

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

SHAKESPEARE'S LIARS

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Read 21 April 1983

My theme is words and men (and women)—the raw material of Shakespeare's drama. If language is one of the glories of Shakespearian man, as he uses it for feats of self-discovery and revelation, and for intercourse with others, it is also one of his chief perils, as he not only uses but also abuses it. Language gives him the power to create and to destroy. Like Time in *The Winter's Tale* it both 'makes and unfolds error'; it can reveal truth, but it can just as easily be the instrument of deception. It all depends on the man or woman who speaks it, and on the listener. Or, in the words of Montaigne, writing his essay 'Of Liars': 'Nothing makes us men, and no other meanes keeps us bound one to another, but our word.'¹ My subject is Shakespeare's liars, as men and women who most keenly demonstrate both the glory and the peril of trading in words.

I do not think that Shakespeare was a proto-modernist who believed that words as such lie, and whose plays are about the deceptiveness and inadequacy of language.² When Feste announces that 'words are grown so false I am loath to prove reason with them', or when, as in *King Lear*, the frailties of speech are at the very heart of the experience of the play, then the limitations and the falseness are in the speakers and their worlds, not in the medium as such. If words are double, this makes them all the more useful as dramatic tools. Nowhere, perhaps, do we see this more clearly than in the fondness—which Shakespeare shares with other dramatists of the period—for puns on the word 'lie' itself. In sonnet 138 the play on the

¹ 'Of Lyers', in *The Essays of Montaigne Done into English by John Florio Anno 1615*, ed. George Saintsbury, i (1892), 44. The original essay, 'Des menteurs', is dated 1572-4.

² In this respect I agree with Margreta de Grazia, whose article 'Shakespeare's View of Language: An Historical Perspective', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 29 (1978), 374-88, has a useful summary of writings (mainly from the 1970s) on Shakespeare's mistrust of language.

two senses forms a kind of action, from the worldly wise paradox of the opening lines,

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,

to the achieved *modus vivendi* of the concluding couplet:

Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.¹

The Clown who delivers the fatal 'worm' to Cleopatra makes particularly effective use of the same pun by compounding it with a play on 'die'; and, with rather less sexual innuendo but no less irony, Hamlet and the First Gravedigger try to outwit each other with a pun on lying—in what is in fact going to be Ophelia's grave. And there is that extraordinary scene in *Othello* (III.iv. 1–19), between Desdemona and the Clown who makes comic capital out of not knowing where Cassio 'lies'—a scene which has nothing to do with plot and everything to do with the multiple horrors of lying in that play. If it provides relief, this is dubiously comic, at a point in the structure where Iago's lies have already begun to work and where, only a few minutes later, Othello is going to find the word 'lie' gruesomely expressive: 'Lie with her—lie on her? We say lie on her when they belie her.' The force of the pun is, by this time, less in Othello's mind than in the audience's; there it reverberates as the 'belying' of Desdemona slides out of control and she dies with a lie, however white, on her lips, while ironically the first and only occurrence of the word 'liar' in the play is in Othello's still unenlightened (though by fundamentalist standards true) statement: 'She's like a liar gone to burning hell.' In each of these examples words prove their slipperiness, but Shakespeare proves the power of words—even in their very slipperiness—to interpret human relationships, extend the meanings of situations, and establish formal connections between apparently unrelated parts of a dramatic action. To look at Shakespeare's liars is to affirm his interest in what people do to themselves and to each other through words. What I want to talk about, then, is lying—quite unambiguously in its dictionary definition of speaking falsely, telling untruths—as one feature of that landscape of people which makes up Shakespeare's theatre.

One assumes that Shakespeare the man thought telling the truth was better than lying. Shakespeare the poet knew that his

¹ All Shakespeare quotations in this lecture are from Peter Alexander's edition of *The Complete Works* (1951).

art was always open to accusations of mendaciousness from the Apemantuses (and strict Platonists) of his world:

Apemantus. Art not a poet?

Poet. Yes.

Apemantus. Then thou liest.

(*Timon of Athens*, I. i. 221-3)¹

But Shakespeare the dramatist, though I doubt if he would have agreed with those who believe that the origin of language is in man's need to lie, must have been grateful for the human inability, or unwillingness, to stick to truth—for the dramatic potential in man's sheer capacity for lying. For truth, as Montaigne says, has 'no more faces than one . . . But the opposite of truth has many-many shapes, and an indefinite field'.² In the 'indefinite field' of Shakespearian drama there is an almost infinite variety of lies. At one extreme is the lie as a social convenience, seen, for example, in the Jamesian ambiguities which Polonius instructs Reynaldo to utter in spying on Laertes, taking care not to call these 'indirections' anything so crude as lies ('. . . put on him / What forgeries you please . . .'; '. . . slight sullies . . .'; '. . . breathe his faults so quaintly . . .') and also to point out that the end justifies the means:

See you now

Your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth.

(*Hamlet*, II. i. 19 ff.)

At the other extreme are the lies of such moral magnitude and effect that they are able to kill body and soul, disrupt society, and overturn universal order, as imaged in Pisanio's lines when watching Imogen read Posthumus' letter—lines which remind us that, while Shakespeare may anticipate Henry James, he was a contemporary of Spenser and familiar with an iconography in which Calumny is the arch enemy of Truth:

What shall I need to draw my sword? The paper
Hath cut her throat already. No, 'tis slander,
Whose edge is sharper than the sword, whose tongue
Outvenoms all the worms of Nile, whose breath

¹ Kenneth Muir, writing on 'Shakespeare's Poets', in *Shakespeare the Professional* (1973), discusses the irony with which Shakespeare treats poets in his works—possibly 'to protect a heart he would not wear upon his sleeve' (p. 40).

² *The Essays of Montaigne*, I. 44.

Rides on the posting winds and doth belie
 All corners of the world. Kings, queens, and states,
 Maids, matrons, nay, the secrets of the grave,
 This viperous slander enters.

(*Cymbeline*, III. iv. 30-7)¹

If there are many kinds of lies, there are many sorts of liars, too. Lying can be as literally part of a life-style as it is with Falstaff, fathering lies like himself, 'gross as a mountain, open, palpable', and articulating his philosophy on the battlefield of Shrewsbury:

Counterfeit? I lie, I am no counterfeit: to die is to be a counterfeit; . . . to counterfeit dying, when a man thereby liveth, is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed; (1 *Henry IV*, v. iv. 113 ff.)

or with that 'infinite and endless liar' Parolles, who can think of no better way of lying about someone than to say that he, too, is a liar: 'He will lie, Sir, with such volubility that you would think truth were a fool' (*All's Well*, III. vi. 9 and IV. iii. 235-6). But it can also be an act as unnatural as it seems to Coriolanus in the marketplace ('Must I / With my base tongue give to my noble heart / A lie that it must bear?' *Coriolanus*, III. ii. 99-101), or as foreign as it is to Isabella in the final scene of *Measure for Measure*. 'To speak so indirectly I am loath', she tells Mariana, as she rehearses the instructions given her by the Duke,

I would say the truth; but to accuse him so,
 That is your part. Yet I am advis'd to do it;
 He says, to veil full purpose.

