creative purpose, a point insisted on in the latter two cases by the women near them. Oberon's career is largely a matter of correcting mistakes he has initiated, and his fine talk of promontories, dolphin's backs and little western flowers is seriously challenged by the maturity and conscience of Titania, who reminds him of the catastrophic effect of their quarrel on the wider world around them. She confronts him, in fact, with all the moral authority of a much later victim, Hermione countering the destructive pettiness of Leontes. Berowne meanwhile, brilliant but fatally ungenerous, needs Rosaline to send him to fight for his laughs among the sick and dying, initiating the play's unexpected resolution—one which has made it much more popular in recent years: the victory of intelligence and the long perspective over romantic consummation.

This process whereby a hero learns his lessons from an eloquent woman of conscience is much to our taste, I would say: it repeats itself regularly in contemporary playwriting. As Shakespeare's career continues, we will surely approve of Viola as a page fearlessly rebuking the Count Orsino, Hero Claudio, Emilia Iago, and we will notice how much of *As You Like It* lies in the hands of Rosalind, and what a mess Orlando

[6] *The Guardian*, 14 Feb. 2004.

would make of their courtship were it left to him. The female principle is here far ahead of the male; and if Shakespeare's women don't become tragic heroines with quite the same noisy regularity as the men, that is because they are less like fools, since being a tragic hero seems to involve behaving very stupidly at some point, and Shakespeare seems to see that as a male prerogative.

Also in *As You Like It*, we find a variation on the political critique I mentioned when Corin, with a dignity that you see all too infrequently in performance, puts Touchstone's courtly affectations firmly in their place:

> Sir, I am a true labourer, I earn that I eat; get that I wear; owe no man hate, envy no man's happiness; glad of other men's good, content with my harm; and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze, and my lambs suck[7]

—a livelihood which Touchstone tries to dismiss as no more than 'the copulation of cattle'.

It is always a pleasure of course to watch the eloquence of a Shakespearian wordsmith being capsized by someone going about their daily business, by a Gravedigger or a Fool. Or simply an actor: three times Shakespeare uses members of his own profession as instruments of the plot, and they are, as you might expect, always successful. They impress Hamlet mightily of course, and through him Claudius; and in the mini-plays that close *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, their lack of pretension is a powerful advocate. In the former, Don Armado, with a tattered Quixotic dignity, defends his own performance as Hector the Great from the mockery of his courtly audience:

> The sweet war-man is dead and rotten; sweet chucks, beat not the bones of the buried. When he breathed, he was a man. But I will forward with my device.[8]

Essential to this is Armado's impeccable courtesy under pressure. In the *Dream*, a young man who, I would argue, has probably never acted before, least of all dressed up as a woman, unexpectedly finds his stride and silences the same kind of barracking in his grief for the dead Pyramus:

> These lily lips,
> This cherry nose
> These yellow cowslip cheeks
> Are gone, are gone!
> Lovers, make moan;
> His eyes were green as leeks.[9]

[7] *As You Like It*, III. ii. 78–82.
[8] *Love's Labour's Lost*, V. ii. 662–6.
[9] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. i. 338–43.

Because of his sincerity, this unlikely stuff becomes the true poetry of the theatre, and the least feigning.

At this point I can hear Barnardine's straw begin to rustle. In the fourth act of *Measure for Measure* (1603) the wily Duke of Vienna—or some would say, the haplessly improvising one—runs into a hitch. Despite fulfilling Angelo's unholy bargain for the release of Isabella's brother by slipping Angelo's discarded fiancée into his bed in place of Isabella—ah, none more short-sighted than a Shakespearian male in the grip of a bed-trick—the Duke finds that Angelo has reneged on the bargain. So, just as one woman was substituted for another, the head of another condemned man must evidently be substituted for that of Claudio; and so emerges from Shakespeare's imagining the briefly great figure of Barnardine, a Bohemian living in Vienna (a foreigner, for a start), nine years already on Death Row, perfectly at home while appeal after appeal has been launched and quashed, utterly unmoved by the periodic approach of death, but now out of time. He must be the replacement. But he refuses to come out and be executed because he is sleepy; when invited to continue his sleep after the execution, he declines on the grounds of habitual drunkenness and invites anybody who wants to dispute the point to come to his 'ward'. His ward is of course a pile of straw, the same straw we have heard rustle when he first emerged. To his jailer, no doubt, this was like the sound a baboon makes in a cage as it darkly heaves itself into sight, but what appears before us is a model of a certain kind of marvellous mad dignity, which in no way conforms to the Duke's starchy judgment:

> Unfit to live or die. O gravel heart![10]

With a single rustle, Shakespeare has managed several things simultaneously, not least the making silly of the leading character in a play at a stage in his career when he was less than ever interested in heroes. Most evidently, he has made the nakedly disempowered Barnardine assume the values of pride, independence and self-government of which his ruler's version looks increasingly tawdry. The confounded Duke's image certainly needs to be cleaned up after this; Shakespeare has to invent another victim, Ragozine the pirate, to substitute for his substitute—and since he is dead already there is no need to countenance another opportunistic execution, so the Duke gets away with it morally, just about.

