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American Shakespeare

edited by
Maria DiBattista



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Come, said my soul,
Such verses for my body let us write, (for we are one,)

Walt Whitman – *Leaves of Grass* – 1855

A highly valued contributor to *Memoria di Shakespeare* has left us, not long after authoring an intelligent and original piece published in issue number 7, "Vanitas", edited by Rosy Colombo and Keir Elam. That essay was further proof of Catherine Belsey's interest in continental Shakespearean studies – which in turn are much indebted to her vivid and thoughtful contributions to academic inquiry. Our journal will miss her voice.

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Introduction. American Shakespeare

Maria DiBattista

The American Shakespeare profiled in this volume may at times appear but is not, be assured, some jingoistic chimera conjured by cultural nationalists eager to appropriate him as their country's *genius loci*¹. Shakespeare occupies a real and commanding place in America's national life, serving for over two centuries as a cultural touchstone in the curriculum of both public and private schools and on the boards of theaters from Broadway to Tombstone², and as a

¹ In his inaugural lecture as the first director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Joseph Quincy Adams was eager to claim Shakespeare as "the common possession of both branches of the Anglo-Saxon race". The British colonists may have "shifted the place of their residence", he argued, "but not to a foreign country". They had, rather, "established a newer England beyond the sea", taking with them, as "their birthright", Shakespeare "as the finest flower of [their] language and culture". "Nothing could rob them of him", Adams writes; "And being theirs, he is ours, is of us, their descendants" (Adams 2014, 419-21).

² In John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, Wyatt Earp proves his mettle and worth as a sheriff for the feral frontier town of Tombstone by volunteering to rescue a harried Shakespearean actor who has been kidnapped by the notorious Clanton gang. He finds the terrified actor being taunted into performing Hamlet's "To be or not to be", which he manages to do until, terrified, he stops short after declaiming, "Who would fardels bear / To grunt and sweat under a weary life". The tubercular Doc Holliday, who grunts and sweats for physical as well as spiritual reasons, takes up the dopped line at the charged word "life", and

wisdom figure almost reflexively invoked in public debates about the exceptional nature and (possibly imperiled) future of the Republic³. Yet American Shakespeare cannot simply be regarded as a cultural icon like any other, since veneration of Shakespeare, while it entails, can also transcend conventional notions of influence. At its most profound and generative, American enthralment with Shakespeare and his characters – above all Falstaff and Hamlet, but also and obsessively, with Lear, Macbeth, Prospero, Shylock, Coriolanus, Iago and, for those with particularly supple natures, Rosalind and that queen of the bodily sublime, Cleopatra – can lead to the discovery, or unleashing, of the ‘true self’, Whitman’s “Me myself”, which otherwise might remain dormant or incompletely realized. To cite some of the most eminent examples featured and expounded in this volume: Emily Dickinson, the recluse of Amherst, saw her own declamatory inwardness mirrored in a Danish prince with too much, rather than too little, commerce with the world; Orson Welles, whose life might easily be moralized in Falstaff’s self-lament, “Company, villainous company, hath been the spoil of me” (Shakespeare 2005, III.iii.9-10), cutting and splicing revered Shakespearean texts to ‘liberate’ the

proceeds to recite words that possess an achingly special meaning for him – “But that the dread of something after death...”. Although Doc does not quite finish the soliloquy, his contemplation of impending death resonates with a personal pathos that otherwise seems to be missing in a frontier town whose fame is connected to its affinity for dead bodies. The Englishman, once freed, concludes, miserably for everyone, that “Shakespeare was not meant for taverns nor for tavern louts”.

³ Even as I write, Shakespeare is a trusted guide through the thickets of political dissension and disorder. In a column lamenting how “Wokeness Derails the Democrats”, Maureen Dowd appeals to Shakespeare for guidance: “In Shakespeare, when characters want to fulfill their desires, they escape to what’s been called the Green World. And that’s what Democrats promised voters: that they could leave behind the vitriol and aggravation of Donald Trump’s America and escape to an Arden that was cool, calm and reassuring”. Noting that the Democrats “violated that pledge” and lost their way to that “verdant forest”, Dowd laments that the Democrats only managed to lead the country “into a circular firing squad”, so that, as one top Democrat she quoted dispiritedly remarked, instead of “rancor and division” Democrats “offered something else: division and rancor” (Dowd 2021). Rosalind might be amused to hear that the Forest of Arden is characterized as a cool, calm and reassuring place of refuge.

great-spirited entertainer Falstaff he felt himself to be; Philip Roth, from *Operation Shylock* through *Sabbath's Theater* and the terse bitter outbursts of *Exit Ghost* and *The Humbling* impersonating and Americanizing one Shakespearean role after another as if determined to establish, as Stephen Dedalus is challenged to do in *Ulysses*, that Shakespeare was a Jew⁴.

Such imaginative transpositions of Shakespearean into American originals are among the sturdier offspring of what Walt Whitman deemed the “*mythus*” of Shakespeare’s incomparable, but also inexplicable genius (Whitman 2014, 221). The most fantastical yet tenacious belief emanating from that *mythus* is that Shakespeare found his natural heirs and true home in America. Willa Cather abandoned her customary reserve to advance just such a view. In reviewing a production of *As You Like It* staged at a newly dedicated Stratford theater in which the American Mary Anderson played Rosalind, Cather insisted that “[i]t was more fitting [...] that an American woman play there that night than an English woman because Shakespeare belongs to two nations now” (Cather 2014, 247). Cather follows up this upstart claim to joint ownership of Britain’s most cherished national treasure with a disarming admission: “Then one always fancies if he had been born just a few centuries later he would have been an American” (247). Once you grant – a major concession! – Cather’s initial premise that there is a something intrinsically American in Shakespeare’s unbounded genius, it “then” inevitably (“always”) follows that it was only an historical accident, one easily rectified by American fancy, that he wasn’t born in America.

Cather was not alone in conjuring an American Shakespeare as the great might-have-been and perhaps yet-to-be. A half century earlier Melville refused to be deterred by the *mythus* of

⁴ In compiling evidence to support his claim that “[a]ll events brought grist to his mill”, Stephen argues that “Shylock chimes with the jewbaiting that followed the hanging and quartering of the queens’ leech Lopez, his jew’s heart being plucked forth while the sheeny was yet alive”. He is just congratulating himself on “getting on very nicely” with his “theologocophilological” demonstrations when he is challenged by John Eglinton: “Prove he was a jew [...]. Your dean of studies holds he was a holy Roman” (Joyce 2000, 262-63). The point is not an idle one in a novel that posits that the modern Ulysses is a Jew.

