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Shakespeare's Peculiarity

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1. 'Not of an age, but for all time'?

AT ABOUT THE TIME when *Hamlet* was first performed, Ben Jonson made a radical break with some conventions and practices of English poetic drama that had served dramatists like Marlowe and Shakespeare. Henceforth, Jonson's own plays would be in verse *or* prose, with no further mixing save in carefully demarcated instances like Volpone's mountebank speech or Tiberius's epistle, or the prose Inductions and Intermeanes in *The Staple of News* and *The Devil is an Ass*. The abandoned practice had allowed some extraordinarily expressive moves, as when a king descends into prose to speak about 'unaccommodated man', or when Falstaff momentarily ascends to verse while imitating a king; but in Jonson's remodelled poetic drama even the most lowly characters' speech would be accommodated in a busily inventive, energetic and streetwise verse.[1] For so deliberative an author this must have been a major creative decision, but it isn't discussed in David Riggs's critical biography.[2] This is one point where the biography would have startled its subject, but it's a representative omission. Most contemporary critics discuss poetic dramas as though they were, or might as well have been, written in prose.

Doubtless Jonson would also have been startled, and pained, by the

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[1] The best account of this is still that provided by the late Jonas Barish in *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, MA, 1960). Brian Vickers provides a helpful chart of the 'Percentage Distribution of Prose in Shakespeare's Plays' in *The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose* (1968), p. 433.

[2] David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1989).

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knowing (though speculative) way in which Riggs suggests low or self-serving motives for Jonson's double conversion, to Roman Catholicism in 1598 and then back to the English Church in 1610, when Jonson famously drained the communion cup.[3] Even if, as Riggs suggests, 'A man about to be hanged need not be overly concerned with the statutes against recusancy' (p. 52), that doesn't explain what did 'concern' Jonson as he faced death, or why he then remained a recusant for twelve years. As Ian Donaldson has observed, 'Jonson's conversion to Catholicism spectacularly failed to concur with interest'.[4] Moreover, to accept this charge of religious insincerity would inevitably shake or destroy any sense of the quiet but intense, Erasmian Christian Humanism in a work like *The Forrest*.[5] Yet professional Lit. Crit. now favours, or is disposed to trust, Riggs's kind of reductive knowingness, which is no less conspicuous in, say, Arthur Marotti's account of Donne or Leonard Tennenhouse's readings of Shakespeare.[6]

This suspicious concern with motive—whether New Historicist or Freudian—also exhibits something vulnerable, which I have compared elsewhere to Iago's 'fear of being taken in'.[7] Today—Shakespeare's probable, though not certain, birthday, and St George's Day too—bardolatry is derided as part of 'the Shakespeare myth'; but the alernative, supposedly more professional habit of what Thomas Clayton nicely calls 'bardoclasm' has human, as well as critical, dangers.[8] We have become too frightened of seeing and saying that some works of art are inexhaustible, and we behave as though to be caught looking *up to* a great author (not a theorist) would somehow imperil or even betray our claims to professional and interpretative expertise.

[3] Riggs, p. 176.

[4] Ian Donaldson, *Jonson's Magic Houses: Essays in Interpretation* (Oxford, 1997), p. 54; Donaldson's review of Rigg's biography, in *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 41, no. 3 (July, 1991), pp. 253–61, also raises important questions about its declared method of seeking a 'psychological' explanation whenever Jonson's behaviour 'resists' the explanations of a 'social historian' (Riggs, p. 2).

[5] I discuss the Erasmian character of Jonson's religious beliefs in 'Three Poems Jonson Did Not Write: Ben Jonson's Christian Humanism', *ELH [English Literary History]*, vol. 47 (1980), pp. 484–99.

[6] Arthur Marotti, 'John Donne and the Rewards of Patronage', in Guy Fitch Lytle and Stephen Orgel, eds., *Patronage in the Renaissance* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 207–34; Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (London and New York, 1986).

[7] See the Epilogue to my *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (Ithaca, 1993), especially pp. 223–32.

[8] Thomas Clayton, ed., *The* Hamlet *First Published (Q1, 1603): Origins, Form, Intertextualities* (Newark, DE, 1992), p. 26.

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At least Ben Jonson wasn't frightened in that way, when he wrote his magnificent elegy 'To the Memory of my Beloved, the Author Mr William Shakespeare'.[9] That word 'Author' isn't superfluous; it carries Jonson's proud sense of the importance of poetry and of the state of the language, at a time when authors were not protected by copyright and when the only precedent for publishing a native poet's works as 'Workes' was provided by Jonson's own 1616 Folio. Without that precedent, the more famous First Folio might never have been published. The same pride appears in Jonson's scorn for the gentlemanly habit of anonymous publication and in the way he himself, more than any other poet of the time, turned the prefatory poem or puff into a vehicle for serious critical appraisal. Without this other kind of Jonsonian precedent we might not have had poems like Carew's elegy on Donne or Marvell's poem on reading *Paradise Lost*. Although Jonson's elegy on Shakespeare does show a kind of fear, or strain, in the lines leading up to 'I therefore will begin. Soule of the Age!', there is no need to see this (in Dryden's fashion) as a sign of insolent envy. Rather, all the preliminary, effortful ground-clearing shows Jonson recognising an unprecedented critical challenge. Even as he insists that Shakespeare's writings are 'such, / As neither man, nor muse, can praise too much', he is determined to avoid those paths of error taken by 'seeliest ignorance' or 'blind affection'; the 'path' of praise he then chooses is, again, unprecedented. Jonson insists that because Shakespeare 'so far' surpasses English contemporaries like Lily, Kyd, and Marlowe, his achievement can only be measured against that of his true 'peers'—the great classical authors whom Jonson says Shakespeare equals in tragedy and surpasses in comedy:

> Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show,
> To whom all scenes of Europe owe.
> He was not of an age, but for all time!

A recent book on *Shakespeare and National Culture* castigates Jonson for this 'claim to transcendence and universality',[10] but of course Jonson wasn't denying that Shakespeare was also of his age: to call him 'Soule of the Age' presupposes that. Nor was he claiming that Shakespeare is 'universal'. What could such a claim mean? Shakespeare certainly isn't read on the moon or Mars, and, more interestingly, hasn't had the appeal in many Spanish-speaking countries that he now

[9] *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford, 1925–52), vol. 8, pp. 390–92.
[10] Willy Maley, 'This sceptred isle', in John J. Joughin, ed., *Shakespeare and National Culture* (Manchester and New York, 1997), pp. 83–108; p. 87.

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has in China.[11] Jonson was predicting—was the first to predict—that Shakespeare's appeal, like that of the classical dramatists he equals or surpasses, would not be confined to a particular time or culture. And of course that prediction proved true: Shakespeare is the world's most performed dramatist.

Yet most contemporary Anglo-American criticism is now, in effect, *reversing* Jonson's verdict by concentrating on a Shakespeare who is of an age, and not for all time.[12] This makes it difficult to consider Shakespeare's peculiarity without confronting our own.

I began brooding on this paper and that seemingly inescapable difficulty when I attended the 1996 Stratford conference. The first plenary lecture, given by Stephen Booth, lived up to its unforgettable first sentence: 'Shakespeare is our most underrated poet.'[13] This was doubtless provoking to those who, like Alan Sinfield, see Shakespeare as an 'instrument of domination'.[14] But afterwards, as I looked through the books on display, cultural conspiracy theories were more in evidence than any interest in inexhaustibly great poetry. There was *Alternative Shakespeares 2* (sounding like *Terminator 2*), and a new Michael Bristol, and further volumes in Macmillan's series of 'New Casebooks' on Shakespeare which set out to show where we are now. Indeed, this series shows where we are now in a more inadvertent way, since its recommendations for Further Reading practice a curious and revealing kind of critical apartheid.

After the obligatory list of 'Editions' comes a short selection of what is staidly and uninvitingly called 'Traditional Criticism'. To be 'traditional' in this sense doesn't involve being very old or dead, since a relatively youthful critic like Jonathan Bate appears in this section if he appears at all—as Falstaff says, 'They hate us youth!' Next comes a longer selection of 'Critical Theory', which sometimes includes works not directly concerned with Shakespeare; in this case the declared aim is 'to indicate some of the new theoretically informed work which is

[11] See Qi-Xin He, 'China's Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37 (1986), pp. 149–59, and Philip Brockbank, 'Shakespeare in China', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39 (1988), pp. 195–216.