The subversion is also blatantly linguistic: the Duke thinks and speaks in mechanistic contrivances, while Barnardine involves not only the audi-

[10] *Measure for Measure*, IV. iii. 71.

ence's ear but its sense of smell—it is as if we had been down in the straw next to him. This use of language also, as it happens, prepares for the scene's audacious ending when, despite the fact that we are imprisoned in the stews of Vienna, Lucio insists on keeping the Duke company 'to the lane's end', since he is 'a kind of burr; I shall stick'.[11] The pungent monosyllable keeps triumphing over all the aristocratic fiddling about; and this victory is only a more confident version of an earlier moment in Shakespeare's career when the musicians who were to play at Juliet's wedding complain they have lost their evening's gig because of her death. Their short scene, momentarily changing the play's perspective in the same way, is incidental only in that it doesn't affect the plot; and it is always quite shocking to me to see it cut from productions, as it generally is; shocking too to see Barnardine played only according to the Duke's patronising account of him.

None of this is enough to make Shakespeare a Marxist; but on the other hand it is more than a series of effective theatre jokes. He of course inherited two very English traditions, both well identified recently by Peter Ackroyd:[12] on the one hand the 'babooneries', often pagan, that frisk in the margins of medieval sacred texts, the satyrs, scolding wives, wrestlers and monkeys that jostle in the psalters and are sometimes carved in stone in the dark corners of cathedrals; and also the posture of extreme, almost embarrassed reticence in the artist towards his own work that runs all the way from Chaucer to Hogarth. In Shakespeare, of course, this reticence, combined with his sheer lack of limitation, has made him available to a very wide range of cultural ownerships; in any event his babooneries can be as profoundly affecting as his main texts, and are morally intrinsic. His even-handed relativism is of course particularly marked when he sets out to tell the story of a whole community. In the sustained miracle of *Henry IV*, he embarks like some superlative actor on a research programme into pub, Court, rebel camp, battlefield and apple-orchard. He proposes and contradicts, asserts and adjusts, abutting worlds linguistically and narratively. The big metaphor is constantly unseated by the casual detail, high culture regularly refuted by a line normal as rain, as ordinary as a headache. It was essential to him, both within this play and across the canon, to express the same things in an infinite number of ways. We respond swiftly to Hamlet's glimpses of the undiscovered country, or Edgar's 'Ripeness is all', but are either really

[11] *Measure for Measure*, IV. iii. 190–3.
[12] Peter Ackroyd, *Albion* (London, 2002), pp. 132 and 159.

any better than Shallow and Silence in their orchard, arriving in the immediate wake of an anxious scene in the Court when the issue was King Henry's mortality?

> *Shallow*: Certain, 'tis certain; very sure, very sure; death, as the Psalmist says, is certain to all; all shall die. How a good yoke of bullocks at Stamford Fair?
> *Silence*: Truly, cousin, I was not there.
> *Shallow*: Death is certain.[13]

The wayward terror of an old man's mind seeking to concentrate is now accompanied, not by iambic pentameters from my lords of Warwick and Westmoreland, but by a smell of straw, mown grass and manure that Barnardine would have appreciated. Still more remarkably, Shakespeare is inventing the form as he goes along, a highly sophisticated prose rhythm, rather than relying on the helpful inbuilt plangency of blank verse.

Increasingly of course (as Shakespeare pulls away from his contemporary field, whilst laying out a model for the violent juxtapositions of Webster and Middleton) this unique interplay of at least two styles of language issues simultaneously from the same mouth. In *Timon of Athens*, an experiment so complicated that he seems in the end to have abandoned it, Timon embarks regularly on passages of virulent beauty:

> But myself
> Who had the world as my confectionary
> The mouths, the tongues, the eyes, the hearts of men
> At duty more than I could frame employment
> That numberless upon me stuck as leaves
> Do on the oak, have with one winter's brush
> Fell from their boughs, and left me open, bare
> For every storm that blows.[14]

In one way of course this could be Lear: but the single almost comical word that cues the marvellous threnody is one that as far as I know Shakespeare never used elsewhere, its humble meaning exactly as it is today—a 'confectionary', or sweetshop. Timon had the world as his sweet-shop. Similarly, he sees himself as a comminatory angel, but he more often looks like a curmudgeon on a park bench; the uncertainty of whether his is a tragedy or a huge feat of petulance animates this much underrated play.