“Shakespeare’s unapproachability”, a tenet of the “absolute and unconditional adoration of Shakespeare” as an unsurpassable, decidedly Anglo-Saxon genius (Melville 2014, 131). Carrying the banner of “republican progressiveness into Literature”, Melville, in a sudden surge of evangelical zeal, rallies his comrades in American letters: “Believe me, my friends, that Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio. And the day will come, when you shall say who reads a book by an Englishman that is a modern?” (131).

No one would argue that that day has come (and gone) and Melville justified in his belief that “if Shakespeare has not been equalled [sic], he is sure to be surpassed, and surpassed by an American born now or yet to be born” (132). This volume does not concern itself with assessing the chances or alleged instances of such miraculous surpassings. Rather it addresses Shakespeare’s uncanny modernity through the supreme fiction of his naturalization and subsequent instatement as the tutelary spirit of the New World fostering its fables of a diverse, resourceful and self-creative humanity. Collected here are essays that survey and analyze telltale works of literary, cinematic and popular culture that invoke Shakespeare as the progenitor and custodian of its artistic and spiritual achievements, its advances upon unclaimed reaches of human experience. It examines Shakespeare’s presence in its various, multiform avatars and iterations – prose fiction, staged performances, essays and journal entries, poetry and film – any and all works that allude to, re-imagine or internalize Shakespeare in pursuit of their own aesthetic aims, whether those aims be to satisfy or to disappoint modern and democratic American purposes, such as they may be and however they are defined, defended or derided (satirized).

Emerson was the first to proclaim Shakespeare, whose very name “suggests joy and emancipation to the heart of men”, as a poet-prophet “announcing new eras and ameliorations” (Emerson 2014, 119-20). In his “omnipresent humanity” (118) Shakespeare was prototype of the American Bard proclaiming the liberal and

liberating ideals espoused (if never adequately realized) by the world's newest democracy. Trusting, like all true genius, to his demotic instincts, he grounded his art in popular tradition, which "in furnishing so much work done to his hand, [left] him at leisure, and in full strength for the audacities of his imagination" (108). Such audacities in "transferring the inmost truth of things into music and verse" left not just human, but "natural history" forever changed and so "added a new problem to metaphysics" (118-19). Whitman, more troubled by the political than metaphysical problem posed by Shakespeare's imaginative fecundity, confessed to a "baffled and mix'd" feeling in confronting the audacities of Shakespeare's creative power (Whitman 2014, 223). He hazarded that there was something "offensive to the modern spirit" in an imagination so engrossed by "the dragon-rancors and stormy feudal splendor of mediæval caste" (Whitman 1892, 391). He insisted that Shakespeare's style, supremely grand as it was, stopped "short of the grandest sort, at any rate for fulfilling and satisfying modern and scientific and democratic American purposes" (392). Nonetheless he prophesized that in less than two generations Shakespeare was destined to live in America "less as the cunning draughtsman of the passions, and more as putting on record the first full exposé – and by far the most vivid one, immeasurably ahead of doctrinaires and economists – of the political theory and results, or the reason-why and necessity for them which America has come on earth to abnegate and replace?" (Whitman 2014, 222).

The recent spate of works on Shakespeare's enduring relevance to American political culture would seem to ally themselves with Whitman over Emerson in defining the nature and impact of Shakespeare's words (what his personal views might be is forever in dispute) on American public life. Among the most notable and influential scholars/popularizers of Shakespeare's unflinching contemporaneity is James Shapiro, whose Library of America anthology, *Shakespeare in America*, a collection spanning from Revolutionary times to the present day, and his *Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us about Our Past and Future*, advance the view that Shakespeare is unrivalled in giving voice to the American political unconscious. "For well over two centuries",

Shapiro writes, surveying the wide rolls of democratic citizenry, “Americans of all stripes – presidents and activists, writers and soldiers – have turned to Shakespeare’s works to give voice to what could not readily or otherwise be said” (Shapiro 2020, ix). In Shapiro’s account, Shakespeare emerges as an articulate medium for a diverse and increasingly cacophonous *vox populi*, ventriloquizing the political hopes and grievances of dissenting, at times rabid faction that would otherwise remain ill-formulated or altogether mute.

Sometimes the messaging is implicit rather than overt, as in the anecdote Shapiro relates to introduce *Shakespeare in America*. He singles out an 1846 production of *Othello* staged largely for the entertainment of U.S. troops stationed in Corpus Christi, Texas, a slave state that bordered on Mexico, with whom the country was soon to be at war. The oddity that seemed prescient yet hardly remarked at the time involved casting: soon-to-be Confederate general James Longstreet was initially cast as Desdemona, and when he proved too tall, Ulysses S. Grant, the future commander of the Union army, was assigned the role. (He was later replaced by a professional actress, his performance apparently lacking in the sentiment, not to mention the desired “look”, for the role [Shapiro 2014, xix]). Shapiro regards this episode, which exposes the sordid tangle of the country’s foreign and internal race relations, the latter of which would soon plunge the country into civil war, as symptomatic of how “the history of Shakespeare in America is also a history of America itself” (xxii). The equation is elegant, but perhaps a little too tidy in aligning the two histories in such a seamless synchrony. One might as readily venture that Shakespeare becomes the man of the times precisely when the times themselves seem unsure of what his value, the value of the arts generally, might be in light of the pressing, agonizingly obdurate political, social and economic problems besetting and sometimes dividing the nation. As Robert L. Caserio suggests in an essay in this volume: “If Shakespeare (or any poet, dramatist, or novelist) can target and illuminate the news of the day, then, it would seem to follow, his cultural value, as well as that of literature generally, is assured”.

Casario questions the grounds and, more radically, the benefits of such assurance and the avid, increasingly urgent pursuit of demonstrable relevance it fuels. The urgency is exemplified by Stephen Greenblatt's *Tyrant*. Greenblatt portrays Shakespeare as a popular entertainer and shrewd businessman who, knowing "that for a playwright, any critical reflections on powerful contemporary figures or on contested issues were at once alluring and risky" (Greenblatt 2018, 184), resorts to canny indirection to make himself heard without jeopardizing his livelihood, not to mention his life. He became master of the art of "the oblique angle" by which he "prudently projected his imagination away from his immediate circumstances". Nonetheless, Greenblatt avers,

Shakespeare found a way to say what he needed to say. He managed to have someone stand up onstage and tell the two thousand listeners – some of whom were government agents – that "a dog's obeyed in office". The rich get away with what is brutally punished in the poor. "Plate sins with gold", his character continued, And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks: Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it. If you said words like these at the tavern, you stood a good chance of having your ears cut off. But day after day they were spoken in public, and the police were never called. Why not? Because the person who spoke them was Lear in his madness. (186)

It is through such oblique yet readily discernible references that Shakespeare, Greenblatt concludes, "never looked away from the horrible consequences visited upon societies that fall into the hands of tyrants". In his focused attention on the "tyrants" who populate Shakespeare history plays and tragedies – Richard II, Macbeth, Lear and Coriolanus – Greenblatt himself looks obliquely at the character and regime of Donald Trump, whose election in 2016 convinced him of "Shakespeare's uncanny relevance to the political world in which we now find ourselves" (191).