[12] Hence the title of Derek Longhurst's revisionist essay, '"Not for all Time, but for an Age": An Approach to Shakespeare Studies', in Peter Widdowson, ed., *Re-reading English* (1982), pp. 150–63. Ian Donaldson discusses the permutations of Jonson's verdict in chapter 11 of *Jonson's Magic Houses*.

[13] Booth's lecture, 'Shakespeare's Language and the Language of Shakespeare's Time', was later published in *Shakespeare Survey*, 50 (1997), 1–17.

[14] Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford, 1992), p. 261.

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emerging in the area of Shakespeare and Renaissance studies'.[15] Closer examination confirms that this concept of 'Critical Theory' is systematically exclusive, if not monolithic. It ignores and excludes all of that 'new theoretically informed work' on metre and metaphor which bears very directly on poetic drama, while concentrating on the currently privileged, highly politicised issues of 'race, class and gender'. Finally, there is a selection of 'New Approaches' (as opposed to 'Traditional Criticism'). This includes numerous 'radical reappraisals' which could not be included in the main text but will also, the editors promise, 'illuminate the rich interchange between critical theory and critical practice that characterises so much current writing' and 'reflect both the controversy and the excitement of current criticism'.

Uh-huh. In the dull old days when I was a student, before all this 'excitement', 'current criticism' meant Rossiter, Leavis, Frye, Empson, and—to recall a mere sample of critical B's, without going through the alphabet—Anne Barton, C. L. Barber, Sigurd Burckhardt, Stephen Booth, Jonas Barish, Bernard Beckerman, John Bayley and John Russell Brown. It seemed exciting then. Now, it seems like a Golden Age. Still, I examined the New Casebook on *Antony and Cleopatra* for examples of the newer, richer 'interchange'. The introduction by John Drakakis had much to say about 'the straitjacket of traditional response' (p. 21): apparently, what older, inferior critics like Hazlitt, Coleridge, Bradley, L. C. Knights, Wilson Knight, John Bayley, and John Russell Brown *all* 'fail to realise', in being so 'fascinated by what they take to be [Cleopatra's] linguistic and sexual power', is that 'implicit in such an approach is, in the circumstances, a racist, as well as a sexist, component which traditional criticism has done much to ignore' (p. 4). However, this 'straitjacket' can be thrown off, once we see that the 'unconscious but gradual eroticisation of Egypt, which has only recently come to be understood at the level of theory', is 'part of a much larger process' that has 'recently been identified' by Edward Said 'under the term "orientalism", which is a way the West has of constructing, and looking at the East, the unfamiliar, and the exotic' (p. 4). A quick fix, or cure, or alternative construction, is happily to hand: 'Traditional criticism has simply indulged its own fascination with the East that Cleopatra represents, but if we apply Said's thinking to *Antony and Cleopatra*, this changes our critical perspective considerably, and offers us new ways of looking at the play' (p. 4).

[15] Since I discuss this play later, I am quoting from John Drakakis's New Casebook on *Antony and Cleopatra* (1994), p. 331; other New Casebooks share this format, with minor differences.

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Feeling distinctly unreassured by such shameless assurances, I made my way to the seminar on Shakespeare in Translation, where we were to discuss the distinction between linguistic and cultural untranslatability. That impressive international gathering confirmed Jonson's prediction in a striking way, and the presence of so many scholars from countries like Russia, Japan, China, Poland, and Romania brought home the absurd (racist) insularity of conspiracy theories which attribute Shakespeare's pre-eminence to his usefulness as an 'instrument of domination'. But of course this gathering wasn't directly concerned with the prior question: why did Shakespeare, and no other contemporary or later English dramatist or poet, make this cross-cultural and transhistorical appeal? What makes Shakespeare so peculiar?

2. Close reading

One very English answer to that question would be to say that Shakespeare is 'our' greatest poet. He has seemed so supremely important to later poets and poet-critics like Dr Johnson or Coleridge or Eliot or Ted Hughes, or novelists like Dickens and Melville, because he takes the language further than any other writer in English. But of course that is also why Shakespeare is so difficult to translate. The argument that Shakespeare is 'our' greatest poet looks unpromising, if we are also trying to understand why he is the world's most performed dramatist. Still, I want to pursue this 'English' argument for a while, as a way of emphasising that the kind of drama Shakespeare wrote was poetic drama.

To emphasise the greatness and complexity of Shakespeare's poetry is not necessarily—is necessarily not—to forget its essentially dramatic character. The greatest English critic observed of 'our' greatest English poet:

> It is incident to him to be now and then entangled with an unwieldy sentiment, which he cannot well express but will not reject; he struggles with it a while, and, if it continues stubborn, comprises it in words such as occur, and leaves it to be disentangled and evolved by those who have more leisure to bestow upon it.[16]

Dr Johnson was describing what might seem a powerfully and positively dramatic feature of Shakespeare's poetry, while imposing neo-classical doubts and reservations. However, as F. R. Leavis suggested, the

[16] W. K. Wimsatt, ed. *Dr. Johnson on Shakespeare* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 67.

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predictable reservations can be detached from the strikingly perceptive description.[17] Johnson was describing his sense of something in Shakespeare's poetry that seems unusually and at times incandescently urgent, rapid, and improvisatory. Ted Hughes's account of this is, unlike Johnson's, wholly approving, but then Hughes is evidently attending to the same thing when he writes that Shakespeare's language has 'the air of being invented in a state of crisis, for a terribly urgent job, a homely spur-of-the moment improvisation':

> The meaning is not so much narrowly delineated as overwhelmingly suggested, by an inspired signalling and hinting of verbal heads and tails both above and below precision. . . . The idea is conveyed, but we also receive a musical and imaginative shock, and the satisfaction of that is unfathomable.[18]

That idea of a 'musical' shock is important in reminding us that poetic rhythm is a constituent of meaning, and allows the poet-dramatist a greater control over intonation than prose can ever achieve. As for what seems 'unfathomable' in being 'overwhelmingly suggested' rather than 'narrowly delineated', Stephen Booth addresses this issue in a profound and profoundly provoking way when he distinguishes between 'delivered and undelivered meanings' and calls for the kind of 'close reading that tries to avoid resulting in "readings"—in interpretations'.[19] This boldly opposes the way in which contemporary criticism is very much more concerned with interpretation than evaluation. Booth is concerned with all those 'potentially disruptive relationships whose terms are alien to those of the straightforward discourse to which our consciousnesses attend' (p. 48). Booth even goes so far as to claim that such 'echoing incidentals of sound, sense, *and undelivered sense*' (my emphasis) are 'not *a* but *the* principal source of the greatness we find in Shakespeare's work' (p. 51).

Of course that use of 'we' might well alarm any translator, who has

[17] F. R. Leavis, 'Johnson as Critic', *Scrutiny*, 12 (1944–5), pp. 187–204. After quoting this same passage, with Johnson's further comment that 'Shakespeare regarded more the series of ideas, than of words', Leavis observes: 'That such descriptions carry with them a severely adverse judgment we know well enough; the evidence abounds: "the offspring of his throes is tumour, meanness, tediousness and obscurity": "he has corrupted language by every mode of depravation"—it is easy to accumulate passages and tags of like import. Yet again and again the description itself, in its lively aptness, implies a measure of appreciation' (p. 193).

[18] Ted Hughes, Introduction to *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (1971); reprinted as 'The Great Theme: Notes on Shakespeare', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* (London and Boston, 1994), pp. 103–21; quotation, p. 105.

[19] Stephen Booth, 'Close Reading without Readings', in Russ McDonald, ed., *Shakespeare Reread: The Texts in New Contexts* (Ithaca and London, 1994), pp. 43–55; p. 43.