(*Measure for Measure*, IV. vi. 1-4)

This range, of course, is a reminder of the range of moral perspectives on lies and liars in the plays. Shakespeare is no fierce fundamentalist. We must not assume that he himself accepts, or wishes us to accept, Falstaff's lie with quite the ease of Hal:

For my part, if a lie may do thee grace,
 I'll gild it with the happiest terms I have;

(1 *Henry IV*, v. iv. 156-7)

¹ In Hadrianus Junius's *Emblemata* (Antwerp, 1565) the theme of *Veritas Filia Temporis* is treated in an emblem (LIII) where, under the motto 'Veritas tempore reuelatur, dissidio obruitur', Time (or Saturn) is represented as rescuing his daughter, Truth, from a cave where she has been oppressed by Discord (*Lis*), Envy (*Invidia*), and Calumny (*Calumnia*). D. J. Gordon draws attention to the pessimism of this, as against the optimism of the poem which Geoffrey Whitney attaches to the same picture when he uses it in *A Choice of Emblems* (1586). See *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 3 (1940), 228-40.

but nor can we doubt that he glories in the sheer creativeness of Falstaff's lying wit. More often than not, lying is part of a complex exploration of moral values; often, too, it is part of a dramatic inquiry into what *is* true. 'If I should tell my history', Marina insists, 'it would seem / Like lies, disdain'd in the reporting' (*Pericles*, v. i. 117-18). With Montaigne, Shakespeare no doubt disdains lying as 'an ill and detestible vice', but he also shows the difficulty of knowing and judging a liar—much as Montaigne does in his several essays dealing with lies, not least in the one entitled: 'It is folly to measure the true and false by our own capacity.'¹

Measure for Measure is perhaps the play which most peremptorily challenges that 'capacity' as we respond to the liars in the play. The world of Vienna is open to great perversions of truth, as Angelo's case shows, and as the disguised Duke tells Escalus: 'There is scarce truth enough alive to make societies secure' (iii. ii. 213-14). The Duke tries to revive truth by the big lie of his disguise. Though he is voluble about Lucio's form of lying, his 'slandrous tongue' and 'back-wounding calumny', his own device is, throughout the play, surrounded by a notable unwillingness to call a lie a lie. The only two characters who explicitly call others liars² are, comically, Elbow fulminating against Pompey

¹ Florio's translation of this title is: 'It is folly to referre Truth or Falshood to our sufficiencie' (*The Essays of Montaigne*, i. 191-6). The version quoted is from *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, translated by Donald M. Frame (no date). In 'Of Lyers', lying is 'an ill and detestible vice' (*The Essays of Montaigne*, i. 44); in 'Of giving the lie' (dating from 1578-80) it is 'a horrible-filthy vice' (ii. 402). It is interesting that one editor of the essays finds himself prompted to write a three-and-a-half page note to the last mentioned passage in which he defends Montaigne against the accusation of being, himself, a liar. See *Œuvres Complètes de Michel de Montaigne, Les Essais*, iv, ed. A. Armaingaud (Paris, 1926), pp. 271-4.

² To be called a liar, Montaigne points out, 'is the extremest injury, may be done us in words' (*The Essays of Montaigne*, ii. 402), and he goes on to note the irony that we tend to defend ourselves most ardently 'from such defects as we are tainted with'. Thus Iago to Emilia: 'Filth, thou liest' (*Othello*, v. ii. 234). As Touchstone knows, giving someone the Lie Direct is the point of no return in duelling; we see this in deadly earnest in *Richard II*, 1. i and in *King Lear*, v. iii. 140; and humorously in Sir Andrew Aguecheek's challenge to Caesario/Viola (*Twelfth Night*, iii. iv. 149). In extremis, Coriolanus and Young Siward give the lie to, respectively, Aufidius and Macbeth (*Coriolanus*, v. vi. 103 ff. and *Macbeth*, v. vii. 10). Hamlet creates an imaginary duel situation and, characteristically, makes a vivid image of a clichéd intensifier: 'Who... gives me the lie i'th' throat / As deep as to the lungs?' (*Hamlet*, ii. ii. 568-9). The response to being given the lie acts as a test of nobility in *Pericles*, ii. v. 54 ff. and, humorously, in *The Winter's Tale*, v. ii. 129. Otherwise, high-born characters call others liars only in states of extreme emotion (Lear, Leontes, Cleopatra), whereas others, of a lower social

for describing his wife as a 'respected' woman, and, drastically, Lucio in words which freeze on his lips in that moment when he tears off the Friar's hood to find that he has revealed the Duke:

Why, you bald-pated lying rascal, you must be hooded, must you?

(v. i. 350)

It is tempting to say that Lucio here provides a kind of safety valve for our ambivalent feelings about the Duke. His own plot is articulated in a language of euphemisms. Isabella is instructed to go and lie to Angelo about lying with him (for that is what she is having to do, though the lying, like the bed-trick, is enacted off-stage) in a language of 'indirections' which would do credit to Polonius, let alone more recent politicians: 'answer his requiring with a plausible obedience; agree with his demands to the point; only refer yourself to this advantage . . . If for this night he entreat you to his bed, give him promise of satisfaction' (and she a nun, about to make quite a different kind of promise). In the scene where Mariana—again out of hearing—is initiated into the plan, Isabella comes straight from this interview with Angelo, to report with no sign of embarrassment that 'I have made my promise / Upon the heavy middle of the night / To call upon him' (iv. i. 32-4). The ends of the lie, it is obvious, will justify the means—though even this point is made by careful circumlocution:

If you think well to carry this as you may, the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof. (iii. i. 248-9)

In the end the Duke decides to lie to Isabella, too, to 'keep her ignorant of her good, / To make her heavenly comforts of despair / When it is least expected' (iv. iii. 105-7). Meanwhile she trusts his therapeutic purpose: 'for 'tis a physic / That's bitter to sweet end' (iv. vi. 7-8). This refrain—'sweet end'; 'full purpose'; 'least expected'—suggests that the 'euphemisms' in the play are there not so much to obscure deceit and draw attention from the lie perpetrated as to thrust our imaginations forward, to the promised end. They point the structure for us and help us to select from possible responses. Isabella's immediate response to the Duke's account of his plot provides a model in which the truth of actuality gives way to a fiction with a purpose: 'The image of it gives me content already; and I trust it will grow to a most prosperous perfection' (iii. i. 250-1). In other words, we are status, utter the accusation more readily and thoughtlessly (Falstaff and his companions; Kate and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*; Abraham to Sampson in *Romeo and Juliet*).

dealing less with the Duke and Isabella as liars and more with Shakespeare as a liar—the playwright, finding in the lie a useful dramatic structure.

In the Comedies we are obviously not asked for moral outrage at the feigning which is part of the game of *homo ludens*. Transvestite heroines embody and enact the structural and thematic movement of their respective plays, through deceit to truth. When they tell outright lies, as in the developed fictions which both Julia and Viola use to convey their 'real' feelings, then the emotional result is truth, not falsehood.¹ In the world of the romantic comedies, just as young women will practise deceit to gain the right, true end, so young men will be swaggerers and—as in the high-spirited passage where Portia plans her disguise—'tell quaint lies' (*Merchant of Venice*, III. iv. 69). Yet, the perspective may shift suddenly, to lay bare the potential perniciousness of lying. There is more than comic wit in Beatrice's diatribe against men who 'are only turned into tongue, and trim ones, too. He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it', especially as it is spoken just after she has asked Benedick to 'Kill Claudio'—a Claudio deceived by a malignant lie (*Much Ado*, IV. i. 322 ff.). Later in the same play the belied Hero's uncle attacks Claudio and Don Pedro in a scene where justified moral outrage threatens to unbalance the comedy, and in a language which anticipates that of Jonson's and Middleton's 'roarers':

Boys, apes, braggarts . . .
Scrambling, out-facing, fashionmonging boys,
That lie and cog and flout, deprave and slander.

(v. i. 94-5)

And the conceit with which Leonato articulates the denouement of *Much Ado about Nothing*—'She died, my lord, but whiles her slander liv'd' (v. iv. 66)—looks forward to *The Winter's Tale*, even as it speaks more poignantly than Leonato intended, of lying as a deadly sin.

The Tragedies are more directly concerned with such lies. Lying (if often dressed up as omission of truth) dominates the political world of *Hamlet*, the plot of *Othello*, and so much of the first Act of *King Lear* that the Fool, pointedly, asks to 'learn to lie'. The moral chaos of *Macbeth* is epitomized by 'th' equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth' (v. v. 43-4). I do not want to sound as if I were suggesting that all Shakespeare's dramatic art can be reduced to a study of lying: there are plays, such as *A Midsummer*

¹ Cf. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, IV. iv. 139 ff. and *Twelfth Night*, II. iv. 106 ff.

Night's Dream, where hardly anyone lies, except the fiction itself: 'Else the Puck a liar call.' But there are also plays, like *Othello*, which pivot on a lie. They are plays, of course, where human intrigue controls the design.