Kenneth Burke, writing at an earlier but equally if not in fact more troubled, disconcerting time⁵, had a somewhat different sense of Shakespeare's uncanny relation to the social and political world and a decidedly different theory of how such uncanniness worked on a mind – or audience – distressed at the state of things. Although he is briefly tempted to succumb to the biographical allure of the Shakespeare *mythus*⁶, Burke does not linger over his 'feelings' about how the plays may betray Shakespeare's personal traits or inclinations, but prefers to foreground "another kind of knowledge about Shakespeare that we *do* have, and *should* use", namely that Shakespeare "lived at a time when feudal thinking was being transformed into nationalism": "Otherwise put, the kind of quarrels among families that had come to a head in the Wars of the Roses were giving place to the growth of centralized, though limited monarchy, and the emergence of Britain as an *empire*" (Burke 2007, 7-8). Feeling securely grounded in the historic 'knowns' of Shakespeare's time, he then takes a theoretical leap into the aesthetic unknown where, presumably, Shakespeare's genius was germinating, and discovers something like the traces of spontaneous generation:

I think he spontaneously saw both how complex a motive is and how to translate it into, if not a simplicity, at least a unified set of interrelationships. And whereas others might have added an adjective to a noun, or to a verb an adverb, he added to our lore a cluster of

⁵ Burke's intense engagement with Shakespeare began in the 1920s and extended over half a century through the Great Depression and the Second World War and into the postwar era. His landmark reading of *Othello* appeared in 1951, but it was in the 1960s, a period of inordinate social and political unrest, that his method illustrated, in three of his most trenchant and influential readings, the fatalities of power in Shakespeare's political tragedies: "Shakespearean Persuasion: *Antony and Cleopatra*" (1964); "*Coriolanus* – and the Delights of Faction" (1966); "*King Lear*: Its Form and Psychosis" (1969). These essays are collected in Burke 2007.

⁶ Thus, for example, with a characteristic and, to me at least, an endearing willingness to indulge second thoughts, he allows that the plays "do reveal a kind of imagination ultimately impinging upon modes of self-involvement that, as you prefer, could be called either suicidal or narcissistic. Such traits come to fruition, I feel, in plays as different as *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Timon of Athens*" (Burke 2007, 4).

persons. He knew, even more thoroughly than Plato, how any given idea would behave, when translated into terms of personality. (8)

Burke, an imaginative but loyal disciple of Aristotelian poetics and rhetoric, turns his attention to Shakespeare's plots, which reliably and entertainingly translated ideas into personalities. Infusing and complicating his Aristotelianism with Freudian insights into individual and social pathologies, Burke contends that Shakespeare's plays recognize and project whatever underlying socio-political anxieties – he calls them “psychoses” – might have motivated them. This is a theory he advances and develops, with a surprising amiability, in his “*King Lear: Its Form and Psychosis*”. Recognizing that the coupling of form and psychosis seems too radical, even demented a notion to entertain, Burke suggests we “now try: ‘*King Lear: What Is It About?*’”. The rephrasing, he hopes, will encourage us not to think about the play as being simply “‘about’ a foolish old king whose bad judgment got him into fatal difficulties” and to begin thinking about its plot “in ways whereby it can be shown to involve an underlying extra-literary ‘psychosis’, if there is such a thing as an underlying psychosis” (155). There is indeed such a thing, as Burke will take pains to demonstrate, not only in *King Lear* but in all the great Shakespearean dramas, including the comedies. (The absurd entanglements and ludicrous interlacing of human and faery worlds of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, are motivated by a “Court psychosis” that Puckishly splits the form – and our sympathies – between “the courtly characters and the respectfully subservient ‘mechanicals’” [180], between human and faery kingdoms)⁷.

⁷ In this late work, Burke is keen to establish that though the tenor of comedy, especially a comedy like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is designed to induce a “state of total relaxation”, “the motive underlying its comic appeal (what I would call the ‘psychosis’ of the situation) was in dead earnest”. To illustrate just how deadly, he compares the comedy to *Coriolanus*, whose psychosis reflects and tragically intensifies the “equally wide social gap between the courtly characters and the ‘handicraft men’ who are so seriously concerned with their plans to perform a play in the Duke’s honor” (Burke 2007, 178-79). Both the tragic class oppositions at the heart of *Coriolanus* and the comic entanglements in which both the Court and merry mechanicals are embroiled in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

In Burke's account *King Lear* is a play whose psychosis derives from "anxieties and disturbances" consequent upon the very idea of abdication, whose appeal, Burke speculates, overlaps "upon such motivational quandaries as are implicit in thoughts of retreat or surrender, with no reference whatever to parents and their offspring":

For instance, any threat to one's self-esteem might find sympathetic response in the tragedy of a man whose mistakes had strongly forced upon him the fear of impotence, with a corresponding sense that many of his utterances might prove as powerless as the rage of senility or infancy. Might not the appeal of *King Lear*, so far as an extra-literary "psychosis" is concerned, begin in such feelings as many people have at the thought, far afield, that our nation must not give, like a weak old man, but should go on expending its treasure until, still young and vigorously assertive, we shall have torn apart any enemy, even if it be but a distant victim of our own choosing? (157)

As Burke almost sheepishly confesses, "it is but a step from drama to Dramatism" (156-57), his omnibus theory of the multiple, multivalent rhetorics of human culture that was indebted to Shakespeare's modeling and representation of the world as *theatrum mundi*, a stage on which is enacted, over and over and yet never exactly the same, the "play" – understood both as a construct and a series of expressive acts – of human life. "[O]nce you hit that center", Burke writes, "and know how to be thorough in developing outwards from it, or in tracking down its implications, you have *in principle* anticipated just about everything – and that's the recipe for Shakespeare" (8). Emerson was adamant that "[n]o recipe can be given for the making of a Shakespeare" (Emerson 2014, 119). Apparently a recipe can be given, and not just an approximate one either. According to Burke, it is precisely what the critic can and should feel compelled to provide if we are to identify "everything" that goes into the making of a Shakespeare play. Burke, having stumbled on that word, never abandons or regrets it; "recipe" recommends itself as a word suggesting that the materials

illustrate Shakespeare's "Humanistic" treatment of a "hierarchal psychosis" (184).

of drama are readily at hand, a matter of combining the formulas and motives of human action in their rightful, that is dramatically combustible (mentally or emotionally comestible?) proportions. In exemplary democratic fashion he selects a homely word to signify a method, at once palatable and purgative, of serving up to our hungry minds the *prima materia* of the human pageant⁸.