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more than enough to do in trying to convey delivered meanings. Theatre directors, a bolder breed, might reply in Tadashi Suzuki's spirited fashion: 'If the English think that Shakespeare is part of their exclusive heritage, then Shakespeare is of no interest. It's precisely the ability to impress other nations that makes Shakespeare so excellent.'[20] Dennis Kennedy goes still further when he suggests that foreign Shakespeare productions are often superior because the 'modernity of translation' gives them 'a more direct access to the power of the plays', so that British and American directors might be well advised to commission new translations 'into contemporary English'—even though we would lose 'the full value of the verse'.[21]

I don't at all dismiss that argument, but what would the loss involve, and what do we measure it against? Kennedy's primary allegiance is to good theatre, and specifically modern notions of what constitutes good theatre. For instance, Kennedy and modern directors like Peter Brook and Ninagawa are especially concerned with the visual aspects of production, but Shakespeare and his contemporaries spoke of going to hear a play, not going to see one.[22] In poetic drama the 'full value of the verse' is not, as Kennedy always supposes, some kind of extra musical-linguistic bonus, it *is* what provides the most 'direct access to the power of the plays'.

I need a good example, or test case. I shall take one from Act IV of *Othello*, and I choose this particular example because it will also allow a

[20] Ian Carruthers, 'The Chronicle of *Macbeth*: Suzuki Tadashi's Transformation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*', in Heather Kerr, Robin Eaden and Madge Milton, eds., *Shakespeare: World News* (Newark, DE, and London, 1992), pp. 214–36; quotation, p. 217.

[21] Dennis Kennedy, *Foreign Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 5. For a later version of Kennedy's argument, see his challenging essay, 'Shakespeare Without his Language', in James C. Bulman, ed., *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance* (London and New York; 1996), pp. 133–48.

[22] So, in the most famous instance, Hamlet is speaking quite conventionally when he says, 'we'll hear a play tomorrow' (2. 2. 51), whereas the Prologue to Ben Jonson's *The Staple of News* is either unconventional or, more probably, a sign that the conventional expression was already changing in 1626, when that play was first performed. Such a change seems even more charged with significance, as well as Jonsonian distaste, if we reflect that *The Staple of News*, which was printed in folio in 1631, was the first play Jonson had chosen to publish since he finished editing his 1616 Folio. The Prologue appears in the Induction, manages to say, 'For your owne sake, not ours'—and is then immediately interrupted by the gaggle of Gossips: Gossip Mirth, Gossip Tatle, Gossip Expectation, and Gossip Censure. When Gossip Censure finally calls for 'peace', the Prologue begins again, but differently, by alluding to the maligned, disgruntled 'Poet': 'For your owne sakes, not his, he bad me say, / Would you were come to heare, not see a Play . . .' (*Ben Jonson*, vol. 6, pp. 279, 282). In the published edition this 'Prologue for the Stage' is followed by an alternative, far more encouraging and respectful 'Prologue for the Court'. It seems a pity that Jonson didn't reserve the 'Stage' prologue for the 'Court', since the court's taste for lavish spectacle had helped to produce the change Jonson angrily spotlights.

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comparison between Shakespeare's poetic-dramatic ways of characterising Othello and Leontes, and this will help in a later part of my argument. My quotations are from the First Folio text, although the act, scene, and line numberings are—for ease of reference—those of the New Arden editions.

> Had it pleas'd Heaven,
> To try me with Affliction, had they rain'd
> All kinds of Sores, and Shames on my bare-head:
> Steep'd me in povertie to the very lippes,
> Given to Captivitie, me, and my utmost hopes,
> I should have found in some place of my Soule
> A drop of patience. But alas, to make me
> A fixed Figure for the time of Scorne,
> To point his slow, and moving finger at.
> Yet could I beare that too, well, very well:
> But there where I have garnered up my heart,
> Where either I must live, or beare no life,
> The Fountaine from the which my current runnes,
> Or else dries up: to be discarded thence,
> Or keepe it as a Cesterne, for foule Toades
> To knot and gender in. Turne thy complexion there:
> Patience, thou young and Rose-lip'd Cherubin,
> I heere looke grim as hell. (4. 2. 47–64)

This speech presents many local problems (and rewards). For example, editors have worred about the 'fixed Figure' and that 'finger', which is 'moving' in the Folio but 'unmoving' in the Quarto. If, as seems likely, the image plays on the idea of a Renaissance sun-dial—where the finger moves but so slowly it seems not to, all the while pointing cruelly at some decoratively grotesque figure, in this case a horned cuckold—such problems will be all the more vexing for a translator in a country where decorated sundials are unfamiliar or unknown. But my immediate concern is with the characterising effect of two more general and generally representative features of this speech: its syntax, and its metaphors.

We might first notice how the syntax is very much Othello's, and markedly unlike that in Leontes' accretive, unstoppable outbursts in the second scene of *The Winter's Tale* or, say, Hamlet's first soliloquy. The Elizabethan audiences who first heard Hamlet must have been startled and enthralled by an emotional intensity quite unlike anything that had been heard before on an English stage. Yet one measure of that intensity is that it seems unreasoning and uncontrolled. Hamlet has just been giving his mother and everybody else a bad time by insisting on the

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authenticity of his feelings for his dead father, but then, as soon as he is left alone to soliloquise, his father is barely mentioned; his speech is overwhelmingly concerned with his mother and her remarriage. It is also so torrential, and tormented, that its syntax cannot tell us whether the final reference to incest is climactic or a kind of furious afterthought. As for Leontes, his verse is almost clinically diagnostic. His crazed syntax, interjections and cancerous parentheses show how Leontes cannot keep his thought to any trajectory. His metaphors are no less revealing, and show how he regards his wife as an extension of his property, or estate:

> . . . Goe play (Boy) play, there have been
> (Or I am much deceiv'd) Cuckolds ere now,
> And many a man there is (even at this present,
> Now, while I speake this) holds his Wife by th'Arme,
> That little thinkes she has been sluyc'd in's absence,
> And his Pond fish'd by his next Neighbor (by
> Sir *Smile*, his Neighbour:) nay, there's comfort in't,
> Whiles other men have Gates, and those Gates open'd,
> As mine, against their will . . . (1. 2. 188–96)

Not surprisingly, this demented speaker cannot even 'conclude' when he says he will:

> . . . and 'tis powrefull: thinke it,
> From East, West, North, and South, be it concluded,
> No Barricado for a Belly. Know't,
> It will let in and out the Enemy,
> With bag and baggage: many thousand on's
> Have the Disease, and feele't not.

'Disease' is the right word for this, but what of Othello's speech?

One important difference is that Othello's syntax is remarkably controlled for as long as he is considering what agonies he could bear: '*Had it* pleas'd heaven to try me . . . I *should have* found . . . *But* alas, to make me . . . *Yet could* O beare that too . . . *But* there where I have garnerd up my heart . . .' Once the speech arrives 'there', the agony of confronting what cannot be endured produces a breakdown that is syntactic and logical as well as emotional: 'To be discarded thence, / *Or keep it* as a cistern . . .' The speech then plunges into chaos and incoherence, prompting one modern editor to complain that the last lines represent 'a most tiresome crux, coming at a moment when any clog on apprehension is particularly vexatious'.[23] I think that complaint altogether misses the

[23] M. R. Ridley, ed., *Othello* (1965), p. 153.

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dramatic point: the incoherence is dramatically coherent, since the whole speech is exploring and exposing the conditions and the moment of Othello's breakdown. Since no other English poetic dramatist depicts breakdown like this, we are confronting an example, or aspect, of Shakespeare's peculiarity.