Unless we are habitual liars, we lie for a purpose: a lie tends to be teleological. Furthermore, it is in the nature of lies that they are rarely momentary phenomena or isolated acts. They tend to grow into actions: a lie, once spoken, tends to have to be elaborated, supported by further lies, until its ramifications spread beyond the liar's control, and sooner or later a revelation (brought about by Time the Revealer or more directly by human ingenuity) will take place. Our little everyday, 'white', lies may not be quite so Aristotelian in their course; but any more elaborate lie—pernicious or salutary—is ideal as a design for a plot structure. Shakespeare seems particularly conscious of this in *Much Ado about Nothing*: Don John's slanderous lie is first rehearsed in Act II, scene ii, where Borachio rapidly draws up the scenario for 'the death of this marriage'; it is then practised on Claudio and Don Pedro in Act III, scene ii, and the scene of supporting evidence is enacted off-stage and reported by Borachio to Conrade in Act III, scene iii. The lie and the 'proof' of its truth are then again reported and reviewed in the church scene (IV. i), none of those present realizing that Borachio has been overheard and 'comprehended' by the Watch. The lie draws attention to itself as plot logic; hence the effectiveness in the design of the unexpected: Hero's swoon and the Friar's counter-lie which keeps her 'dead' until Dogberry has finally got around to revealing that Don John and his companions are 'lying knaves'. In contrast to this neat pattern, Iago's plan emerges piecemeal, from a general notion of 'abusing' Othello's ear, as circumstances and Othello's nature play into his hand: 'Tis here, but yet confus'd. / Knavery's plain face is never seen till us'd' (*Othello*, II. i. 305–6).

To look at *Othello* is also to be reminded that what comes to be really characteristic of Shakespeare's art is not lying as plot dynamics but lying and being lied to, or about, as character experience—the exploration of what the lie does, of how it *transforms* both the liar and the belied. I say 'comes to be', for we need only compare Don John to Iago, Claudio to Othello or Leontes, and Hero to Imogen, to see how much more fully the experiences of agents and victims of lies are articulated in the later plays. But I am not suggesting a simple evolutionary process from early to late, or from comedy to tragedy and tragicomedy. One of the very earliest Shakespearian liars is the aptly named Proteus

in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.¹ When it comes to the point, he is a bad liar, unimaginatively producing two identical lies:

I grant, sweet love, that I did love a lady;
But she is dead . . .
I likewise hear that Valentine is dead.

(iv. ii. 101-9)

But in the monologue where he deliberately sets about perverting the truth—resolving to break his oath of love and faith to his mistress Julia and his friend Valentine, so as to be free to woo Silvia—he demonstrates a kind of perverse imagination which is nothing less than a model of how the liar uses words to reconstruct his world:

I will forget that Julia is alive,
Rememb'ring that my love to her is dead;
And Valentine I'll hold an enemy,
Aiming at Silvia as a sweeter friend.
I cannot now prove constant to myself
Without some treachery us'd to Valentine.

(ii. vi. 27-32)

As far as human relationships go, this—spelled out with the antithetical stiffness which is the idiom of the play—is a mere diagram; but translate the diagram into action, and we have a world where 'nothing is but what is not', and where characters would have to define themselves in Iago's language: 'I am not what I am.' Indeed, the disguised Julia finds just this when she has to woo Silvia on Proteus' behalf:

I am my master's true confirmed love,
But cannot be true servant to my master,
Unless I prove false traitor to myself.

(iv. iv. 99-101)

Proteus does not reach his new self without a struggle with the old—

I cannot leave to love, and yet I do—

(ii. vi. 17)

¹ A. B. Giamatti, 'Proteus Unbound: Some Versions of the Sea-God in the Renaissance', in *The Disciplines of Criticism*, ed. P. Demetz *et al.* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1968), discusses the two Renaissance traditions of Proteus: 'as *vates* and poet' and 'as *magus* and sinister manipulator of words'. His point, that these traditions 'support one another, providing reciprocal tension and balance, for each depends on the other for the reservoir of ambiguity that gives Proteus, and language, the potency to adapt and to signify' (p. 455), is relevant to Shakespeare's Proteus, and to my argument in this lecture.

and, though this sounds more like the paradoxes of Richard III ('I am a villain; yet I lie, I am not') than the agonized breaking-down of a Leontes or an Othello ('I think my wife be honest, and think she is not'), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* still contains a blueprint of the creative power of the liar: making new selves and new relationships and a world in which the old values—constancy, honour, friendship, love—have been inverted.

At this point I must conclude this brief survey of the 'many shapes' of lying, in the hope that there has run one thread through it: the uselessness of speaking of something like 'the concept of the liar in Shakespeare'. His interest in lying is, not surprisingly, not an abstract one, but an interest in human predicaments: those of a liar, of one who is lied to, and (especially in the slander plots to which he almost obsessively returns) of one who is lied about.

Needless to say, this does not mean that Shakespeare does not explore the wider—we may call them 'philosophical'—aspects of dealing with that which is not true. Even Proteus gives us glimpses of that condition of chaos which Montaigne analyses in the essay 'Of giving the lie':

Our intelligence being onely conducted by the way of the Word: Who so falsifieth the same, betraieth publik society. It is the onely instrument, by means wherof our wils and thoughts are communicated: it is the interpretour of our soules: If that faile us we hold our selves no more, we enter-know one another no longer.¹

Jacobean tragedy generally was much concerned with that falsifying of the word which, in Montaigne's phrase, 'betraieth publik society'. Though Shakespeare chose not to set his tragedies in the tyrannical and hypocritical courts of Jacobean drama, they all show, in one way or another, his appraisal of the rhetoric of the world of *realpolitik*. Repeatedly in his Histories and Roman plays the dialogue demonstrates that gap between rhetoric and truth which Montaigne laments, earlier in the same essay: 'Now-adaies, that is not the truth which is true, but that which is perswaded to others.' But what he uniquely dramatizes is the horror—both more personal and more universal—of a lie so transforming the sense of self and others that 'enter-knowledge' becomes impossible and dialogue as such meaningless. The victims of slander experience this most poignantly, as when Desdemona, treated like the whore Othello thinks she is, cries out to him:

¹ *The Essays of Montaigne*, ii. 402–3.

Upon my knees, what doth your speech import?
 I understand a fury in your words,
 But not your words.

(*Othello*, IV. ii. 31-3)

Hermione, who is more articulate, sees only too clearly the Catch 22 position of such a victim:

Since what I am to say must be but that
 Which contradicts my accusation, and
 The testimony on my part no other
 But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me
 To say 'Not guilty'. Mine integrity
 Being counted falsehood shall, as I express it,
 Be so receiv'd.

(*The Winter's Tale*, III. ii. 20-6)

In the mockery of a trial to which she is subjected, even the verdict of the oracle is deemed a lie. Yet her defence rings with a lucid sense of self and an understanding of the impasse she is in which echo the voice of Shakespeare's sonnet 121. This poem—'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed'—is perhaps his most direct account of the activity of lying as seen from the point of view of the belied. The first two quatrains challenge slanderers who 'in their wills count bad what I think good'; the third quatrain makes the kind of self-assertion which is possible when, as a sonneteer, you have the whole stage to yourself:

No; I am that I am; and they that level
 At my abuses reckon up their own.
 I may be straight though they themselves be bevel;
 By their rank thoughts my deeds must not be shown.

But when you are confronted with an accuser convinced that your 'integrity' is 'falsehood', then the logic of 'I am that I am' dissolves into nonsense. Both Hero and Desdemona try, each in her own words, to make such a statement. Each responds to a 'catechizing' (*Much Ado*, IV. i. 77) in what seems to her the only natural and logical way. To Claudio's demand that she 'answer truly to your name' Hero replies:

Is it not Hero? Who can blot that name
 With any just reproach?

(*Much Ado*, IV. i. 79-80)

And to Othello's question 'Why, what art thou?' Desdemona answers:

Your wife, my lord; your true and loyal wife.

(*Othello*, iv. ii. 35)

But each has her answer invalidated and flung back: Hero with a flat reply to what was intended as a rhetorical question ('Marry, that can Hero') and Desdemona with a bitterly ironical invitation to 'Come, swear it, damn thyself'. To be belied is to find oneself living in a fiction, without a self and a language, as Hermione sees:

You speak a language that I understand not.

My life stands in the level of your dreams.