That Shakespeare is routinely invoked as the national dramaturg providing the scripts and *dramatis personae* for America's political and cultural stage would seem to confirm Whitman prediction that Shakespeare, "the cunning draughtsman of the passions", would be superseded by Shakespeare the prescient delineator of the 'reasons why' a constitutional republic is destined to abnegate and replace the *ancien régimes* of caste-bound societies. But Shakespeare's looming presence in the national psyche may also portend a somewhat different outcome, one in which Whitman's prophecy itself appears superannuated, given that politics and the passions now seem to have merged, one hopes not irreversibly, in the furors and paroxysms of class-inflected faction. The times arguably call for, if they do not exactly promote, another urgency, the need to attend to the "philosopher's Shakespeare"⁹ who enthralled and instructed Melville. Melville extolled an altogether different American Shakespeare from the popular idol adored by "those mistaken souls, who dream of Shakespeare as a mere man of Richard-the-Third humps, and Macbeth daggers" (Melville 2014, 129). It was not such self-disfiguring disguises and lurid props, Melville reminds us, but "those deep far-away things in him; those

⁸ Newstok notes that "in Shakespeare's period, 'recipe' meant a prescription-like formula for a medical concoction, a sense appropriately returning us to the medico-physiological basis of Aristotle's *catharsis* what was of enduring interest to Burke". He then goes on remark that recipe "might even hearken back to the disdain Socrates displays toward rhetoric as mere 'cookery' in the *Gorgias* [462b-466a], a kind of shadow of true medicine – a charge that Burke would have been eager to rebut" (Burke 2007, xxix).

⁹ Stanley Cavell has been the most eloquent and influential exponent of the skeptical "philosopher's Shakespeare". See especially Cavell 1987. See also McGinn 2006.

occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality; – these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare” (129).

These deep far-away things clustered around the very axis of reality are rarely, if ever apprehended, much less probed by the collective mind, which is generally satisfied by things close-by that are found on the surface, rather than hidden within the depths of reality. For Melville, the sublimity of Truth is gleaned through individual intuitions and the mind’s “quick probings” that have the capacity to transfigure the realities they penetrate. Emerson had insisted that “[f]or executive faculty, for creation, Shakespeare [was] unique”, “the subtlest of authors, and only just within the possibility of authorship” (Emerson 2014, 118). Imagining worlds and lives at “the farthest reach of subtlety compatible with an individual self” (118), the (American) Shakespeare Emerson salutes no longer insistently appears or even interests us as “a canary in the coal mine” (Shapiro 2020, 203), a harbinger as well as indicator of potentially explosive, incipiently transformative cultural change. He attracts our attention and ultimately compels our moral and spiritual allegiance as the creator, Harold Bloom insists the inventor, of the human. Bloom helpfully if tendentiously summarizes the two main, utterly divergent ways of reading Shakespeare – or as Bloom would and did say, the ways Shakespeare reads us. The first concentrates on Shakespeare primarily as “a cultural phenomenon, produced by sociopolitical urgencies”. “In this view”, Bloom alleges, “Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare – his plays were written by the social, political, and economic energies of his age”. This is arrantly reductive but not that far off the mark. “The other way of exploring Shakespeare’s continued supremacy”, as Bloom describes it, “is rather more empirical: he has been universally judged to be a more adequate representer of the universe of fact than anyone else, before him or since” (Bloom 1998, 16).

Whether one accedes to Bloom’s vision of Shakespeare’s supremacy depends in large part on whether one agrees with, or even fully comprehends, his sense of fact. The universe of fact he invokes is constituted, along with strictly empirical data favored by historicist critics – dates, events and the broad social and political

movements they instantiate, statistical and circumstantial information about the lived reality of any particular time or person – out of less tangible moral and ontological facts, especially the fatal vagrancies of the will and heart and the blunt fact that we must die. In rebuffing the claims of historicizing materialists with his own generous sense of fact, Bloom disarms resistance to the notion that Shakespeare “gives us more of the world most of us take to be fact” and thus makes more plausible his even more extravagant claim that to an extent we have still to acknowledge, Shakespeare “pragmatically reinvented us”. Reinvention is a particularly American trope, especially when it comes to questions of identity, as in “Americans are always reinventing themselves”, a formula for the opportunity America offers its citizenry that every schoolchild learns and, often to their cost, takes to heart. Shakespearean humanity anticipates and is perpetuated by this typically American desire and will to change, to become other or more than oneself. Or as asserted by Bloom: “What Shakespeare invents are ways of representing human changes, alterations not only caused by flaws and by decay but effected by the will as well, and by the will’s temporal vulnerabilities” (2). Shakespeare envisioned and endowed his characters with a moral freedom never before experienced, foremost a freedom of self-determination previous literary characters, however original, hardly ever possessed, much less were allowed to exercise.

Following Dr Johnson, Bloom locates the grandeur and astonishing fecundity of Shakespeare’s all-too-human/superhuman art in the number of these transformations, in his “diversity of persons”: “No one, before or since Shakespeare, made so many separate selves” (1). Although this claim is made in exploring Shakespeare’s universalism, it reflects an American preoccupation with the allure, but also the challenge of diversity, connecting as it does the notion of a changeable and changing selfhood with the social advantages and cultural splendors of difference, of *separate* selves each with their individualizing language, each intent on exercising their inalienable right to pursue their own sweet (or foul, as the case may be) will. Bloom, for whom separateness is the hallmark and guarantor of a genuine diversity, is most astonished by Shakespeare’s prodigies, “heroic vitalists”, as

he characterizes them, like Rosalind, Shylock, Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra, characters who, in his most Emersonian evocation of new eras and ameliorations, Bloom credits with “the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it” (4).