[13] *King Henry IV Part 2*, III. ii. 40–5.
[14] *Timon of Athens*, IV. iii. 260–7.

The matter of the confectionary is relatively subtle; we all, I suppose, have our favourite simple moments when a verbal hero's flow collapses into a phrase as commonplace as a drawn breath. It might be Leontes, faced with the recovery of Hermione, managing only that unsurpassed:

> O, she's warm![15]

—or King Lear briefly looking through the curtains of derangement to confirm

> I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester[16]

—or having a little difficulty with his or Cordelia's clothes in his final anguish

> Pray you, undo this button; thank you, sir.[17]

The ability to spot and do justice to such moments of directness and simplicity, craftily lying within or on either side of some great rhapsody, one would hope to be part of the training of a classical actor—though in general it is something learned with time, trial and error, and is by no means constant. Let me, for the next few moments, move the angle a little and address, as if he or she were hidden among you, an imagined young actor or actress with the same hopes as myself in the 1960s, eager to do the sort of things that will also allow you, the public, to sense a continuing and developing tradition. There is a commonplace view that young actors nowadays don't want to do the classics, longing instead for the quick fix of television or movies. It is absolutely untrue, though it certainly reflects indirectly a most unwelcome aspect of the industry they are entering. For the first thing to say, dear young man or woman, is how surprised I am, because of this development, that you are there at all, and I admire it very much in you, since on the face of it your chances of having my opportunities to enter any kind of Shakespearian community seem to be diminishing all the time. Your training may already have reflected negatively what everyone knows to be a general constriction in the industry, and while it is pointless to bid time return, there is real regret to be felt for the fact that the very idea of classical acting as a speciality has become quite eccentric (though it must be said that the Royal Shakespeare Company is currently reconnecting with this part of its tradition with such plans as a post-graduate group being prepared to join the main company). Faced with a dearth of opportunity, not to mention some dogma

[15] *The Winter's Tale*, V. iii. 109.
[16] *King Lear*, IV. vi. 182.
[17] *King Lear*, V. iii. 311.

attached to the practice, you may well be concluding, in the manner of Oscar Wilde on fox-hunting, that a Shakespearian actor represents the unteachable in pursuit of the unattainable.

Imagine yourself getting lucky however, and you will find, lying around like so many weapons on an old battlefield, all manner of technical mantras, depending on who you talk to. Here is a brief trio of what, when it comes to the speaking of verse—a large part of how you will be judged—I think you might need to know.

First, in Shakespeare, every clue to character is embedded in the language itself, or rather in the idiosyncratic way it is manipulated. This is not after all a world of lengthy Shavian prefaces, explaining all, or of Arthur Miller's helpful profiles of his characters as they make their first entrances, or even of the adverbs that most contemporary playwrights insert between the name of the speaker and the speech as a guide to how to act it. Not only that, but it is quite important to avoid the voices that would fill the gap—theatre critics, some textual ones, and a certain generation of theatregoers—whose assumptions may be based on the persuasiveness of past performances, or indeed on their own moral tendencies: for instance, Cressida is no better than a whore, Angelo is a hypocrite by nature. Having cut yourself off from the babble (to which I have contributed myself), you will especially need to develop your own textual radar, scanning for the clues. We saw earlier how Claudius's beneficent opening speech swims in the warm waters of easy metaphor and affable antithesis—'the memory' is 'green', the kingdom is 'contracted in one brow of woe', 'wisest sorrow' is the keynote. On the other hand we've also touched on the taut and anxious diction of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, who at his play's opening, addressing his advisor Escalus, ushers us into a much bleaker world than Claudius's, its horizons austere and foreshortened:

> Of government the properties to unfold
> Would seem in me to affect speech and discourse
> Since I am put to know that your own science
> Exceeds in that the lists of all advice
> My strength can give you; then no more remains
> But that, to your sufficiency, as your worth is able,
> And let them work.[18]

The same need here for a big breath, but only one metaphor ('the lists of all advice'), and a strange bump in the metre—'But that to your sufficiency as your worth is able'—which may or may not be significant. It

[18] *Measure for Measure*, I. i. 3–9.

probably isn't; but you should at least consider whether the momentary clumsiness tells us anything about the Duke's difficulties in coming to the point, or whether perhaps, with his congested reasoning, he would really have been happier speaking in prose. This, it seems, is not an orator, but either an exhausted chairman deputing power or a political fixer getting off the hook, depending on the production's take on this particularly ambiguous character.