(*Winter's Tale*, iii. ii. 77-8)

Shakespeare's liars, on the other hand, often seem to be very good at forging an identity and a language for themselves. Iago has built a solid fiction of an 'honest' self; Iachimo is given a whole scene to take notes from which he later constructs his account of having slept with Imogen. Yet neither seems to have a particularly lively imagination. Nor (whatever some *Othello* critics say) are they at the imaginative centre of their respective plays. There we find heroes who, if they are liars, are so in a far more complex fashion, and part of our response to their prismatic, volatile selves is precisely to question when they are lying and when telling the truth. When, almost in one breath, Hamlet tells Ophelia 'I did love you once' and 'You should not have believ'd me; . . . I loved you not' (*Hamlet*, iii. i. 115-19), then who is deceiving whom, and where is Hamlet most true to himself? And how true was he in that somewhat embarrassing attempt at telling his love in 'numbers' which Polonius reads out:

Doubt truth to be a liar;

But never doubt I love.

(ii. ii. 117-18)

As for Othello, where doth truth stop and fiction begin in that tendency to self-dramatization which most critics agree is one of his central characteristics? And where does fiction shade into a lie? 'The notablest liar', writes Anthony Munday, 'is become the best Poet'. And he continues to expound this point in what sounds like a de-glamourized version of Othello's tales of 'antres vast and deserts idle', or of those travellers' tales which even

the sceptical Antonio and Sebastian are brought to credit in the banquet scene of *The Tempest*:

Our nature is led awaie with vanitie, which the auctor perceaing frames himself with novelties and strange trifles to content the vain humors of his rude auditors; faining countries never heard of; monsters and prodigious creatures that are not; as of the Arimaspie, of the Grips, the Pigmeies, the Cranes, & other such notorious lies.¹

As Othello tells of 'the Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders' (*Othello*, I. iii. 143-5), he holds his sophisticated auditors spellbound. But, though he is a good poet, the defensive situation which he is in makes Munday's stricture more relevant than the Sidneian apology that 'he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth'.² What Othello affirms, of course, is above all the effect on Desdemona of his 'poetry'—his surely at least semi-fictional narration. He is telling a tale about telling a tale, and, if there is a fictional element, he is as truly moved by it as Hamlet perceived the First Player to be by his own delivery of Aeneas' tale 'But in a fiction, in a dream of passion' (*Hamlet*, II. ii. 545). His report of Desdemona's responses is authenticated by a colloquial simplicity of style which makes *oratio obliqua* sound like direct quotation:

She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.
She wish'd she had not heard it; yet she wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man . . .

(I. iii. 160-3)

He would have been the envy of Astrophil who, seeing his mistress more moved by fiction than by fact, cries out: 'I am not I. / Pity the tale of me' (*Astrophil and Stella*, sonnet 45). To suggest that Othello deliberately falsifies the true story of his life and his wooing of Desdemona would be to sink to the level of Iago's version: that 'she first lov'd the Moor, but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies. To love him still for prating?' (II. i. 220 ff.). But it seems peculiarly ironical, in a play so full of ironies, that Othello and Desdemona are brought together by one persuasive fiction, to be

¹ Anthony Munday, *A second and third blast* . . . (1580), reprinted in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, iv (Oxford, 1923), 211. This might also have been a description of Autolycus with those marvellous ballads which his 'rude auditors' are so anxious to be told are 'true' (*The Winter's Tale*, iv. iv. 253 ff.).

² Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (1965), p. 123.

sundered by another. It also seems that Shakespeare finds peculiarly fruitful dramatic material in that border area between imagination and lying. When is a lie not a lie? When does a child stop having a lively imagination and turn into a liar? These questions are presumably as old as man himself, or at least as language itself; and they have certainly teased playwrights other than Shakespeare. We need only think of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which opens with a mother accusing her son of lying—'Peer, you're a liar!'—and proceeds to follow and criticize Peer's 'round-about' dealings with truth, but which also contains the moving scene where the poet/liar Peer literally talks his mother through her death agonies in a fiction of a sleigh-ride to Soria-Moria Castle and to a meeting with St Peter and with the Lord Himself. In that border area lies hover ambivalently, with potentials for good or ill; and out of it Shakespeare fetches some of his most striking dramatic situations.

Perhaps the most striking of these is the scene in *King Lear* where Gloucester falls over an imaginary cliff, created entirely by Edgar's words. I make no apology for turning, here, to the exceedingly well known, for the emotional impact of this scene and its sheer dimensions—physical, familial, and spiritual—are such as to make it easy to forget that it is built on the biggest lie in all Shakespeare. (No doubt such forgetting is precisely one of the points of the scene.) Gloucester's two sons both lie to him: Edmund consistently and in pursuit of a well-prepared scheme for acquiring Edgar's land; Edgar spontaneously, selflessly, and to save his father. In Act IV, scene vi, Edgar has to lie very hard—the more active verbs, like 'feign' and 'forge',¹ which crop up as Elizabethan synonyms for 'lying', would be more appropriate here—to deceive Gloucester. In his new and painful state of vision, Gloucester is a resistant object, as he was not when Edmund set to work on him. His nagging questions and Edgar's answers, as the scene opens, have that solidity of specification, that adherence to the practical evidence of the senses, which is characteristic of the play (as in the newly awakened Lear's 'Be your tears wet?'):

¹ As when Exeter, in *1 Henry VI*, III. i. 190, speaks of how the dissension between the peers 'Burns under feigned ashes of forg'd love.' In the Prologue to Act V of *Henry V* the Chorus asks the audience to 'behold / In the quick forge and working-house of thought, / How London doth pour out her citizens', thus providing a link between literal and metaphorical uses of the word 'forge'. 'The quick forge . . .' is obviously the imagination—the faculty which the Chorus is forever appealing to—and one is reminded how easily a word signifying the making of something out of nothing can slide over to become a synonym for lying.

Gloucester. When shall I come to th'top of that same hill?

Edgar. You do climb up it now; look how we labour.

Gloucester. Methinks the ground is even.

Edgar. Horrible steep.

Hark, do you hear the sea?

Gloucester. No truly.

(*King Lear*, IV. vi. 1-4)

The text provides stage directions for what Jan Kott has called the 'pantomime' of the scene,¹ but it also draws attention to Edgar's efforts at lying as such. Though Gloucester admits Edgar's reasoning that 'your other senses grow imperfect / By your eyes' anguish', he continues to insist that Edgar's voice is altered and that he is 'better spoken'. At this point Edgar abandons his attempts to counter Gloucester's incredulity by argument and resorts to a simple imperative—'Come on, sir; here's the place. Stand still'—and to the *tour de force* of the imagination which, on the bare stage, creates out of nothing 'the place', the steepness, and the receding depth:

...yond tall anchoring bark
Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy
Almost too small for sight.

(ll. 18-20)

Details of evocative poetry also function very precisely to keep the lie 'solid':

The murmuring surge
That on th'unnumb'red idle pebble chafes
Cannot be heard so high.

(ll. 20-2; my italics)

However resistant, Gloucester is in one respect an ideal object of a lie: a blind man having visual reality created for him. He is convinced, but the dialogue does not dwell on his imaginary sightseeing. The depth means only one thing to him, and his self-obsessed participation in the scene is defined by the simplest of responses to Edgar's great speech: 'Set me where you stand.' As Gloucester dismisses him—again, taking nothing for granted: 'Go thou further off; / . . . and let me hear thee going'—and kneels to take his farewell of life, Edgar justifies his lie:

Why I do trifle thus with his despair
Is done to cure it.

(ll. 33-4)

¹ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1965; paperback edn. 1967), p. 113.

Whether the need for a justification is Edgar's or Shakespeare's, or (as I think likely) both, the argument is familiar and traditional. The end justifies the means, but in this case both the end and the means are extreme, and Edgar defends his deceit much as St Augustine defended Christ against the accusation of lying.¹ Little attention was given to justifying his initial disguise as Poor Tom: 'Whiles I may scape / I will preserve myself' (II. iii. 5-6). But by this stage in the play his counterfeiting is no longer in the service of pure survival; it has gathered a missionary purpose, and the extremity of the lie and its aim turns Edgar into a maker of parables.