Bloom spent the last decades of his extraordinary life as an antinomian critic expounding the audacities of Shakespearean characters, who are no longer featured players or protagonists in the classical or traditional sense of the term, but aboriginal beings who abound in “[c]harisma”, with “an aura of the preternatural” (384). Citing “Hegel’s fine observation that Shakespeare made his best characters ‘free artists of themselves’”, Bloom then pronounces that “[t]he freest of the free are Hamlet and Falstaff, because they are the most intelligent of Shakespeare’s persons (or roles, if you prefer that word)” (271) and, as such, are “the fullest representations of human possibility in Shakespeare” (745). Bloom thus proposes – vehemently –

that we know better what it is we mean when we speak of the personality of Hamlet as opposed to the personality of our best friend, or the personality of some favorite celebrity Shakespeare persuades us that we know something in Hamlet that is [...] his principle of individuation, a recognizable identity whose evidence is his singularity of language, and yet not so much language as diction, a cognitive choice between words, a choice whose drive is always toward freedom [...]. Like Falstaff, Hamlet implicitly defines personality as a mode of freedom, more of a matrix of freedom than a product of freedom. (427)

Such freedom is not, we are advised, particularly emancipatory. A dark ambivalence shadows Bloom’s portraits of Shakespeare’s heroic vitalists. The ambivalence is “both cognitive and affective” and is incarnated in Hamlet, but prepared for in Shylock, the first of Shakespeare’s characters to warn us of the “abyss of inwardness”: “the tenacious and justice-seeking Shylock essentially is a would-be slaughterer, and Shakespeare painfully persuades us that Portia, another delightful hypocrite, prevents an atrocity through her shrewdness” (11). We are thus persuaded of Hamlet’s superior reality because Shakespeare has given Hamlet, “the least archaic role in all of Shakespeare” (385), both the intelligence and

freedom to confront “the truth, truth too intolerable for us to endure” (7). It is this confrontation with such an intolerable truth that ages Hamlet; he is older, Bloom hazards, than Falstaff, afflicted as he is with a “catastrophic consciousness of the spiritual disease of his world, which he has internalized, and which he does not wish to be called upon to remedy, if only because the true cause of his changeability is his drive toward freedom” (430).

Falstaff, fattened on pleasure, enamored of play and thus paradoxically, cognitively, the younger personality, enjoys and pursues another mode of freedom. It is a freedom coursing through “his torrent of language and laughter” and that is necessary for his “assaults the frontiers of what is possible” (Bloom 2017, 6). What is possible is always, to Sir Jack, more life. And what is required to satisfy life’s hunger to extend the frontiers of the possible is less the freedom from – “from malice”, from “the superego” and its moralisms (Bloom 1998, 313) – as much as the freedom to – primarily the freedom to play. “The idea of *play* is as central to Falstaff as the idea of *the play* is to Hamlet”, Bloom writes, then quickly adds, as if to eliminate any confusion about the kinds of vitality, consciousness and freedom each player embodies and, in his own way, perfects: “These are not the same idea: Falstaff is infinitely more playful than Hamlet, and the prince is far more theatrical than the fat knight” (401). But for both, as for Bloom, as for Burke, the play is the thing:

“Play out the play!” Falstaff cries to Hal; “I have much to say in the behalf of that Falstaff”. “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action”, Hamlet admonishes the Player King. “I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women”, Rosalind adroitly pleads, “that between you and the women the play may please”. The voice in all three, at just that moment, is as close as Shakespeare ever will come to letting us hear the voice of William Shakespeare himself. (225)

If there is something patently “hyperbolic” in Bloom’s claims (his own word for those who would read him only in terms of his extravagances [726]) and something palpably, at times worryingly

overwrought in the American idolatry of Shakespeare as the “man of men, [...] who [...] planted the standard of humanity some furlongs forward into Chaos” (Emerson 2014, 121), it did not go unnoticed by Americans themselves. T. S. Eliot, whose Prufrock knows he is not Hamlet nor is meant to be, declared, with a sense of exasperation he can barely conceal, that *Hamlet* was a failure that did not so much advance on Chaos as succumb to it. Here again it would seem that it is facts themselves that are in dispute. Eliot wonders that no one has sufficiently remarked that “Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear” (Eliot 2014, 382). The facts, such as they are, at least to Eliot, are these: Hamlet is overwhelmed by a “disgust” with his mother, a disgust that “envelops and exceeds her” (383). Eliot’s Hamlet is not Bloom’s intellectual adventurer into the abyss of inwardness, that ontological vortex in which seeing and being, playing and acting are so perilously interfused. He is the febrile brainchild of a Shakespeare writing “under compulsion of” some “inexpressibly horrible” experience (383-84), a Shakespeare who struggles and fails to find an objective correlative for a horrendous experience, the actual nature of which we can only surmise.

I revisit this dispute not to resolve it but to draw attention to what Eliot claims *Hamlet* offers in the place of an objective corrective – a “buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action” (383) or in the dramatist’s verbal art. Yet Eliot himself knew and unleashed the power of buffoonery to express and not simply lampoon unfathomable emotion, as many of the poems collected in *Inventions of a March Hare* and the characteristically hangdog verses of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and its companion poems attest. In such moments of high clowning, as well as in the verbal hijinks of *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, Eliot secured his popular appeal as an American humorist, a dimension of his artistic personality that faded virtually to extinction in his later paeans to high culture and its churches. The innate humor lurking in excessive or outsized emotion is familiar to American popular audiences in the form of the tall tale and its larger than life folk heroes like Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill, forms and figures that come naturally to a people who, as Melville

manfully boasts, “in most [...] things out-do as well as out-brag the world” (Melville 2014, 132). In the free and easy, sometimes outlandish fantasies circulating through and enlivening popular culture, Shakespearean excesses in word, deed or emotion are not regarded as signs of artistic failure; on the contrary they provide an outlet for the crude vitalism and rude invention encouraged and rewarded, indeed demanded by the rough and ready culture of a society for whom the memory of the wilderness is quite recent and painfully sharp. What Eliot dismissed as a mere “buffoonery of emotion” could even be sublimated and spiritualized into what Melville, peering into the dark recesses of Hawthorne’s twice-told tales, called a “religion of mirth” (126), a peculiarly American creed, touched as it is with “Puritanic gloom” and suffused with that “great power of blackness” that “derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free” (128).