That horrible collapse into chaos wouldn't occur in classical French poetic drama either, where a character like Racine's Phèdre always maintains her lucidity or 'clarté' even when she is confronting, and yielding to, the chaos within. In Racine's poetic drama unspeakable things may indeed press in from without, so that when Phèdre speaks of the 'flamme' that devours her this seems altogether more searingly physical, or devouring, than the conventionally tepid 'flamme' which warms Hippolyte and Aricie. And in this respect Racine's Phèdre seems closer to her Euripidean than her Senecan counterpart: Euripides may on occasion represent the goddess of love rather ironically, as an inadequate human construction, but, in the *Hippolytus* as in the *Bacchae*, 'Eros' is apprehended as a terrifying sacred power—and not merely, in the Senecan fashion, as a sickness or disorder. Nonetheless, the constant lucidity of Phèdre's language recalls Erich Auerbach's memorable characterisation of 'the classical, and specifically of the Roman, style, which looks at and organises things from above'.[24]

In sharp contrast—few contrasts could be sharper—Shakespeare's concern is to present a psychological and dramatic process in which, to quote from a sadly neglected book by Michael Black, 'a consciousness undergoing a traumatic evolution is revealed through the words the character uses':

> The language takes us down below the level of logical transitions. The image-shifts, the verbal associations, the central rhythmic ictus and its transformationss and suspensions seem the immediate activity of another mind, understood and felt as we do not ordinarily feel other minds.[25]

This delivers one peculiar difficulty which awaits any Shakespeare translator, no matter what the target language or culture may be: what should the translator do, when the poetic-dramatic significance or meaning of a character's collapse is manifest in, and as, incoherence? If the translator translates this dramatically coherent incoherence as incoherence he or she risks being accused of misunderstanding, so that there is a constant

[24] Erich Auerbach, trans., Willard Trask, *Mimesis: the representation of reality in Western literature* (Princeton, 1953), p. 72.
[25] Michael Black, *Poetic Drama as Mirror of the Will* (1977), p. 58.

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pressure to 'tidy up'—in many of Hamlet's or Macbeth's soliloquies, and in the final part of this speech of Othello's.

Othello is also being characterised through his metaphors, or what Black calls Shakespeare's 'image-filaments' (p. 49). Take that obscene—and I really do mean, vile—image of the 'cestern', or cistern. Othello's earlier, climactic sense of Desdemona as 'The Fountain from the which my current runnes' suddenly and violently contracts into this idea of her body as 'it', a mere container or receptacle to knot and gender in—or, as Othello puts it in another such agonisingly shameful moment, a 'corner' which he once again 'keeps' (i.e. at his own expense) for 'other men' to 'use'. This is all too like Leontes's reference to the 'Pond', and the 'bag and baggage' (testicles and seed). But Othello's speech also shows, or charts, his descent to that point. The speech ascends to the 'fountain', before the precipitous collapse that turns the fountain into the 'cestern', and an obscene 'it'.

Dr Johnson actually disapproved of that preceding fountain-metaphor, protesting that it was improperly conjoined with the idea of garnering; yet, as I suggested in *Shakespeare's Scepticism*, the mixed metaphor is wonderfully precise. It shows how the 'idealistic Othello first endows, or invests, Desdemona with unique significance, garnering up his heart by making her his storehouse of value; and then he sees her as the fountain or source, from which his life *derives* significance and value'.[26] It's worth adding that the cistern-metaphor seems all the more foul and revealing because it perverts *both* parts of the mixed metaphor: the idea of storing, and the sense of a life being like a fountain, fresh and flowing, with its own 'current'.

Moreover, the relation between these metaphors is prepared for in the earlier part of the speech where Othello insists that he could have found a *drop* of patience to oppose sores which *rain* down or a *steeping* poverty which climbs up, to the very lips. Actors like Olivier often use their hands at this point, to signal the up-down contrast. Our response to metaphor is often direct and intuitive, so that the critical or analytical response only comes later, if at all, like a detective after the crime. The conscious detective mind might not even notice how these liquid metaphors momentarily disappear, when Othello thinks of social shame and scorn. But they return, or flood back, as soon as Othello starts summoning his (imaginative) sense of all that Desdemona means to him, as the fountain from which the current of his own life flows—and of course there is nothing

[26] Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Scepticism* (Ithaca, 1990), p. 4.

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like that in Leontes's speeches. Once again, no other English poetic dramatist goes so far in this direction.

I am directing attention to this speech's syntax and metaphors, because they show how the speech traces or measures Othello's plummeting collapse to a level more like that at which Leontes starts. But contemporary critics are more likely to attend to that final resemblance than to the crucial difference in Shakespeare's poetic-dramatic representations. Today, we are quite properly shocked by the way Othello reifies Desdemona's body, seeing it as a 'cistern', or 'corner', and later ogles and even sniffs her smooth alabaster-like skin before he kills her. So, in Derek Cohen's discussion of 'Patriarchy and Jealousy in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*',[27] Othello's 'jealousy' is said to resemble that of Leontes, since both characters' speeches illustrate the workings of the 'patriarchal power structure' (p. 207)—which Cohen contrasts with other 'cultures in which the height of masculine hospitality is sharing one's wife with a male friend' (p. 213). I must say, that cultural comparison seems pretty risky: although the impulse to 'share' is certainly different, might it not be yet another 'masculine' or 'patriarchal' way of regarding and treating wives as property—or are we to suppose that when Eskimo wives are allowed to entertain female friends they feel free to offer their husband's sexual services?

Nonetheless, Cohen is riding our zeitgeist—or being ridden by it. There can't be many critics today who would side with Coleridge when he lists various 'effects and concomitants' of jealousy, 'all of which are visible in Leontes, and, I boldly say, not one of which marks its presence in *Othello*'—and Coleridge is demonstrably wrong: in his new edition of *The Winter's Tale* Stephen Orgel quotes Coleridge's list of 'characteristics', before curtly declaring that they 'are in fact shared by both figures' and 'obviously describe Othello as well as Leontes'.[28] Orgel then goes on to argue that there is a 'radical difference', that has 'nothing to do with character' and proceeds from the different 'plot' of *Othello*, 'which has a villain for its agent'. But doesn't a comparison between Othello's speech and that of Leontes suggest one no less 'radical' difference, that has to do with 'character' or, to place the emphasis where I would prefer, with the constituents of poetic-dramatic meaning? Othello's syntactic control reflects

[27] Derek Cohen, 'Patriarchy and Jealousy in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*', *Modern Languages Quarterly*, 48 (1987), pp. 207–23.

[28] Stephen Orgel, ed., *The Winter's Tale* (Oxford, 1996), p. 18. In his very complicated way, Coleridge kept wanting to affirm, against all the evidence, that Othello was 'above all low passions': see T. M. Raysor, ed., *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Shakespearean Criticism* (1960), vol. 1, p. 43.

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his concern with 'government', meaning self-government, and is altogether absent from Leontes' various 'jealous' speeches; similarly, although Othello's metaphors show him descending to Leontes' level, the speech also reveals an idealistic, self-committing component in Othello's feelings that is alien to Leontes.

Real people don't speak in verse, of course, and wouldn't—couldn't—use metaphor in Othello's way. To watch and listen to whatever a real person in Othello's situation might do and say would be far less informative. The poetry in poetic drama, like the music which articulates music drama, isn't merely a means of intensifying emotion; it allows us to see, as well as feel, the emotion within the poetic drama or music drama's particular constellation—or, as the older Leavis liked to say, constatation—of reciprocal relationships. In each case the articulation or representation depends upon un-realistic conventions and practices, and is in that sense metaphorical, rather than mimetic. But, although this is a path hardly anybody now takes, it is at least arguable that in the eighteenth century, when the great age of European poetic drama had finished in France and Spain as well as England, the greatest dramatist is Mozart. In the next century, when Shakespeare became a crucial figure in European Romantic attacks on French cultural dominance, the results appeared not only in *Otello* and *Falstaff* but also, more obliquely, in *Don Carlos* and *Boris Godunov*. Even Wagner, who had abandoned any attempt to deal directly with Shakespeare after *Das Liebesverbot*—his youthful version of *Measure for Measure*, which opens with the storming of a brothel—immersed himself in Shakespeare, Calderón and Greek tragedy while composing *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

The best 'translation' of Othello's 'Had it pleas'd Heaven' speech that I know is Verdi's. I have argued elsewhere that *Otello* is 'the apotheosis of nineteenth-century readings and misreadings of Shakespeare's play', and that the musical structure of 'Dio! mi potevi' keeps astonishingly close to the psychological dynamics of Othello's speech.[29] In Tomasso Salvini's legendary performances as Shakespeare's Othello, which so impressed both Henry James and Constantin Stanislavsky, this same speech became 'the crucial passage for Salvini's interpretation', measuring the descent from idealistic self-commitment to murderous chaos.[30] That doubtless reflects

[29] Graham Bradshaw, 'A Shakespearean Perspective: Verdi and Boito as translators': this essay appeared as the 'Epilogue' in James A. Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: 'Falstaff'* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 152–71.