In the postlapsarian part of the scene the intended 'cure' is achieved, with Edgar acting in a new persona—but only after the 'true' features of the fictive situation have been further substantiated. First there is the height, which is now above them:

Look up a-height; the shrill-gorg'd lark so far
Cannot be seen or heard. Do but look up.

(II. 58-9)

This makes the point both that the new Edgar figure is not supposed to know that Gloucester is blind, and that the fictive lark is too high up to be audible. Then there is a palpable testing of Gloucester's soundness of limb, the accompanying lines thick with implicit stage directions. The two kinds of evidence—the height and the wholeness—give an extraordinary concreteness to Edgar's words, 'Thy life's a miracle.' It needs only one more lie, the story of the fiend-like 'thing' into which Edgar now turns his previous incarnation, to make the moral inescapable:

Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours
Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.

(II. 73-4)

This assertion of miracles and their purpose could, of course, be said to be the crowning lie of the scene (and it would be, if this were

¹ In Book II of *Questiones Evangeliorum*. See J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiæ cursus, Ser. Lat.*, xxxv, col. 1362. Edgar could have justified his disguise as Poor Tom much as Sir Walter Raleigh, in his scaffold speech, justified having feigned sickness: by appealing to the precedent of King David. 'The Prophet David did make himself a Fool, and did suffer Spittle to fall upon his Beard to escape the hands of his Enemies, and it was not imputed to him a sin': 1 Samuel 21: 13. See Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Sir Walter Raleigh: The Renaissance Man and His Roles* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1973), chapters 1 and 2.

Shakespeare's end-game). But the moral proof of the pudding is in the eating, and this particular lie completes the 'cure' of Gloucester:

I do remember now. Henceforth I'll bear
Affliction till it do cry out itself
'Enough, enough' and die.

(ll. 75-7)

The scene, then, is in a tradition, both secular and religious, of salutary deception. In a secular sense, Edgar—though far from court—has lied to Gloucester in the educative fashion recommended by Castiglione when he advises the courtier to feign 'in order to win the mind of the prince so that he may speak the truth effectively':

beguiling him with salutary deception; like shrewd actors who often spread the edge of the cup with some sweet cordial when they wish to give a bitter-tasting medicine to sick and over-delicate children.¹

But another and much stronger sense reaches beyond the sugared pill, to the metaphysical marvel of 'men's impossibilities' being found to be divine possibilities. Editors gloss these lines with a reference to Luke 18: 27: 'The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.'² In Shakespearian terms Gloucester's experience is seen as something akin to Pericles' when, with a dawning sense of the miracle which is about to happen, he wills himself to credit the history of Marina's life 'to points that seem impossible' (*Pericles*, v. i. 123). Not that Gloucester himself articulates the wonder of the impossible proving possible, as heroes and heroines of the Last Plays do. His own lines merely enunciate a moral recovery—from which he is to lapse and be pulled back again by Edgar in Act v, scene ii. But for the audience in the theatre who have had the benefit of watching and listening

¹ *The Book of the Courtier*, translated by Charles Singleton (New York, 1959; Anchor Books edn.), p. 294.

² Kenneth Muir, in the Arden edition of *King Lear* (1952), quotes Furness. While not doubting the similarity to the passage in *Luke*, I think Edgar's lines also reminiscent of, if not necessarily echoing, Montaigne's essay: 'It is folлие to referre Truth or Falshood to our sufficiencie.' Experience, says Montaigne, has taught him 'that so resolutely to condemne a thing for false, and impossible, is to assume unto himselfe the advantage, to have the bounds and limits of Gods will, and of the power of our common mother Nature tied to his sleeve. . . . For to deeme [unlikely events] impossible, is by rash presumption to presume and know how farre possibilitie reacheth. If a man did well understand, what difference there is betweene impossibilitie, and that which is unwonted . . .'
(*The Essays of Montaigne*, i. 192-3).

to the whole scene—all the lies and all the truths, and all the lies which transform themselves into truths—it must surely grow into something of greater constancy: an apology for lying and even a model of the truth of fiction—the kind of truth which leaves behind, as irrelevant, questions of mendaciousness. Edgar's lie effects Gloucester's rebirth, and both together affect the audience's sense of man's possibilities.

As far as the possibilities of the liar go, this scene also makes the obvious point that, while lies may create something (and in this case a whole landscape, geographical and spiritual) out of nothing, they cannot exist in a vacuum: they need, or rather assume, an audience. The 'prosperity' of a lie, as of the 'jest' which Rosalind speaks of to Berowne,

lies in the ear
Of him that hears it, never in the tongue
Of him that makes it;

(*Love's Labour's Lost*, v. ii. 849–51)

and, though Shakespeare is, throughout his plays, much concerned with the image of the tongue—'double', or 'candied', or 'poisoned'—he is equally, if not more, concerned with the infected or abused ear. The Ghost in *Hamlet* sees 'the whole ear of Denmark / . . . by a forged process of my death / Rankly abus'd'; Regan (of all people) tells Gloucester that Lear is 'apt / To have his ear abus'd'; and Antigonus can only think that Leontes' ear has been 'abus'd, and by some putter-on'. The ear, in these cases, is the image of the mind. (Leontes is, of course, his own audience.) For, if the creation of a lie is a matter of the imagination, its action involves the imagination not only of the speaker but also of the listener—who, like the implied reader in certain modern theories of fiction, collaborates with the liar. Iago's skill lies in knowing how to turn Othello into such a collaborator. Other liars find their objects only too ready to collaborate. Lear goes more than half-way to meet Goneril and Regan in their professions of love; and both Beatrice and Benedick, in their respective scenes of staged overhearing, rush to embrace the idea that they are beloved. Credulity like Malvolio's stems from an only too obliging imagination—

Fabian. What dish o'poison has she dress'd him!

Sir Toby. And with what wing the staniel checks at it!—

(*Twelfth Night*, II. v. 104–5)

which we have seen exercised, before any deceit is practised on him, in conjuring up a scene of married, *arriviste*, bliss. He believes

Maria's delightfully lying letter because he wants to: 'I do not now fool myself to let imagination jade me; for every reason excites to this, that my lady loves me' (II. v. 145). The shattering of a vision of self based on a lie ends, in this case, in pretty dark comedy, with 'Sir Thopas' trying to convince the allegedly mad Malvolio that 'That that is is'; but Sir Toby's words to Maria which anticipate this, at the end of the gulling scene, could as well have been spoken to Goneril or Regan at the end of the first scene of *King Lear*: 'Why, thou hast put him in such a dream that when the image of it leaves him he must run mad' (II. v. 172-3).

Shakespeare's interest in how human beings affect one another—how, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, they 'modify' one another—means that he takes a particular interest in the interaction of the liar and the one lied to. The liar has the power of transforming another being: of replacing 'that that is' with a 'dream' or an 'image'. The instrument of lying is rhetoric. At the end of such rhetoric, at its extreme, there can be a soul-making, as in the case of Gloucester; but there can also be what Strindberg calls 'soul-murder':¹ the action where (as in *Miss Julie*, and even more in *Creditors*) one person takes another to pieces, eating out his will and vision of himself, and either puts him together into a different being or destroys him altogether. Strindberg thought the play of *Othello* an instance of such soul-murder, and Othello's questions of Iago in the last scene—

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body?—

(*Othello*, v. ii. 304-5)

suggest that he would have agreed. In the process of 'ensnaring' Othello there is surprisingly little lying as such. Technically, the only real lie Iago tells in the scene which takes Othello from an unquestioning lover to a jealous revenger is the account of how he 'lay with Cassio lately' and witnessed that gentleman's amorous dream. In itself, this is a lively fiction, circumstantially documented, and supported by fabricated quotations. But it comes late in the scene, when Othello is already well in the grip of a passion which prevents him from questioning Iago's story. Less than sixty lines earlier—though ages ago, in psychological

¹ In the essay 'Själamord' ('Soul-Murder'), in *Vivisektioner (Vivisections): Samlade Skrifter av August Strindberg*, ed. John Landqvist, xxii (Stockholm, 1914), 188-201.

time—he had still been able to reach out, through an ‘if’, to the possibility of Iago’s lying:

If thou dost slander her and torture me,
Never pray more . . .
For nothing canst thou to damnation add
Greater than that.