Two seemingly antithetical but deeply allied minds, both mordant American humorists steeped in the doctrine of “Original Sin”, exemplify American ingenuity in accommodating these visitations through Shakespearean “buffooneries of emotion”, buffooneries enacted, witnessed or denounced. The first “deeply thinking”, but superficially ingenuous mind belongs to Mark Twain, who relished parodying Shakespearean plots, characters and language, never to greater, more hilarious effect than the Shakespearean revival (mis)conceived and staged by the conning duke and king in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. For an encore to this night of dazzling entertainment the duke gamely pieces together fragments of Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, musings on the afterlife that are interspersed with Macbeth’s equally lugubrious musings on life’s calamities. The opening alerts us to the grim fun ahead:

To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin
 That makes calamity of so long life;
 For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane,
 But that the fear of something after death
 Murders the innocent sleep,

Great nature's second course,
 And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune
 Than fly to others that we know not of. (Twain 1958, 115)¹⁰

These scrambled lines never attract the audience they seek, and may in fact deserve; the show is a flop, but the duke, a quick study, decides on a very different entertainment the following evening, replacing Shakespearean set pieces with the spectacle of the king appearing before a now full house “a-prancing out on all fours, naked” (127). No matter, since the best audience for the duke’s Shakespearean pastiche is surely Huck himself, who seems to have committed the bowdlerized soliloquy to memory. He may not recognize the lines as a nonsensical mishmash, but that does not mean that they do not have their intended effect, especially if we connect them to what we might call Huck’s “psychosis”, a child’s (but hardly childish) dread of isolation intensified by an even greater dread of finding oneself in the company of “sivilized” saints (23). This split consciousness, born of Huck’s dawning awareness of himself as inviolably separate and other, manifests itself at the very beginning of the novel when, after being “pecked at” by the pious Miss Watson about the “bad place” where misbehaving miscreants like himself are destined to go unless he behaves (4),

¹⁰ For your enjoyment, here is that delirious pastiche in its entirety: “To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin / That makes calamity of so long life; / For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane, / But that the fear of something after death / Murders the innocent sleep, / Great nature’s second course, / And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune / Than fly to others that we know not of. / There’s the respect must give us pause: / Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst; / For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, / The oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely, / The law’s delay, and the quietus which his pangs might take, / In the dead waste and middle of the night, when churchyards yawn / In customary suits of solemn black, / But that the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns, / Breathes forth contagion on the world, / And thus the native hue of resolution, like the poor cat i’ the adage, / Is sicklied o’er with care, / And all the clouds that lowered o’er our housetops, / With this regard their currents turn awry, / And lose the name of action. / ’Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. But soft you, the fair Ophelia: / Ope not thy ponderous and marble jaws, / But get thee to a nunnery – go!” (Twain 1958, 115-16).

Huck gives his mind over to the night's darkness to which he feels his feelings and behavior have condemned him:

I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars were shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave and has to go about that way every night grieving. I got so down-hearted and scared, I did wish I had some company. (5)

Huck is never more himself, since he is never more alone, than as a pint-sized American Hamlet, haunted by a ghost eager to make itself understood. The ghost, we might say, is a specter of his own nascent moral consciousness burdened, as the ghost is, by incommunicable but lacerating grief. Grief for what? The loss of innocence perhaps, or the loss of faith in "sivilization", which ultimately are the same loss. The unquiet rustlings of the night echo his disquieting apprehension of such losses and the death they portend. These fardels become easier to bear, however, when lightened by Huck's own guileless religion of mirth, his best and perhaps only defense upon the darkness within as well as outside him, including and especially the black infamy of slavery. But Huck is a child and his defenses are unavailing against the brute social and political facts of antebellum America, facts so obdurate and unconquerable as to make his planned escape to the Territory beyond the reach of all "sivilizing" people and forces seem what it actually is – a childish fantasy.

A more adult, contemporary and decidedly militant Shakespearean burlesque is Mary McCarthy's assault on "General Macbeth" as "[a] commonplace man who talks in commonplaces, a golfer, one might guess, on the Scottish fairways" (McCarthy 2014, 531). In McCarthy's moral dissection of the ambitious Thane of Glamis, Macbeth is shown up as the Shakespearean hero who most corresponds to an American "bourgeois type", "a murderous

Babbitt" (531). She begins by protesting that Macbeth has been credited, falsely and to the detriment of genuine visionaries, with imagination, while on the contrary his actions betray the baleful literal-mindedness and pettiness of a middle-class opportunist. McCarthy allows that Macbeth is "impressionable" (531); he is, after all, particularly susceptible to the equivocating prophecies of the three witches, predictions that amuse Banquo but which Macbeth credulously accepts. But a truly "reflective" mind, McCarthy insists, "might wonder how fate would spin her plot", whereas "Macbeth does not trust to fate; that is, to the unknown, the mystery of things; he trusts only to a known quantity – himself – to put the prophecy into action. In short, he has no faith, which requires imagination. He is literal-minded; that, in a word, is his tragedy" (531).

McCarthy parses that word and the tragedy that ensues from it in all its variations, remarking how literal-minded Macbeth cannot contain his excitement at the promised 'promotion' to king and sends on a letter to his wife "like a businessman briefing an associate on a piece of good news for the firm" (532). McCarthy ridicules him even here as a trepidant executive, a "buck-passer", "ready to fix responsibility on a subordinate" (537), as he does in incriminating the drunken chamberlains for Duncan's death. He is expert at providing himself public cover, justifying his actions in bombastic utterances, subtly and horribly converting poetry into declamations that pitch the entire play "to the demons' shriek of hyperbole" (540). In all these ways, McCarthy concludes, *Macbeth* shows us "life in the cave" (540). For McCarthy, Macbeth's reversion to a primeval conception of nature and human society found its contemporary counterpart in "the return of the irrational in the Fascist nightmare and its fear of new specters in the form of Communism, Socialism, etc." (540). It is thus not brooding Hamlet, but "bloodstained Macbeth" who seems to her "the most 'modern'" of Shakespeare's characters, "the only one you could transpose into contemporary battle dress or sport shirt and slacks" (540). So attired, Macbeth's last and most morally depraved contemporary avatar is the "churchgoer", "indifferent to religion, to the categorical imperative of any group of principles that be held to stand above and govern human behavior" (540-41).