[30] James A Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: 'Otello'* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 177. Salvini's claim to be 'one of the theater's greatest interpreters' is well discussed by Marvin Rosenberg in Chapter 8 of

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the enormous influence of Schlegel's reading of *Othello*, which was reprinted as a supplement—the only supplement—in the standard translation by Carlo Rusconi which Verdi and Salvini read, and also in the translations (which Verdi also consulted) by Giulio Carcano and Andrea Maffei.[31] But how should we explain the fact that this same speech of Othello's is altogether ignored in what were probably the two most influential readings of our century: in Leavis's account of Othello as a deluded egotist, and in Greenblatt's account of a deluded Christian?[32] As James Hepokoski observes, 'the tone and feel of the relatively recent and ruthlessly objective critique was quite unknown to Verdi and Boito'[33]—and, we might add, to Schlegel, Coleridge, and Bradley. Although I certainly don't want to reinstate or even defend those earlier readings I do think that Othello's speech establishes, in poetic-dramatic terms, profound differences between Othello and Leontes. What Orgel, Cohen, and Greenblatt make, or fail to make, of this speech provides a measure of our present situation, and the difficulties we now have in responding to the conventions and practices of Shakespearean poetic drama. As I suggested earlier, most contemporary critics discuss Shakespeare as though his plays were, or might as well have been, written in prose.

That might remind us that all our readings are also 'translations' which reflect our own mental world and horizons, just as Peter Brook's stagings are Shakespearean 'translations' or 'adaptations', like those of Davenant or Tate. I don't say this in any censorious spirit; good or bad, it's how it is. We only go wrong, I think, if we suppose that the 'full value of the verse' is irrelevant to, or even somehow impedes, 'direct access to the power of the plays'.

The Masks of Othello (Berkeley, 1961), and by Virginia Mason Vaughan in Chapter 8 of *Othello: A contextual history* (Cambridge, 1994). Stanislavski recorded his impressions of Salvini in *My Life in Art*, trans. J. J. Robbins (New York, 1956), pp. 265–76, while Henry James's very enthusiastic response appeared in *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting & the Drama: 1872–1901* (New Brunswick, 1948).

[31] So, for example, Verdi's letter of 8 May 1886 to Boito shows him carefully comparing Shakespeare's English text with the translations by Rusconi, Maffei, and Victor Hugo: see Hans Busch, ed. and trans., *Verdi's 'Otello' and 'Simon Boccanegra' (revised version) in Letters and Documents* (Oxford, 1988), vol. 1, pp. 215–16.

[32] F. R. Leavis, 'Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero: or, The Sentimentalist's Othello', *The Common Pursuit* (1952), pp. 136–59; originally published in *Scrutiny*, 6 (1937), pp. 259–83. Stephen Greenblatt discusses *Othello* in chapter 6 of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London, 1980). I compare these two readings in *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (Ithaca, 1993), pp. 190–201.

[33] Hepokoski, p. 171.

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But, as I anticipated earlier, this first stage of my argument has brought me to a curious and problematic point. Shakespeare is 'our' greatest poet and, quite inseparably, 'our' greatest dramatist, because what he wrote is—as I have been insisting—poetic drama. But this very 'English' (or English-speaker's) view still won't explain why Shakespeare was mattering so much in quite different countries and cultures—Germany, Russia, Japan or, say, Norway—before there were any adequate or impressive translations. It doesn't explain how or why he is the world's most performed dramatist.

3. Complex designs

In our 'politically correct' age contemporary critics like to give marks to attitudes, before failing older authors, or modern writers like T. S. Eliot or Philip Larkin, whose attitudes don't pass, or measure up to those of the critic—as though our own attitudes and beliefs were somehow not of an age, but for all time! Much of the *best* contemporary Shakespeare criticism is also concerned with attitudes; this delivers a Shakespeare who is very much of his time, but in another sense of ours.

Earlier, I mentioned the New Casebook on *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Alternative Shakespeares 2* as books that show, and set out to show, where we are now. Ania Loomba has essays in both volumes, and in the first she emphasises how Renaissance drama, and not just Shakespeare, is 'proto-Brechtian' in its use of 'montage' and in its '"disconnectedness" of both structure and perspective'.[34] As Loomba says, Brecht himself 'observed similar characteristics in at least twenty of Shakespeare's contemporaries'; the 'non-teleological form' in plays like *The Changeling* or *Antony and Cleopatra* 'becomes an important vehicle for resisting closure' since the drama is actually exploring (or, as British cultural materialist bulldozers like John Drakakis love to say, excavating) 'complex, shifting, largely impersonal, never soluble' conflicts. I would agree, and indeed I argued in *Misrepresentations* that *Henry V* is 'proto-Brechtian' in something very like Loomba's sense.

Another part of Loomba's declared intention is 'to insert the discussion of gender more fully into such proto-Brechtian multiplicity and

[34] Ania Loomba, '"Travelling Thoughts": Theatre and the Space of the Other', in John Drakakis, ed. *Antony and Cleopatra* (1994), pp. 279–307; this essay first appeared in Loomba's *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 1989).

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montage', and in her excellent discussion of the 'loose and episodic structure' of *The Changeling* her concern is not to follow all those 'traditional' critics who try to 'establish the harmony between' the tragic and comic scenes but rather to see how the mixing of plots which 'serve to puncture and comment upon each other' creates a 'collage which serves to demystify certain issues'. Of course that repeated phrase 'serves to' is somewhat slippery in declining to specify who or what serves what to whom, and the same phrase reappears twice in Loomba's next sentence, when she explains that Isabella's fidelity in the comic subplot 'does not serve to condemn Beatrice; rather the almost surrealistic treatment of madness in the sub-plot serves to alienate us in the Brechtian sense from the "madness" of Beatrice's story' (Casebook, p. 282). Loomba is clearly concerned with a Shakespeare who is 'of his age' and not 'for all time'. If we were suspicious and narrow-eyed we might connect that slippery use of 'serves to'—which serves to suppress questions of artistic achievement and intention—with another part of Loomba's own declared intention, which is to 'democratise' the canon which has Shakespeare at its 'apex'. In her more recent essay on 'Shakespeare and Cultural Difference' Loomba enters this related complaint:

> A recent MLA bibliographical search showed up nearly 400 essays on *Othello* produced in the last five years, most of them including some discussion of 'race', but only one study related to Heywood's *Fair Maid of the West*—a saga of mercantilism, interracial sexual relations, cross-dressing and the production of emblematic English femininity. Shakespeare continues to be regarded, somewhat contradictorily, as both unique and more emblematic of attitudes (dominant or contestory) in 'his' period than any other playwright. He also continues to be considered in isolation from, or in a privileged relation to, other writers.[35]

The 'bardoclastic' uses to which this complaint might be put are emphasised by the essay's appearance in *Alternative Shakespeares 2*.

And yet—the complaint is shrewd, the contradiction Loomba complains about is real, and there are many other reasons for admiring this essay. To read *Othello* with plays like Heywood's *Fair Maid of the West* or Behn's *Orinooko* is not only desirable but inescapably necessary, if one's critical and historical concern is to identify and trace changing attitudes to race and gender. The so-called 'traditional' critic who isn't eager to undertake such work should at least be grateful to a critic like Loomba who is, and usually does it in an exemplary way. On the other hand, that

[35] Ania Loomba, 'Shakespeare and cultural difference', in Terence Hawkes, ed., *Alternative Shakespeares*, vol. 2 (London and New York, 1996), pp. 164–91; quotation, p. 165.

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is no reason to dismiss the question of whether, or rather why, Shakespearian poetic dramas seem, well, better than those of Heywood and Behn, which haven't travelled, and have barely survived. These concerns are not opposed, but complementary.