(III. iii. 371–7)

Now he can only groan in response ‘O monstrous! monstrous!’, the text suggesting that his imagination has translated Iago’s lying words into a true scene, and one which requires action: ‘I’ll tear her all to pieces.’ Before this, Iago’s strength lies, of course, in insinuations, perfectly timed and structured into an act of persuasion far more potent than any formal rhetorical structure. He tells Emilia no more than the truth when in the last scene he explains:

I told him what I thought, and told no more
Than what he found himself was apt and true.

(V. ii. 179–80)

Over the scene, Iago’s discourse eases into fiction almost imperceptibly, rather as Renaissance prose narrative tends to do, behind a screen of prefatory apparatus and authenticating analogues (‘I know our country disposition well . . .’; ‘She did deceive her father, marrying you . . .’). Consummately he establishes his credibility and affirms his reputation as a fellow ‘of exceeding honesty’, achieving his false ends by telling the truth:

I do beseech you,
Though I perchance am vicious in my guess,
As, I confess, it is my nature’s plague
To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy
Shapes faults that are not—that your wisdom
From one that so imperfectly coniects,
Would take no notice.

(III. iii. 148–55)

So Othello takes notice, and Iago achieves ends more sudden and violent even than the ‘monstrous birth’ he envisaged at the end of Act I. From the very beginning of this dialogue we see and hear how Othello’s imagination translates Iago’s negative rhetoric into positive images:

By heaven, he echoes me,
 As if there were some monster in his thought
 Too hideous to be shown . . .
 And didst contract and purse thy brow together,
 As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
 Some horrible conceit.

(ll. 110ff.)

Normally there is much virtue in 'as if': a bridge which enables us to move from that which is to that which is not, and back again. But Iago makes sure that Othello's traffic is one-way, stopping any attempt of his to return to his original image of himself and of Desdemona, and forever beckoning him on towards the chaos which at the beginning of the scene had simply been the sign of impossibility ('I do love thee; and when I love thee not / Chaos is come again', ll. 92-3). When Iago disappears briefly from the scene, Othello's soliloquy shows just how far he has travelled:

I had rather be a toad,
 And live upon the vapour of a dungeon,
 Than keep a corner in the thing I love
 For others' uses.

(ll. 274-7)

The brief appearance of Desdemona means a flicker of a chance to return to base: 'If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself!' But by the time Iago and Othello are both together on stage again, 'Othello's occupation's gone' and Desdemona's identity is gone, too:

Her name, that was as fresh
 As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black
 As mine own face.

(ll. 391-2)

The effect of a lie, Montaigne stated in the essay 'Of giving the lie' which I quoted earlier, is that 'we hold our selves no more, we enter-know one another no longer'. The scene in *Othello*, to the subtlety of which I have been able to do scant justice here, not only confirms these statements but also shows why and how they are true. To explain away the scene in terms of the Elizabethan stage convention of the calumniator always being believed¹ is to cut out the heart of the scene: the fascination with the power which words can wield over man's imagination, making him accept as real that

¹ Cf. E. E. Stoll, *Othello: An Historical and Comparative Study* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1915).

which they signify. Obviously it is convenient, indeed necessary, in the concentrated time-span of a play to foreshorten acts of persuasion. *Richard III* is full of examples of this, and so are all the plays, notably the Comedies, which operate more by patternings of language, structure, and theme than by explorations of the troubled workings of the human mind. *Much Ado About Nothing* might well seem to belong in that category: Claudio leaps at Don John's lie in a few, mainly monosyllabic, lines which suggest a kind of conventional shorthand. But even then the shorthand hints at the negative, teasing technique of activating the victim's own imagination which Iago is to use on Othello:

Claudio. Disloyal?

Don John. The word is too good to paint out her wickedness; I could say she were worse; think you of a worse title, and I will fit her to it.

(*Much Ado*, III. ii. 96 ff.)

Similarly, the sense of shattered identity, and of a world transformed, in Claudio's speeches in the near-tragic church scene looks forward to *Othello*. Hero seemed to him 'as Dian in her orb, / As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown'; but now she is 'more intemperate in [her] blood / Than Venus, or those pamp' red animals / That rage in savage sensuality' (IV. i. 56-60). And so his vision of reality is forever changed:

... fare thee well, most foul, most fair! Farewell,
Thou pure impiety and impious purity!
For thee I'll lock up all the gates of love,
And on my eyelids shall conjecture hang,
To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm,
And never shall it more be gracious.

(IV. i. 102-7)

As we have seen earlier, the lie acting on Claudio has transformed his Hero into another Hero. As we see (or rather hear) here, his shock—of lost 'enter-knowledge'—is conveyed in a language of paradoxes and oxymorons. Through the neat patterning of his idiom there beats a kind of hysteria: the logic of a chaos where contradictory statements are equally true. It is soon to reappear in Troilus' reaction to a situation which, as facts go, is almost exactly the reverse of Claudio's. He witnesses Cressida's faithlessness, but tries *not* to believe 'th'attest of eyes and ears'. He stays on stage after the meeting between Cressida and Diomed in order to 'make a recordation to my soul / Of every syllable that here was spoke',

But if I tell how these two did coact,
Shall I not lie in publishing a truth?

(*Troilus and Cressida*, v. ii. 116-17)

The intensity of Troilus' wish to transform the truth into a lie takes him into that agonized state of apprehension where, to paraphrase Sir Thopas, 'that that is is not'. Claudio never really doubts that 'foul' has merely *seemed* 'fair'; but Troilus' line 'this is, and is not, Cressid' challenges both the imagination to create and language to signify. Yet Troilus is not a Macbeth; he does not linger in a state where 'nothing is but what is not'. 'This is, and is not, Cressid' is also the pivot-line of a speech with a large and completed action—a soul-making. It begins with the series of *if* clauses in which all that he has so far believed and valued most dearly is brought in to prove the truth a lie:

If beauty have a soul, this is not she;
If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,
If sanctimony be the gods' delight,
If there be rule in unity itself,
This was not she.

(ll. 136-40)

This way, it would seem, madness lies; but not in a play as analytical as *Troilus and Cressida*. Troilus recognizes the 'madness of discourse' in which he is engaged, and the speech moves to a plateau where he takes a conspectus of his own predicament:

Within my soul there doth conduce a fight
Of this strange nature, that a thing inseparate
Divides more wider than the sky and earth;

(ll. 145-7)

and from where he slides to the inevitable recognition of a loss of faith: 'The bonds of heaven are slipp'd, dissolv'd, and loos'd.' The speech ends as his imagination grapples in disgust with the new Cressida:

The fragments, scraps, the bits, and greasy relics
Of her o'er-eaten faith, are bound to Diomed.

(ll. 156-7)

In the brief remainder of the play Troilus is driven only by the fury of disillusionment and a kind of exhaustion of the imagination. He tears up a letter from Cressida as 'words, words, mere words' (v. iii. 108); and when Hector is dead, 'there is no more to say' (v. x. 22).

Macbeth, on the contrary, lives for the better part of his play in that state of mind, and language, where 'horrible imaginings' are more real than reality. At the beginning of his first appearance on stage he meets the witches: at the end of that same scene he pulls aside to contemplate the words of these 'imperfect speakers'. Like Troilus he analyses the shock of a confrontation which has shaken his very being; but his analysis, unlike Troilus' coherent and progressive argument, moves through questions which have no answers, or only unspeakable ones, to a self-analysis which stops at description:

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man
That function is smother'd in surmise,
And nothing is but what is not.

(*Macbeth*, I. iii. 138-41)

By the act which makes the 'fantastical' murder a reality, Macbeth creates around him a world of unimagined horror, where scenes of bloodshed alternate with scenes in which he discusses the reality of what he has seen—or imagines that he has seen. From his own point of view, of course, he ends up as the victim of a lie. When Birnam wood does come to Dunsinane, he begins to 'doubt th'equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth' (v. v. 43-4); but it is only in his penultimate speech in the play, when his sense of bearing 'a charmed life' has been shattered by the truth about Macduff's mode of birth, that he finally abandons belief in the witches' prophecies:

And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd
That palter with us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope!

(v. viii. 19-22)

He has been a willing victim. Act I, scene iii makes it clear that 'the imperial theme' has been as much in his mind as ideas of social advancement were in Malvolio's, and that his imagination is all too ready to supply what the 'imperfect speakers' have left unsaid. He is even his own Iago in adducing corroborative evidence:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth?