You can, in short, hear your character's voice in the varying structures of the language if you listen carefully; though it is also true that Shakespeare himself breaks the rules. As interpreters we sniff anxiously around Gertrude's famous description of the drowning of Ophelia—'There is a willow grows aslant a brook'. Why is it so beautiful? We've never heard Gertrude speak like this before, and there has been no evidence that she ever could. Is she constructing a tremendous gloss on an event she has watched happen but done nothing to stop? Has she perhaps pushed Ophelia in, even? You may laugh, but I've been at those discussions. The inconvenient fact is that there are many moments when a character is, for the sake of illustrating the story, briefly visited with Shakespeare's miraculous gift of tongues, and it would not have occurred to him to justify this in any other terms.

Secondly, many of us, not only the young ones, are inclined to go daisy-picking—by which I mean pulling out a carefully selected word in a verse line for emphasis, to underline some point that specially interests us—eureka, there's the character. Sometimes it works—as in Hotspur's choleric description of the lord who asks for his prisoners on the battlefield:

> He was *perfumed* like a milliner[19]

—but more often it sounds like a selfish intrusion, and can be disastrous if the word is embedded in an antithetical pattern or a developing thought that will take several lines to be resolved. This is not just a piety; if Orsino starts with

> If music *be* the food of love, play on . . .[20]

—as if, in fact, he had been wondering whether it was or not—it is not only as ugly as if a crotchet had replaced a quaver in the melodic line, but it becomes almost impossible to catch a meaning that is absolutely evident

[19] *King Henry IV Part 1*, I. iii. 36.
[20] *Twelfth Night*, I. i. 1.

if the line is allowed to speak for itself. The movement should always be forward, unfurling, a domino effect that can extend for twenty or thirty lines, for which both your brain and lungs have to be ready. It's very exciting when it works, and very irritating to find you've run out of steam half way through a long thought because you've been beguiled by some magic word in the middle of it.

I want to say it's easy, but I suppose it's not really. Blank verse, while being the rhythmic form closest to natural speech—The Thing We Do Each Time We Want To Speak (there, I've done it for you), is not, in truth, the way we talk. I'm not referring to archaic cadences but rather to passion and volubility—we are simply unused to sustaining our thoughts or letting them grow to a point with the sustained vigour of a Shakespearian hero. In very general terms, it is typical of middle-class English speech to start a thought, then monitor and censor it as it goes along, qualifying and even neutralising it before the end—it is a form of apology for having an opinion. Again very generally, this is where Americans have an advantage, not only because, having inherited Jacobean language so quickly, they are in some ways closer to it, but because there is a characteristic in American speech to start strong and stay strong to the end, even if a certain amount of local colour is lost on the way. I would have said this was a wild simplification, but last week we had the chance to hear President Bush and Prime Minister Blair say virtually identical things one after the other, but in quite different music. First:

> [The lecturer demonstrates as President Bush, building steadily to a climax at the end]:
>
> It gives all sides a chance to reinvigorate progress on the road map—we are committed to the vision of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

This was immediately followed by:

> [The lecturer demonstrates as Prime Minister Blair, building to a climax on 'road map' and dying away gradually thereafter]:
>
> This is part of the process back to the road map, which we continue to believe offers the only realistic route to the two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace.

Please don't tell anyone that you heard me compare George Bush to a Shakespearian actor. But it is possible (I suppose) to be inspired by his sustained confidence, while unnerved by our man's dying fall. I was struck, directing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* not long ago in England, by a variant of this: the persistent difficulty even very good young actors

had with the rhyming couplet, on which so much of the play, especially the story of the four lovers, rests. In rehearsals, all five of us became frustrated at hearing such a couplet invariably reaching a peak half way through its first line, limping toward that line's end so that the rhyming word was barely established, whereupon the second line, instead of completing a crescendo, became a breathless rearguard action to hoist both sense and rhyme into place. It has been said that such a formal use of language is Shakespeare's device to distance us from any sense of real tragedy among the confused quartet in this play; but this critical conceit is no use at all to the actors, who have to believe that they are people who always speak like this, completing their thoughts with a rhyming word found a split second before it is spoken. If they can get into this habit of mind, their breathing should adapt to it quite quickly.