To come at that point from another direction, a work of art is *worked*. Brechtian 'disconnectedness' is not incompatible with the creative impulse to integrate and concentrate. No example can be conclusive, but let me provide an illustration from *Antony and Cleopatra* that seems to me suggestive, and so far as I know hasn't been discussed.[36] Plutarch's essay *On Isis and Osiris*[37] was quite widely read in the Renaissance, and was of course concerned with the chief goddess *and* the chief god in the Egyptian pantheon—but Shakespeare isn't. In his poetic drama there are many references to Isis, but not one to Osiris or any other Egyptian male deity. His Egypt seems wholly 'feminized', while the opposite happens with the play's references to the Roman pantheon: there are repeated references to Jupiter or the 'Jove of power', and to 'plated Mars', Bacchus and Hercules, but not to female deities like Juno, Diana, or Minerva. The only exception is Venus, who should probably not count as an exception since these references occur in contexts where Venus is being identified, like Isis or Dido, with Cleopatra, and where the Roman Antony's alliance with Cleopatra is being compared, implicitly and explicitly, with that between Mars and Venus: the alliance between 'Rome' and 'Egypt' is presented as a conjunction of opposites, like the alchemical *coniunctio oppositorum*.[38] Other 'Egyptian' images are constantly associated with nature in its benign and threatening aspects, and with the natural elements of earth, air, water, and fire—the fire that quickens Nilus's slime, and so on—whereas the images associated with Rome repeatedly involve what is not natural but man-made and in that respect unnatural or anti-natural: cement, bridges, hoops, arches, knots—things that bind, connect and

[36] I first discussed this in 'Shakespeare's Surrogate Dramatists', in *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 29: 1991 (published by the Shakespeare Society of Japan in 1994), pp. 37–60; and I discussed the curious, I think fascinating, way in which this play's psychic-symbolic 'geography' resembles Lawrence's in 'Lapsing Out in *Women in Love*', *English*, vol. 33 (1983), pp. 17–32.

[37] Plutarch's essay appeared in the *Moralia*, and was translated by Philemon Holland in 1603. Marvin Spevack's 1990 New Variorum edition of this play is more informative than earlier editions in commenting on the influence of this remarkable essay; for example, it is likely that the Shakespearian account of Cleopatra's 'infinite variety' owes something to Holland's version of Plutarch's description of Isis: 'An infinite number of names, for that she receiveth all forms and shapes'.

[38] This fascinated C. G. Jung, in *Mysterium Coniunctionis* and his other writings on alchemy.

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dominate, construct and constrict, and variously testify to an insistently male, imperious and imperial, urge to control.

In other words, Shakespeare is being intriguingly selective, developing his contrast between 'Egypt' and 'Rome' in ways that are sometimes mythopoeic rather than historical and allow the contrast to function as an intricately sustained poetic-dramatic conceit or structural metaphor. I have written elsewhere of the comparably sustained and (in the Renaissance sense) 'witty' conceits or structural metaphors in the 'Henriad' and *Othello* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[39] My immediate point is that although this kind of integration seems peculiarly Shakespearian—or another part of Shakespeare's peculiarity—it's not incompatible with those 'proto-Brechtian' features which Loomba thinks more generally characteristic of Renaissance drama. We need to make a distinction rather like that Stephen Booth makes in discussing *King Lear*, when he distinguishes between the 'encompassing order in the *work*' and our sense of the absence of any comparable order in the *world* the work 'describes'.[40] I agree that the 'structure' of *Antony and Cleopatra* is 'loose and episodic' in Loomba's Brechtian and formal (or structural) sense, just as it is 'epic' and 'non-teleological' in its resistance to 'closure'; but, far from being 'loose' in any critical or aesthetic sense, it asks to be considered as a peculiarly integrated, complex design.

The extent to which *Othello* is a comparably complex design appears if we return to Stephen Orgel's comparison between Othello and Leontes, and notice the peculiar difficulties Orgel gets into when he claims that Shakespeare's presentation of Leontes' jealousy is 'in fact realistic', 'strikingly modern', and 'far more true to human experience than Othello's super-rationalized passion, which has a villain for its agent'. Orgel argues that, 'at a critical moment in *Othello*', Emilia 'punctures the play's claim that jealousy is caused by the plotting of villains' (pp. 18–19). Yet it is Orgel himself who maintains that the 'radical difference' between Othello and Leontes has 'nothing to do with character', and instead derives from the 'plot' of *Othello*, 'which has a villain for its agent'. This is Orgel's claim', not 'the play's claim'. Moreover, that curious reference to 'the play's claim' mumbles the game it dare not bite, that is, Shakespeare's creative intentions: does 'the play's claim' also mean Shakespeare's claim? I hope not, but it does imply some odd sense in which Emilia is outside, or not part of, the 'play' she inhabits. This seems all the more curious if

[39] See, for example, *Shakespeare's Scepticism*, pp. 65–79, and *Misrepresentations*, pp. 221–2.
[40] Stephen Booth, *'King Lear', 'Macbeth', Indefinition and Tragedy* (New Haven, 1983), p. 27.

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we reflect that Shakespeare was departing from his sources in inventing the crypto-feminist Emilia and wouldn't have taken that trouble so that she could 'puncture' his play.

4. Blocking out

Rather than telling us what to think and feel, Shakespeare's complex designs constantly show and explore the various, sometimes irreducibly, different ways in which different people think and feel. All of my own writing on Shakespeare has been concerned with his perspectivist habit of going 'inside' a Shylock or Caliban, and 'framing' a series of different perspectives on characters and whatever points are at issue, like honour or the divine right of kings. Here we might say that Shakespeare's peculiarity appears in the way he reads us. That is, one effect of his perspectivism is to reward our attention, but another effect is to expose whatever we are inclined to disregard, or block out.

Fortinbras provides a striking illustration. He has been a significant and often very ominous figure in many European productions, from Wajda to Bergman; in Ninagawa's second Japanese production he resembled Colonel Gadhaffi. And if you live in a country like Poland, which for a century and a half existed as a passionate idea but not as a country, your response when Shakespeare's ending shows a Norwegian taking over the Danish throne is likely to be more disturbed than that of a modern Englishman or American; in this case the foreign responses are probably much closer to those of the play's first audiences, when there was so much anxiety about the succession and what would happen after the queen's death. Yet, although this might now seem startling, Fortinbras was regularly eliminated from the end of the play in all the English stagings from 1718 (or earlier) to 1897, when Bernard Shaw persuaded Forbes-Robertson to reinstate Shakespeare's political ending; indeed, Fortinbras was altogether eliminated in some later English stagings and film versions, like Olivier's or Tony Richardson's.[41]

Which Fortinbras to include is another, rather complicated question: in an important essay Philip C. McGuire has shown how Fortinbras appears differently in the First and Second Quartos and in the First

[41] See Philip Edwards's 'Introduction' to his New Cambridge edition of *Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 61–7.

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Folio.[42] As you know, Hamlet's final soliloquy and his preceding conversation with the Norwegian Captain in Q2 are absent from the Folio text. McGuire himself argues that 'Q2 alone makes us aware that *its* Fortinbras is . . . a prince willing to risk his death and that of "twenty thousand men" "even for an Egge-shell" '—or 'for a fantasie and tricke of fame'—while the Folio presents a 'reformed prince' who could offer Denmark a 'fresh and positive beginning' (172).

McGuire goes too far, I think, in asking us to suppose that Shakespeare not only revised but reversed the Second Quarto's more ambiguous conception of Fortinbras. Our first impression of Fortinbras in the Folio as well as the other texts is of a very dangerous hothead—'young *Fortinbras* / Of unimproved Mettle, hot and full' (TLN, 112–13); moreover, whatever evidence there is that the Folio Fortinbras is genuinely 'reformed', not merely obliged to obey the uncle who controls the pursestrings, seems more uncertain than McGuire allows. Indeed, this delivers a contrast which, rather surprisingly, McGuire doesn't discuss. Claudius's diplomacy may be less heroic, and less risky, than King Hamlet's single combat with King Fortinbras, but it's very effective and preserves Denmark from war and foreign rule. In sharp contrast, Hamlet is entirely indifferent to the fate of Denmark—that detested 'prison'—in the second scene, and later. In Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well* (*Warui Yatsu Hodo Yoku Nemeru*, 1960) Nishi, Kurosawa's anguished modern Hamlet, insists that he wants revenge not 'just to avenge my father', but to punish 'all those men who prey on people who are unable to fight back'. We never hear Hamlet expressing that kind of concern for Denmark or the Danes; his first and last action when he is King is to deliver his country to a foreign power—somewhat redundantly, since Fortinbras is not slow to see, and seize, his 'vantage'.