Bloodstained or less murderously ambitious Babbitts may be indifferent or outright hostile to any categorical imperative at odds with their craving for social success or supremacy, but America is also the land of the non-conforming, the dissident, the *free*. For such American originals, the nation's founding principles – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – possess tangible moral weight and reference and impose certain deeply felt obligations, including the obligation to oneself. These democratic ideals were never more exuberantly defined and defended, but also more ardently scrutinized, than in classical Hollywood cinema, especially in the comedies of its golden age. Two anxieties in particular shadowed and thus potentially jeopardized the human and historical viability of these ideals. One we might call the “love psychosis”, the fear, endemic to hard times, that love is an economic liability and happiness is best pursued and more likely to be realized apart or in spite of marriage. The other we might deem the “class psychosis”, a disturbance or fracturing of class identity symbolized in the runaway heiress and dizzy dame, defectors from the upper class who risked their personal and even mental safety in venturing beyond the prescribed bounds, the safety and sanctimony, of conformity. These “psychoses” threatened to undermine faith in, and moral allegiance to, the life, liberty and authorized pursuits of happiness that constitute America's foundational principles and categorical imperatives.

Here, too, Shakespeare provided the characters and the dramatic templates, the “recipe”, as Burke might say, for acknowledging and dramatically purging the psychoses spawned by a world-wide Depression and the rise of totalitarian regimes that were undermining trust in the viability of democratic institutions. Stanley Cavell puzzled “why it was only in 1934, and in America of all places, that the Shakespearean structure surfaced again, if not quite on the stage” (Cavell 1981, 19), to give birth to a socially and philosophically questioning, self-revising and indisputably native genre – the comedy of remarriage. Cavell points to the historical confluence of transformative social forces: “the technology and the achievement of sound movies, the existence of certain women of a certain age, a problematic of marriage established in certain segments of the history of theater” (28). Remarriage thus became a

trope for reaffirming but also reimagining social bonds between the sexes and the classes from which they came and hoped either to reform or escape. The genre of remarriage reached its apogee in films like Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, a Depression era fairy tale that tallied, in a uniquely American accounting, what love, among other necessary commodities, actually cost; Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby*, a zany burlesque of renegade instincts (and loose leopards) in the "green world" of Connecticut; and in the dazzlingly ingenious farces of Preston Sturges. Sturges, as demonstrated in an essay in this volume, was brilliantly inventive in transposing Shakespearean comic situations and predicaments, especially the perplexities of being twinned or its psychological equivalent – divided yet joined in feeling, motives or objectives – into an American context, a transposition that meant not just a change in terrain, but a transvaluation of social, moral and emotional outlook. In Sturges's canny Americanization of Shakespearean plots and plotters, the pursuit and achievement of happiness rather than social harmony and comity became the end terms of comedy's contrivances and mystifications, its frantic deceptions and social maneuverings.

America also proved hospitable to more malign but equally entertaining master manipulators schooled in Shakespearean schemes and connivances, like the fiendish, manipulative and hyper-theatrical Frank Underwood of *House of Cards*, a Shakespearean prodigy of evil concocted out of a grotesque coupling of Macbeth and southern ribs (a recipe Burke might have savored). In the pantheon of charismatic demons incubated and nourished in American popular entertainments we might add Don Corleone, an actual, if lovable monster who actually dies pretending to be one to amuse (although he only succeeds in terrifying) his grandson, and Tony Soprano, the one the more dangerous the quieter he becomes, the other volatile and clamorous, both ruthless in conducting family business. Both are outsized Shakespearean personalities playing signature roles in America's dark romance with the twisted codes and criminality of the Italian mob. Then there are the merchants of vice like Walter White, the black genius of *Breaking Bad* (whose Shakespearean DNA, along with Frank Underwood's, is anatomized within this

volume), or *Deadwood's* Al Swearengen, the real life architect and kingpin of a thriving gambling and prostitution emporium in historic Deadwood whose thriving trade in drink, cards and flesh proved instrumental in the annexation of the Dakota territory. The casting of Ian McShane, an English actor with RADA training, to play the American-born Swearengen continues the tradition of English actors impersonating the accent and speech patterns as well as the tawdry morals of American builders of family and commercial empires, suggesting the brisk and fertile transatlantic translation of Old World Shakespearean characters (and character actors) into New World villains with the wilderness in their blood.

The first native American actor who seemed the rightful inheritor, but also transformer of the Shakespearean legacy was Edwin Booth, to whom we owe our “modern” Hamlet, dressed in black and melancholic. His fame and stature are forever shadowed by the infamy of his brother, John Wilkes, the assassin of President Lincoln. Both are the central figures of David Stacton’s *The Judges of the Secret Court*, the title itself evoking American paranoia towards its own juridical institutions, whether constituted as legal or moral courts of conscience. The brothers are creatures of the theater for whom Shakespeare not only represents but comprises “the universe of fact”. The world for them is but a stage and the stage a world on which they have been born – doomed? – to perform, albeit with different levels of skill. The least skillful actor is the assassin; he is also, as Mary McCarthy might say, the literalist. In a near-faultless illustration of Burkean dramatism, John Wilkes, in preparing for his murderous assault, assembles all the necessary ingredients of the dramatic recipe suitable for his chosen role as “the booted avenger”:

It seemed altogether natural, therefore, to pack a false beard, a dark moustache, a wig, a plaid muffler and a make-up pencil, for wrinkles and lines of anxiety, should those be called for. [...]

There remained only the choice of some phrase appropriate to the action. This was a serious matter, and Shakespeare was the source there. Unfortunately he could not think of anything from *Julius Caesar*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, or *King Lear*, the only Shakespeare he really knew. The immortal assassination line in *Caesar* unfortunately belongs to Caesar. (Stacton 2011, 43)

An actor who knows he is only as good as his lines, John Wilkes combs his memory for a striking Shakespearean phrase to make his assassin's bullet fatally eloquent. He finally decides that "if words were to have any dignity, they must be in Latin. They must have a certain imprimatur, if that was the word" (43). Not exactly the right word, but no matter, since the audience in attendance at the Ford's Theater never hear his vaunted lines of justification, "*Sic semper tyrannis*", and in fact initially believe this intruder on the stage to be "a character from some other play" who "blundered into this one" (55). The last impression made by the actor who envisioned himself as a Great Hero is that of a "maimed and crazy" supporting player, dressed as a slave driver and limping like a toad, making a clumsy, ignominious exit. In his flight to the (presumed) safety of the South, Booth, incorrigibly theatrical and now delirious from the sepsis emanating from the injury he sustained in leaping onto the stage, conceives a new part for himself. No longer the Great Hero, he will shine as the Great Sinner impressing the world with the enormity of his sins. Booth ransacks his memory for Shakespearean speeches that capture the pathos of defeat, finally settling on the lines possessing the desired Shakespearean imprimatur:

All I want, he would say, is a *grave*.
 A little little *grave*, an *obscure grave*.
 He had always been adept at pathos. (134)

But as John Wilkes realizes when he awakens from his delirium, the "lines" are "from the wrong play": "They are spoken by Richard II, before he is betrayed by the pretended clemency of Bolingbroke into giving himself up, not by Richard III" (134). Buffoonery of emotion has found its objective correlative.