Thirdly, there are different pitches of poetry. Sometimes it is modest and painterly and must speak for itself—again not as easy as it sounds. A Richard II on the walls of Flint Castle planning to exchange his 'figur'd goblets for a dish of wood' will not get very far with us unless he makes that dish absolutely visible—we have to see its grain, its colour, perhaps its lopsidedness, just as we have to see the thirteen other proper nouns contained within those seven lines of verse. The poetry here serves the office of a camera, and the accumulation of photographs it takes call for the sharpest focus, rhapsodically abject as the speech is. I cannot absolutely say how this balancing act of logic, passion, cadence and photographic accuracy is done—if I could, my own success rate would be one hundred per cent—but I know that it calls for a nightly attentiveness—you have, to adapt a phrase of Samuel Beckett, to try again, fail again, fail better. The failure is usually in not quite hitting the centre of the word and releasing its nucleus of meaning, instead allowing our emotional attitude to it to twist it into an exclamation instead of a fact. An audience does not want to know how beautiful the actor thinks the language is, and they already know the King is upset; but they do want to be moved by Richard's exceptional ability to remain creative while his heart is sinking.

This speech is largely in one register, but by contrast Shakespeare sometimes takes off vertically, rearing and tilting with a dazzling un-English suddenness. Then he may collapse into utter simplicity, or an inarticulacy all the more moving for the fact that the language failing his hero is usually so comprehensive.

> Where should Othello go?[21]

[21] *Othello*, V. ii. 270.

says the Moor simply, glimpsing a huge loneliness of his own making, and then, as if the penny had finally dropped:

> Blow me about in winds! Roast me in sulphur!
> Wash me in steep down gulfs of liquid fire[22]

—until all he can find to relieve him are just two alliterative words:

> O Desdemona, Desdemona, dead.[23]

—however, there is no relief there either, and he collapses into blind exclamation:

> O ! O! O![24]

as if not even Shakespeare can help him any longer.

On this ski-slope, what you, the young classical actor, are asking of yourself is stamina, suppleness, a relish for argument (even the most lyrical speeches in the canon are in some way seeking to prove a point), an ear for a key-change or the unexpected thump of a monosyllable, and plenty of imagination. And there is something else besides that you have little control over and which I find devilishly difficult to define, though I surely know it when I see it and hear it. It has nothing to do with looks, but much with spirit, openness, independence, and a form of heroism that is proportionate rather than brazen. And, to make matters worse still, everyone is watching you, especially an older generation who, it seems, is never satisfied, declaring it isn't as good as it was in our day, saying you didn't do what Hamlet tells the players to do, and so on. That perhaps is easy enough to deal with, but then there are people like me with additional heresies of their own: who will suddenly declare that Baz Luhrmann's film of *Romeo and Juliet* is head and shoulders above most stage productions, and one of whose proudest boasts is that when his own company did the *Henry VI* plays we had a newspaper seller announcing the death of Edward IV—'Ed's Dead! King shuffles off mortal coil' (an improvisation I have a hunch Shakespeare would have liked). Pay no attention—affection for Shakespeare involves occasional battle fatigue, a chronic curiosity about how far the interpretative glove will stretch, and frequent escapes into the babooneries at the borders of the page.

[22] *Othello*, V. ii. 278–9.
[23] *Othello*, V. ii. 280.
[24] *Othello*, V. ii. 281.

Having briefly suggested the beginning of a lifelong process which will lead to a point recognised by Shakespeare himself, when he felt his nature had been

> subdu'd
> To what it works in, like the dyer's hand[25]

let me finally talk to the rest of you again and attempt to sum up. In view of the subject, it's natural enough to pause. It is hard to wind up any piece of writing on Shakespeare, or any address about him, without a conclusion that is either sanctimonious or evasively jocular.

Let me say that I think that our health still depends on him: the fact that he is embraced to the right and the left and by such differing constituencies means we should logically be celebrating all our differences at his fire-side. This, after all, is the man who audaciously proposed, in his greatest love story, that the world's bitterest enemies might finally shake hands over the dead bodies of their children. The Royal Shakespeare Company is doing a season exclusively of tragedies in its main house this year on the basis that the public hungers for work 'of an almost sublime scale and ambition, while actors yearn to be part of something real that takes them beyond themselves'.[26] Quite so: the silence that gathers around a performance of *Hamlet* is quite unlike any other silence I know before any other play: there is something tribal about it, as if we were all gathered around the same watering hole. I would also say that a theatre rocking with laughter at *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Love's Labour's Lost*—especially in Regent's Park in London, or Central Park in New York, or at the new £10 evenings at the Royal National Theatre—venues where there is a real sense of a widely diverse audience, in fact—has the same function. It is after all, what they used to do in Athens two and a half millennia back, when a comedy was as integral to a festival day as a trilogy of tragedies.