Fortinbras matters in various ways. Shakespeare characteristically 'frames' the contrast between the responses of three sons and a daughter to the loss of a father, and a further contrast, which is most pressing in Q2, between 'the man of war and the man of mind'[43] and their different conceptions of 'honour'. But then Fortinbras's resounding declaration that the safely dead Hamlet 'was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royally' also brings into focus the awkwardly pragmatic question of whether being ruled by Claudius might actually have been

[42] Philip McGuire, 'Which Fortinbras, Which *Hamlet*?', in Thomas Clayton, ed., *The Hamlet First Published (Q1. 1603): Origins, Forms, Intertextualities* (Newark, DE, 1992), pp. 151–78.
[43] Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Hamlet* (Newark, DE, London, and Toronto, 1992), p. 747.

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better for Denmark. Of course the force of that question needs to be 'blocked out' if you see the play through Hamlet's eyes. One solution was that of Edward Gordon Craig, whose view of the play was so Hamlet-centred that he saw it as a monodrama in which 'you see, as it were, through the mind's eye of Hamlet'.[44] In the famous Craig-based Moscow Arts Theatre production Bersenev's Fortinbras had a golden cross on his tunic (and seemed to Stanislavsky 'like an Archangel'); I think McGuire's account of the Folio Fortinbras leans too far in that direction. Another solution is to make Denmark—the court, as well as Claudius—so corrupt you don't really care what happens to it; Kozintsev's great film did that, aided by Pasternak's translation in which, as Anna Kay France has shown, Hamlet's speeches are 'sanitised' wherever there is any suggestion that his mind is indeed 'tainted'.[45] A still more drastic solution—seen in all those post-1660 English 'translations'—was to eliminate the problem altogether, by eliminating Fortinbras. On the other hand, if we can't dismiss our doubts about Fortinbras—and the illogicalities the Second Quarto presents in Hamlet's final soliloquy—the play seems more challenging, and far more interesting, than Craig's monodrama. Claudius himself may also seem more like a 'mighty opposite', and less like the drunken bloated satyr encountered in so many Hamlet-centred readings.

5. 'The play's the thing'

Hamlet might seem to provide, and is often treated as, an exception to Shakespeare's habit of creating intricately perspectival designs. Not only does Prince Hamlet dominate the play he inhabits, to an unparalleled degree; the history of *Hamlet* criticism and productions shows the tendency to take what Salvador de Madariaga calls a 'Hamlet-centred' view, seeing the play through Hamlet's eyes.[46] Yet the same history also tells a fascinatingly different story.

It's fair to say that although the English kept finding different ways of

[44] Brian Arnott, *Towards a New Theatre: Edward Gordon Craig and Hamlet*, 1975, p. 81.

[45] Anna Kay France, *Boris Pasternak's Translations of Shakespeare* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1978), pp. 21–52. Since Kozintsev uses Pasternak's translation in his great 1964 film of *Hamlet*, it is very misleading to have Shakespearian subtitles rather than translations of Pasternak's translation. When the film was made, Russian critics like Alexander Anikst had already challenged this noble and ennobling view of Hamlet: see Arthur P. Mendel, 'Hamlet and Soviet Humanism', *Slavic Review*, 30, no. 4 (Dec. 1971).

[46] Salvador de Madariaga, *On Hamlet* (2nd edn., 1964), p. 12.

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admiring Shakespeare's prince they remained locked in a Hamlet-centred view of *Hamlet* throughout the period from Coleridge through Bradley. This view wasn't seriously and vigorously challenged in England until 1916, when D. H. Lawrence expressed his dislike of the Prince in the 'Amleto' chapter of *Twilight in Italy*; Wilson Knight's reading followed in 1930.[47] Japan provides an intriguing parallel. In 1911—around the time when the Italian actor playing Hamlet provoked Lawrence's outburst of dislike—the Japanese novelist Shiga Naoya went to the Imperial Theatre production of *Hamlet*, which was then the talk of Tokyo. Shiga not only disliked Shakespeare's prince, he anticipated Wilson Knight in finding Claudius more sympathetic and impressive. In 1912 Shiga published his story, 'Claudius's Diary' (*Kurodiasu-no-nikki*), and followed this with an essay in which he argued (anticipating critics like Greg and Robson, or me) that the 'Mousetrap' fails to establish Claudius's guilt; this was the first challenge to the Hamlet-centred view in Japan, and for the next half-century such isolated challenges tended to be creative rather than critical—appearing, that is, in fiction and in Kurosawa's 1960 film *The Bad Sleep Well* (*Warui Yatsu Hodo Yoku Nemuru*).[48]

Elsewhere in Europe, especially in Germany and Russia, such challenges appeared much earlier than in England. In one sense this shows how thoroughly Shakespeare had been assimilated in Germany and Russia: critical responses to the prince emerged as an independent, native growth. But in another sense, which both clarifies and complicates my international theme, these responses were 'appropriations' that reflected different cultural and political developments. In Russia the fifteen-year-old Lermontov and sixteen-year old Dostoevsky were transfixed by Hamlet; as Eleanor Rowe shows, in the 1830s and 1840s *Hamlet* was 'the idol of the Russian intelligentsia and "Hamletism" the fashionable pose',[49] but by the 1860s—after Turgenev's great essay on 'Hamlet and Don Quixote', in which 'Hamlet embodies the spirit of negation'—there was a reaction against Hamlet-types (or that kind of intelligentsia). A quarter of a century before Turgenev claimed, in an 1864 speech, that Hamlet was 'closer and more understandable to us . . . than to the

[47] See chapter II, 'The Embassy of Death: an Essay on *Hamlet*', in G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (Oxford, 1930).

[48] For a fuller account of Shiga's story and Kurosawa's film, see Graham Bradshaw and Kaori Ashizu, 'Reading *Hamlet* in Japan', in Jonathan Bate, Jill. L. Levenson and Dieter Mehl, eds., *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Los Angeles, 1996* (Neark, DE and London, 1998), pp. 350–63.

[49] Eleanor Rowe, *Hamlet: A Window on Russia* (New York, 1976), p. 7.

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English', Heinrich Heine had claimed, in *Shakespeares Mädchen und Frauen* (1839), that 'The Germans have comprehended Shakespeare better than the English.'[50] In Germany, as in other European countries like Verdi's Italy, Shakespeare was not an 'instrument of domination' but an instrument of liberation, above all from French classicism and cultural dominance; but by the 1830s the revolutionary authors of the Young Germany movement were, as Werner Habicht puts it, disparaging 'both Hamlet's dreamy and soliloquizing failure to act efficiently and the German introspection he was seen as personifying'.[51] Robert Weimann provides a fascinating account of the later cultural-critical collision which occurred when the 'humanist' Hamlet of Soviet criticism failed to impress Brecht's East Germans.[52]

If we are trying to understand why Shakespeare is the most performed dramatist in the world, his perspectivism probably matters even more than his poetry. Yet my own compressed account of challenges to 'Hamlet-centred' views of *Hamlet* has so far ignored the question that matters most in any account of Shakespeare's perspectivism, but is disregarded in most of those challenges. D. H. Lawrence and Shiga Naoya both very obviously dislike Prince Hamlet, but in a way that is still character-centred. That is, they both suppose that if Hamlet isn't altogether sympathetic, something must be wrong with the play. Neither asks whether the play's perspectives might be organising, not merely provoking, their more critical responses. Once we do ask that question the answer seems clear. Indeed it hardly matters which example we take: once any one example is allowed to rock the Hamlet-centred boat, others will quickly follow.

For example, we might recall how misleading Hamlet's warm welcome to the players is, when set against his complete indifference to whatever happens to them after he has used them in the performance he sets up and also ruins: do they just leave the stage in disgrace? Or we might recall how often male Romantic critics excused Hamlet's brutality to Ophelia by explaining that he is suffering too; doubtless he is, and perhaps that's an excuse as well as an explanation, but why does he never once imagine or

[50] See Oswald LeWinter's excellent anthology in the Penguin Shakespeare Library, *Shakespeare in Europe* (Harmondsowrth, 1970), p. 141.

[51] Werner Habicht, *Shakespeare and the German Imagination* (Hertford: International Shakespeare Association), p. 8.