(I. iii. 130-3)

Later, in Act iv, he is desperately anxious to interpret the visual and verbal signs of the Apparitions as truths to live by. Meanwhile he has himself turned liar: though it is Lady Macbeth who teaches him to lie, in Act I, scene vii where he learns that 'False face must hide what the false heart doth show', when it comes to the public scene after Duncan's murder, he lies far more elaborately than she. Separating words from truth, Macbeth 'betraieth publik society'; but in their progressive alienation from each other—beginning with his bizarre mixture of ruthlessness and solicitude in wishing her to 'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed' (iii. ii. 45–6)—he and Lady Macbeth also illustrate Montaigne's point about lost 'enter-knowledge'. By the time she dies, unlamented, life itself has become to him an absurd fiction: 'a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing' (v. v. 26–8).

But, of course, we do not see the play from Macbeth's point of view only (though the fullness with which we see his viewpoint is a major reason for the fascination of this villain-hero); nor do we see him only—or even primarily—as a dupe and a liar. If the witches' words wield a terrible power over Macbeth's imagination, it is because he is presented to us, above all, as a man with a terrible power to apprehend that which is non-existent. Holinshed's Macbeth, as Henry N. Paul pointed out in his book, *The Royal Play of 'Macbeth'*, had no imagination.¹ Paul suggests that, in endowing Macbeth with an excess of it, Shakespeare was under the influence of Montaigne's essay 'Of the force of Imagination'. Certainly the subject was in the air, and it interested King James, who at the end of August 1605 attended an Oxford debate on the question 'an imaginatio possit producere reales effectus?' Though I doubt Paul's conclusion—that Shakespeare wanted the witches to be purely figments of Macbeth's imagination—I think it very plausible that Shakespeare knew the Montaigne essay. As will be obvious by now, I feel that Montaigne's thinking on liars, and Shakespeare's, often cross-illuminate each other; and also that both vitally connect lying with the imagination. The real point, however, is not whether Montaigne was a source for *Macbeth* but that both the essay and the play are concerned with the *transforming* power of the imagination. The essay is typically discursive and personal. It begins on the 'very great conflict and power of imagination' suffered by the writer himself, and on the sympathetic identification with others which this leads to; and it ends on a kind of

¹ (New York, 1948; reprinted 1971), p. 61.

apology for his own writing. But the bulk of the essay consists of specific and striking examples of the interaction of mind and body, particularly in sexual relations; and of cases where anticipation has turned into actuality, somewhat drastically cutting across the natural course of events: the man found to be already dead when reprieved on the scaffold, or the person transformed on his/her wedding day from a woman to a man! As stories go, there is little connection with *Macbeth*. What does connect the two works is the exploration of the leap from idea to actuality, from one form of being to another, from nothing to something—or, in terms of *Macbeth*, from a ‘fantastical’ to an actual murder, from ‘a dagger of the mind’ to the dagger which kills Duncan, from a mention of Banquo to his real (or is it?) appearance at the banquet.

Macbeth is not one of Shakespeare’s obvious liars; yet his experiences of the ‘reales effectus’ of the force of the imagination in the play are strangely akin to those of the act of lying and being lied to in other Shakespeare plays. The best illumination of that kinship which I know of is in that speech of Leontes’ which has been called ‘the obscurest passage in Shakespeare’:¹ the lines in which he passes from unfounded suspicion to certainty of Hermione’s adultery. I would not presume to remove the obscurity as such, but merely to suggest that these lines both discuss and enact processes which are central both to lying and to the imagination. I have to quote the passage in full:

Affection! thy intention stabs the centre.
 Thou dost make possible things not so held,
 Communicat’st with dreams—how can this be?—
 With what’s unreal thou coactive art,
 And fellow’st nothing. Then ’tis very credent
 Thou mayst co-join with something; and thou dost—
 And that beyond commission; and I find it,
 And that to the infection of my brains
 And hard’ning of my brows.

(*Winter’s Tale*, 1. ii. 138–46)

The strained vocabulary and tortured syntax of the speech as a whole are clearly in character, as those of a man whom Hermione describes as ‘something . . . unsettled’. Polixenes is simply nonplussed by this address to ‘Affection’: ‘What means Sicilia?’ The answer, presumably, is that Sicilia does not so much ‘mean’ as discover, in the course of an interior monologue, that which is not. The first four-and-a-half lines of the quoted passage

¹ M. van Doren, *Shakespeare* (1939), p. 316.

are, I take it,¹ an analysis of his own state of mind by way of an answer to his own questions in the preceding half-line: 'Can thy dam?—may't be?' Like Troilus he watches his mind mastered by an overwhelming passion ('affection'). What he perceives is something very like the action of the creative imagination: making the impossible possible, dreams and 'what's unreal' real—all this out of 'nothing'. The trouble is that in Leontes a more than usual state of emotion is not balanced by a more than usual order. Logic would suggest that, if the image of an adulterous Hermione can be created out of nothing, then it should be seen for what it is: a 'dream', 'unreal', etc. But Leontes gives the lie to logic, and even as he speaks he begins to enact the perilous imaginative leap from 'nothing' to 'something'. Within a few lines the idea of adultery has been transformed into reality; and his brows are almost as hard as those of the fellow in Montaigne's essay who, having dreamt of being cuckolded, woke up in the morning with horns in his forehead, or as sore as Othello's when he rejects the handkerchief. The speech pivots on the illogical 'then'; and in the second four-and-a-half lines a series of cumulative, and cumulatively perverse, *and*-clauses form something very like the rhetorical figure of climax, or *gradatio*. Again, it is in character: this is the rhythm of mind of a man who, as if he were Iago and Othello rolled into one, has begun to fabricate and accept his own evidence ('Thou mayst . . .; and thou dost . . .; and I find it') and will increasingly do so, finding it in the most innocent word and gesture. At the same time the lines are also a model of the imagination as the breeding-ground of lies. Leontes, as he speaks, creates the thing he imagines.

The point, clearly, can be glossed by Theseus' famous speech about 'the lunatic, the lover, and the poet', being 'of imagination all compact' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, v. i. 7-8). When, as in the case of Leontes or Othello, lovers turn in a manner into lunatics, *their* 'shaping fantasies' are a destructive version of the poet's; they too turn to shapes 'the forms of things unknown' and give 'to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name'. Obviously I am not suggesting that Theseus' sneer at the imagination is Shakespeare's. Even locally Theseus' attitude to 'these fairy toys' is subverted by his own mythical identity, and Hippolita's retort

¹ In the appendix on this passage in his Arden edition of *The Winter's Tale* (1963), J. H. P. Pafford leans towards the opinion that Leontes is analysing Hermione's behaviour (pp. 165-6); but he also quotes H. G. Goddard (*The Meaning of Shakespeare*, 1951, p. 651), who considers that Leontes is diagnosing his own case.

confirms the status of 'fancy's images' by simply producing the proof of the pudding. Around Theseus there is the whole *Dream*, and around that play the whole Shakespeare corpus, to provide, implicitly, the same proof. Even so, the pursuit of Shakespeare's liars must finally lead us to listen with a measure of respect to Theseus. For, one thing the corpus of plays also shows is how perilously close, in their creation of something out of nothing, are lunatics, lovers, and poets—and liars.

But it would be wrong to end on the perils of this closeness: on the imagination and its operation through language as potentially lethal toys. If Leontes is a liar, so is Paulina. If Macbeth transforms reality, so does Prospero. The salutary lying which we have looked at—in the comedies, in *Measure for Measure*, in Edgar—is most clearly seen as redemptive and re-creative in the Last Plays. And yet a case could also be made for these plays—in themselves so explicit about their own fictive nature as 'old tales'—as most keenly presenting the tension between the destructive and the creative potentials of lying. There are Iachimo's lies, and Leontes' self-created perversion of the truth, and Prospero's account of how Antonio came to usurp the Dukedom of Milan,

like one
Who having into truth, by telling of it,
Made such a sinner of his memory,
To credit his own lie—he did believe
He was indeed the Duke.