As a means of testing the width as well as the depth of Shakespeare's effect, I have had the remarkable good fortune to travel a good deal with him. In East Berlin in 1989, towards the end of the Honecker regime, I played in *Richard III*. A western European audience is inclined to find a large mollifying element of comedy in the rise of Shakespeare's dictator—he's such a cheeky chappie. But at the Volksbühne we played to an appalled silence; as Richard's iron fist gleamed inside his velvet glove it

[25] Sonnet, 111, 6–7.
[26] Royal Shakespeare Company press release, 2004, cited in *The Guardian*, 14 Feb. 2004.

was as if the audience were holding their breath in the face of a daily fact. Each night local actors, and not only actors, stormed the building and wouldn't let us leave till we had drunk and talked together for several hours. It was like a minute local dress rehearsal: nine months later Honecker was gone and a few weeks after that the Wall was down. I once directed *Twelfth Night* with a Tokyo company in Japanese; I had for a long time some difficulty with the actor of Toby Belch, the company's oldest member, who seemed quite resistant to direction. We went for a drink one night soon before the opening and amidst the smoke of the barbecue and the fizz of the Suntory he told me what of course I should have guessed—he was old enough to have served in the Second World War and his reaction to English-speakers, including directors and playwrights, was, as he'd thought, forever conditioned by that. Now, he said, as we finally reeled out into the Tokyo night, Shakespeare has brought us together.

Many of the best times I have had with the writer in recent years have been less with great performance than with his transforming power in the hands of people who have never imagined him to be a friend. I remember a ten-year old in a workshop at a London comprehensive required to play Capulet for a moment: in the very process of uttering that terrible attack on his daughter the boy palpably identified with another generation, as if for a moment he understood, let us say, his own father's inexplicable rages, all that incomprehensible grown-up nonsense that he saw at home. One of the best versions I have seen of *The Tempest*, that great essay on freedom within and without, was done by life prisoners at Maidstone prison—the physical act of speaking Shakespeare with passion for a day enfranchised these men in a way that made the authorities, bound as they were to approve, palpably uneasy—this was an empowerment that no one could finally take back with the blast of a whistle or the slam of a door.

What all these and many other stories share, sentimental perhaps in the telling but veiling something, in my view, of the greatest value, is that whatever private landscapes we have of Shakespeare, we have to come out and collaborate with each other to experience him properly. Alberto Manguel, in his wonderful book *A History of Reading*, ponders the moment in the monastic scriptoriums of the ninth century when scribes began to read to themselves in silence, and the danger this suggested to some dogmatists, since, as he puts it, the 'unwitnessed communication between the book and the reader' and 'the singular refreshing of the mind'[27] it led to were no

[27] Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London, 1997), p. 51.

longer subject to guidance, condemnation or censorship. On the other hand Manguel points out that the ancestral primacy of reading aloud, in public, survives in such modern idioms as 'I've heard from so and so' (i.e, read his letter), and 'so and so says' (i.e. writes), or that his news doesn't 'sound' good. Shakespeare, as you would expect, straddles both these propositions. I am as enriched as anyone by my private relationship with him, and startled at the number of times in the day I silently quote him. This, to do it again, is one of the touches of nature that makes the whole world kin. Ideally, however, these solaces are a preparation for speaking and hearing him out loud. For this you have to go out, if you can, and arrive somewhere at a certain time, negotiate to some extent with your fellow-citizens, and sit there and listen, forming part of the loop; and in some way, albeit briefly and very subtly, perhaps feel differently towards those fellow-citizens during and after the process. Regardless of scale, I would like to thank you for coming out to exercise this civic right this afternoon, thereby continuing our enquiries into this inexhaustible man whose four hundred and fortieth birthday we celebrate today. On my side, I remain, after forty years, fascinated by the process whereby perhaps a thousand different sensibilities, prejudices, expectations and backgrounds at some point in an evening turn into a singular thing, the force called an audience. We may be today, in terms of numbers, a happy few: but thank you too for sustaining the bargain that I first heard struck nearly forty years ago.