[52] Robert Weimann, 'A divided heritage: conflicting appropriations of Shakespeare in (East) Germany', in John J. Joughin, ed., *Shakespeare and National Culture* (Manchester, and New York, 1997), pp. 173–205.

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even care what would become of Ophelia after he has killed her father? Perhaps Claudius provides the best answer: 'Love? His affections do not that way tend.' (Ironically, the Branagh film supports Claudius' perception: if, as the film too sizzlingly insists, Hamlet and Ophelia have been lovers, Hamlet's indifference to Ophelia's fate becomes even more repulsive.)

I want to pause—partly as a tribute to the late Theodore Redpath—over a different example. Because Hamlet-centred readings produce Hamlet-centred stagings by taking and then staging Hamlet's view of the other characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often presented as sycophants. Yet that is at odds not only with Gertrude's telling them that Hamlet

> hath much talked of you,
> And sure I am two men there are not living
> To whom he more adheres . . . (2. 2. 19–20)

but with the way Hamlet himself greets them as 'my excellent good friends' (223). A few minutes later, he appeals to them 'by the rights of our fellowship, the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love . . .' For Hamlet such 'rights' and 'obligation' are only due to him, never from him. Imagine your own response if a friend you had grown up with became suicidally depressed and his royal parents asked to you to help; in such circumstances, to come when 'sent for' need not be incompatible with caring—but I only ask you to imagine this because it never occurs to Hamlet to do so. To be connected with Claudius is damning enough. Finally, of course, Hamlet gleefully tells Horatio how he sent his old friends to their deaths and possible damnation, with no 'shriving time allow'd'. When Horatio seems shocked, or pensively declines to share in Hamlet's glee, Hamlet insists (in the Folio), 'Why, man, they did make love to this employment' (5. 2. 57). That certainly is imaginative, since there is no evidence that the unfortunate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern knew or even guessed anything of Claudius's plan to have Hamlet killed in England. As Redpath judiciously puts it, in what may have been his last essay: 'if Hamlet *did* believe they were privy to the commission he had no *substantial ground* for such a belief—only at most general grounds for some *suspicion*.'[53] Tom Stoppard expressed a similar view in a 1968 interview on *Rosencrantz and*

[53] Theodore Redpath, 'Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern', in Yasunari Takada, ed., *Surprised by Scenes: Essay in honour of Professor Yasunari Takahashi* (Tokyo, 1994), pp. 105–13; quotation, p. 108.

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Guildenstern are Dead: 'Hamlet's assumption that they were privy to Claudius's plot is entirely gratuitous. As far as their involvement in Shakespeare's text is concerned they are told very little about what is going on and much of what they are told isn't true. So I see them much more clearly as a couple of bewildered innocents rather than as a couple of henchmen, which is the usual way they are depicted in productions of *Hamlet*.'[54]

Although it might seem absurd to suggest that the play *Hamlet* shows how Hamlet lacks imagination, that lack is of a specific and demonstrable kind: Hamlet has a polymathic interest in, is both imaginative and passionately, unforgettably eloquent about, a vast range of things that connect with his own thoughts and feelings; but he isn't interested in, and doesn't even try to imagine or ascertain, what anybody else thinks and feels. We can never be sure what Horatio means, in his hesitant comment on the success or failure of the Mousetrap—'Half a share'—or in his other guarded, and seemingly shocked, response: 'So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to't.' Why? The play cannot tell us, because Hamlet doesn't ask—even though Hamlet had told Horatio that they would compare their impressions after the 'Mousetrap'. For exactly the same reason, we shall never be sure what Gertrude means in that crucial moment when Hamlet says, 'As kill a king and marry with his brother', and the seemingly stunned queen echoes him: 'As kill a king?' Hamlet should be concerned to know the limits of his mother's guilt or innocence, but instead he rushes on, telling her what he thinks he knows and what he thinks she should think or feel. He doesn't listen. He isn't interested. His habit of pouncing on what other characters say shows the same indifference, even when his pounces seem more absorbing. When Gertrude says, 'Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity', Hamlet's 'Ay, madam, it is common' deflects his mother's loving concern in an unloving, unconcerned way, and when Gertrude patiently presses on to ask, 'If it be, / Why seems it so particular with thee?' Hamlet's explosive reply—'Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not seems'—launches the profoundly fascinating speech about 'that within which passes show', but also shows Hamlet's indifference to what his mother meant by 'seems' or by her sensible and very pertinent contrast between the 'common' and the 'particular'. He doesn't care what his mother, or Ophelia or anyone else, has 'within'.

Within the play, other characters are more imaginative or caring:

[54] Paul Delaney, ed., *Tom Stoppard in Conversation* (Ann Arbor, 1994), p. 18.

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Ophelia's soliloquy is largely about somebody else, while Claudius is characteristically affectionate in what turns out to be his last words to Polonius, and only reveals his inner torment when Polonius has gone. But the most telling contrast is not with these other characters but with the play itself, which is almost promiscuous in its imaginative compulsion to consider how all the other characters think and feel.

* * *

Let me attempt a summary, or at least suggest where my nervous hoverings have been punctuated by the occasional pounce. I have argued that we can't consider Shakespeare's peculiarity without confronting our own. Our current preoccupation with race, class, and gender, and with judging authors by grading their attitudes, has coincided with a peculiar and unprecedented indifference to the poetry that articulates poetic drama. Ania Loomba mentions four hundred-odd articles on *Othello* and then notes, approvingly, that they almost all discuss race; probably no more than half a dozen discussed Shakespeare's poetry. One measure of the distance we have travelled is that contrast between Coleridge, who refused to countenance the idea of any similarity between Othello and Leontes, and critics like Stephen Orgel and Derek Cohen, who don't see any significant difference. I have argued that the difference between Othello and Leontes must be heard, in their poetry. But is it, now? Leavis's very influential account of Othello as a deluded egotist was fiercely one-sided, but attentive to Othello's language. Greenblatt's account of Othello as a deluded Christian is no less fiercely one-sided and has probably, by now, been no less influential than Leavis's or Bradley's readings, but there is no point in Greenblatt's account where it matters that *Othello* isn't a prose drama. Similarly, the distance that separates Dennis Kennedy's specifically modern notions of good theatre from great poetic drama appears in Kennedy's willingness to regard Shakespeare's poetry as a kind of bonus: it doesn't occur to Kennedy that in poetic drama the poetry provides—is exactly what provides—the most 'direct access to the power of the plays'.

To which Kennedy might reply, 'That may have been true when people spoke of going to *hear* a play, but it is no longer true, for us.' Even when English-speakers do respond to the supreme power and richness of Shakespeare's dramatic verse, that still won't explain why Shakespeare became the *world's* most performed dramatist. What Stephen Booth identifies as 'not *a* but *the* principal source of the greatness we find in Shakespeare's work' is untranslatable. And yet, as the now rapidly

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proliferating, often absorbing studies of Shakespeare Abroad keep testifying, Shakespeare has crossed endless boundaries, appealing in quite different countries and cultures: something very big was coming through, but what? Why did Shakespeare matter so much in Shoyo's Japan or Verdi's Italy or Pushkin's Russia or Stendhal's France, where the British empire wasn't any kind of presence? Even where and when the British empire was a presence—in South Africa, or some Caribbean colonies, or Karl Marx's London household—the conspiracy theories don't explain, or even acknowledge, how often Shakespeare was an instrument of liberation, not domination. At this point I was driven to argue that if we are really trying to explain how Shakespeare travels so well, his perspectivism may be even more important than his poetry.

One difficulty with this argument is not that it's wrong but that it's unfashionable. The more serious (but related) difficulty is that we go on seeing and getting excited by the *effects* of Shakespeare's perspectivism without concentrating on the *cause*. That is, we go on and on getting excited about whether Othello is a Noble Moor or a deluded egotist, or whether Prince Hal is an ideal king or a coldhearted Machiavel, or whether Shylock is an anti-semitic caricature or a crypto-tragic victim, or whether to side with Prospero or Caliban, and so on. But we keep doing this, and exciting ourselves, without reflecting on how the plays are so peculiar in their way of making such issues so exciting—by framing different, conflicting perspectives within a remarkably complex design. So I have driven myself into this rather lonely corner, which may be my peculiarity.

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