(*The Tempest*, I. ii. 99–103)

Prospero, whose magic deceptions aim to redeem 'three men of sin', is vehement in accusing first Ariel and then Caliban of lying (I. ii. 257 and 344); and Ariel engineers one whole comic and rancorous scene in the subplot by strategic interjections of 'Thou liest' (III. ii. 40 ff.). I do not wish here to involve the whole question of theatrical art as lying (as embodied when Costard's claim, 'I Pompey am' meets with Berowne's retort, 'You lie, you are not he'; *Love's Labour's Lost*, V. ii. 543–4).¹ But when, in the Epilogue to *The Tempest*, Prospero throws the whole lie of his art into the lap of the audience, then we are left with a sense of the huge ambivalence of what is truth—a sense provoked by all Shakespeare's great liars.

Among those, finally, we should note the Friar in *Much Ado About Nothing*. In a play where characters' behaviour and

¹ The subject has recently been explored in Jonas Barish's monumental study, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1981).

language are, for ill and good, altogether rather devious, his plan for giving out that Hero is dead makes him perhaps the biggest liar of them all. He expounds his scheme with a fullness—right down to the contingency plan¹—which suggests a zest for fiction-making. At the same time he declares his aim as morally therapeutic: to 'change slander to remorse' (iv. i. 211), but even as he utters this justification, he sees its limitations: 'But not for that dream I of this strange course' (l. 212). The words 'dream' and 'strange', which Shakespeare so often connects with the workings of the imagination, signal the way which the Friar is moving to identify the end which really justifies the means: the effect on people's minds when they think Hero is dead. That effect will be, as it were, the creation of the 'real' Hero. In describing how this transformation will apply to Claudio, the Friar speaks what I think is a somewhat neglected Shakespearian passage on the power—quite literally creative—of the imagination:

When he shall hear she died upon his words,
Th'idea of her life shall sweetly creep
Into his study of imagination,
And every lovely organ of her life
Shall come apparell'd in more precious habit,
More moving, delicate, and full of life,
Into the eye and prospect of his soul,
Than when she liv'd indeed.

(iv. i. 223-30)

Claudio does indeed, in Act v, hear a great deal about how Hero 'died upon his words', but his mourning rites give little sense that he lives up to the Friar's expectations. The ritual of the denouement—the revelation of 'Another Hero' who 'died . . . but whiles her slander liv'd' (v. iv. 60ff.)—substitutes for any dramatic realization of a morally transformed and reborn Claudio. The Friar's vision remains, however, as a statement of what the imagination may achieve, a statement to be set at the side of Sidney's assurance that the poet makes 'things . . . better than Nature bringeth forth'.² The Friar's lie will stimulate the imagination; and the imagination, imitating the creative processes of nature, will deliver a 'golden' Hero as against the

¹ i.e. 'And if it sort not well, you may conceal her, / As best befits her wounded reputation, / In some reclusive and religious life, / Out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries' (ll. 240-3).

² *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Shepherd, p. 100: 'Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done, . . . Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.'

Hero who 'liv'd indeed'. The metaphor which contains the essential justification of the lie also suggests the magnitude of the issues involved: 'But on this travail look for greater birth' (l. 213).

In the end, then, perhaps the clue to Shakespeare's liars lies in metaphor—the verbal device which transposes fact into fiction and vice versa, and which so does 'make possible things not so held'. The Elizabethans were proud of the copiousness of the English language and the ease with which it lent itself to figures of speech; but there was also an undertow of suspicion of metaphors, as articulated by Puttenham:

As figures be the instruments of ornament in euery language, so be they also in a sorte abuses or rather trespasses in speach, because they passe the ordinary limits of common vtterance, and be occupied of purpose to deceiue the eare and also the minde, drawing it from plainnesse and simplicitie to a certaine doublenesse, whereby our talke is the more guilefull & abusing.¹

'For', he concludes, 'what els is your *Metaphor* but an inuersion of sence by transport'. Shakespearian drama contains a number of characters who share Puttenham's opinion. Phebe, for one, very forcefully subjects Silvius' lovesick 'transport' to the acid test of 'sence' (*As You Like It*, III. v. 10ff.). Timon tackles the 'guilefull & abusing' aspects of metaphorical language in his dialogue with the hypocritical Poet who is reaching for a cliché to describe the unspeakable way in which Timon has been treated by the Athenians. 'I am rapt', says the Poet, 'and cannot cover / The monstrous bulk of this ingratitude / With any size of words'; and Timon ruthlessly refers him back to plain truth: 'Let it go naked: men may see't the better' (*Timon of Athens*, v. i. 62–5). Obviously this is not to say that Shakespeare equates the truth of poetry with nakedness: in *As You Like It* we are also told by Touchstone, that specialist on lies, that 'the truest poetry is the most feigning'. Obviously metaphor is one of his own chief vehicles for communicating with his audience and guiding our responses. Even as he does so, though, he also sometimes tells us about the perils of metaphors which acquire the potency of life-lies. George Eliot, writing of poor Mr Casaubon who 'had imagined that his long studious bachelorhood had stored up for him a compound interest of enjoyment, and that large drafts on his affection would not

¹ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), Book III, chapter vii ('Of Figures and figuratiue speaches'); Scholar Press reprint (Menston, 1968), p. 128.

fail to be honoured', moves naturally from the specific case to a generalization:

... we all of us ... get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them.¹

The King of Navarre and his followers in *Love's Labour's Lost* are *almost* fatally entangled in the metaphors which they apply to their studious bachelorhood. But it is perhaps Brutus who most clearly demonstrates George Eliot's dictum, when he prepares the killing of Caesar as a ritual—

Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius.

Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods,
Not hew him as a carcase fit for hounds—

(*Julius Caesar*, II. i. 166–74)

only to find, when it comes to it, that sacrifice becomes butchery.

If the ability to create one's own imaginative reality is a peril, and if thinking and speaking in metaphor epitomizes this peril, then metaphor ought to be fatal to Cleopatra, to whom hyperbolic imagery is a way of life—and death. Her vision of truth does not go naked; it not only dresses itself in, but lives in, the images she creates of herself in her death-scene, or of Antony after his death. When she has recounted to Dolabella her 'dream' of Antony ('His face was as the heav'ns . . .'), she turns to him for confirmation:

Think you there was or might be such a man
As this I dreamt of?

Instead, he gives her the lie: 'Gentle madam, no.' This 'no' provokes one of the most emphatic accusations of lying in all of Shakespeare's plays, as Cleopatra throws the lie back at Dolabella:

You lie, up to the hearing of the gods.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, v. ii. 93–5)

Who is the greater liar, Cleopatra or Dolabella? Clearly, plainness and singleness is not the only touchstone of perception (unless we think that the true vision of Antony is simply as 'a strumpet's fool'). Cleopatra would seem to be reaching through to that theory of understanding which holds that all cognition is the

¹ *Middlemarch*, Book I, chapter ix (Penguin edn.), p. 111.

apperception of one thing through another,¹ leaving behind the Dolabellas of this world to ponder (as this Dolabella seems to be beginning to do: 'Your loss is, as yourself, great'; l. 101) Montaigne's insight that 'It is folly to measure the true and false by our own capacity.'

Shakespeare's contemporary, the poet and playwright George Chapman, writes in the Preface to his translation of Homer that there is no 'such reality of wisdoms truth in all humane excellence as in Poets fictions'.² Shakespeare gave such truth to his greatest liars: the gift of saying that which *is not* and of making us see and know that it *is*. Such lying is a godsend, even 419 years after his birth and in an age which sets its faith in computers rather than in dramatic poets. To the student of Shakespeare, computer-consciousness lies partly in becoming conscious that a computerized Concordance cannot distinguish between the two senses of 'lie' but jumbles them all together into 341 indiscriminate 'frequencies'.³ The one thing, it seems, that a computer cannot do is to lie, in the senses I have tried to explore in this lecture. Perhaps the time has come when we shall have to learn to say 'I lie, therefore I am.'

¹ Cf. Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As if'*, translated by C. K. Ogden (1924), p. 29.

² In J. E. Spingarn, ed., *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* i (Oxford, 1908), 67-8.

³ This is merely to state a fact, not to bite the hand which has fed me: Marvin Spevack's invaluable *Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973).