But Stacton does not end his account, nor should we our survey, with such tragic blunders, grotesque miscasting, scrambled lines and roles. The figure brought and arraigned before the Judges of the Secret Court, a uniquely American institution of moral inquisition, at the beginning and conclusion of Stacton's historically based fiction is Edwin Booth. His personal and family life coalesce into an affecting "gaslit parable" in which he is, perennially, the

Hamlet doomed to set things right. He accepts the burden of that role, resolving that “having lost spontaneous laughter, like Hamlet himself, he could at least be jesting gay” (238). His capacity for such doleful humor helps exalts Edwin to “the palladium of the American arts, those arts they [Americans] had no time for, and regarded with suspicion” (240). That American audiences nonetheless found time for Edwin and for the Shakespearean art he incarnated was due, Stacton advises, to there being

something gentle in Edwin, and at the same time something enormously strong, which made him acceptable. Perhaps it was dignity. Or perhaps it was that he was a sort of talisman, that he had to live with something that they knew they should remember, and yet, being human and every day, quite sensibly forgot. (241)

National poet, seer, and dramaturg, American Shakespeare’s last but not final role, we might hazard, was to act as a sort of national talisman, a reminder of something to be remembered, but also what Americans tend, perhaps sensibly, perhaps not, to forget. That something is encompassed, positively but ineffably, by the democratic ideals in danger of being lost or forgotten among the expediencies and temporizing moralities of a citizenry at once jealous and heedless of its freedoms. That something is encompassed, negatively but palpably, in Edwin’s recognition that, with Hamlet dead, “[t]he world belongs to Fortinbras” (240). His recognition carries with it a judgment against the universe of facts, of things as they are. But things as they are susceptible to change, a possibility that the American Shakespeare, in his various avatars, but especially as the Bard of new eras and ameliorations, represents.

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Emerson's Shakespeare and the Myth of Discovery; or, Appropriating Shakespeare for America

Paola Colaiacomo

Taking its cue from a contribution of mine to a past issue of this journal ("Persona Pratica e Persona Poetica", *Memoria di Shakespeare* 2, "On Biography", ed. Rosy Colombo and Gary Taylor, 2015, pp. 1-23), this article takes a step further, tracing Emerson's complex relationship with Shakespeare, mainly through his two essays "The Poet" (1844) and "Shakespeare; or, the Poet" (1850). The act of reading is here dramatized: hence the structure in four 'acts' of a composition arranged as an imaginary two-voiced *fugue*. Quotations from Emerson's essays (in italics) are contrapuntually interwoven with my own reflections on texts whose freshness and directness of approach are astounding. Emerson has not developed his theme by singling out any play or character in particular: his "Shakespeare" looks naturally American, before any of the plays exists. His words have fallen out of heaven directly on American soil, and are staring at America's "incomparable materials": waiting, "like the enchanted princess in fairy tales", for the "destined human deliverer" who will be doing justice to them. In what looks like a new act of 'discovery', Emerson does, for American letters, what the early settlers of his own time were doing for the American continent.

Keywords: America, Homer, Influencer, Materials, Medium, Originality, Representative/Representation

Act I: Searching

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. [...] We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer.
(Emerson 1904c, 37)

To see Homer's gods in the barbarism and materialism of the times: of this divine power Shakespeare had been the supreme

incarnation for his epoch, and no less was expected of “Shakspeare”¹, his American avatar, whose descent on the American scene, however eagerly anticipated, was still to be realized.

Oregon and Texas [...] are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination. (Emerson 1904c, 38)

Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism [...] rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphos, and are as swiftly passing away. (37)

On the new, virgin soil, mythical forces are still in control of men’s lives. The yet-to-come American Shakespeare founds his claim to antiquity on his power to be Homer’s contemporary and equal.

Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words. (Emerson 1904c, 8)
But Homer’s words are as costly and admirable to Homer as Agamemnon’s victories are to Agamemnon. (7)

And the same is true of Shakespeare’s words: as costly and admirable to him as Homer’s words to Homer and Agamemnon’s victories to Agamemnon. They have the hardness and costliness of the iron ore out of which they are extracted – each of them as sharp and sparkling as a warrior’s sword. Doesn’t Dante’s Homer hold a sword in his hand (*Inferno*, IV.86)? American Shakespeare will be the American Homer, the American Dante.

Read the antique documents extricated, analyzed and compared by the assiduous Dyce and Collier, and now read one of these skyey sentences – aerolites – which, seem to have fallen out of heaven, and which not your experience but the man within the breast has accepted as words of fate, and tell me if they match; if the former account in any manner for the latter; or which gives the most historical insight into the man. (Emerson 1904f, 208)

The most historical insight into the man Shakespeare is to be found in human breasts, where his words are inscribed with permanent marks. By this miraculous extra-corporeal circulation of his own

¹ Emerson’s spelling is retained in all quotations.

words, Shakespeare is kept alive. No wonder there is no one biography of Shakespeare, but as many as there are men who have accepted his words as words of fate. An infinite number of ever-new biographies has been and will continue to be alive in the breasts of men of different epochs and places. An uncanny literality sustains this all-American reading of Shakespeare as the earliest and most powerful of 'influencers'.

[T]he reason why opinions as to his age vary so much is that our Homer truly lived on the lips and in the memories of the peoples of Greece. (Vico 1948, 290, §876)

Emerson witnessed the early phase of Vico's influence on modern culture. Maybe he heard about Michelet's unabridged translation of the *Scienza nuova*, and almost certainly saw Henry Nelson Coleridge's – the editor of his famous uncle – translation of its third book, on the "Discovery of the True Homer". Should he not have heard of it, his ideal proximity to the Neapolitan philosopher would be all the more striking.

[S]ince there has come down to us no writer more ancient than Homer [...], we are obliged [...] to discover the truth, both as to his age and as to his fatherland, from Homer himself. (Vico 1948, 272, §788)

It was after years spent garnering words on the very lips of people of different tribes – scattered on the craggy territories and the thousand islets that would one day be 'Greece' – that Homer, having recognized, in those words, the distant echo of a future common language, invented the nation of that name. Having lived before 'Greece' was, he could not simply be Greek. He was the inventor of Greece.

[T]he reason why the Greek peoples so vied with each other for the honor of being his fatherland, and why almost all claimed him as citizen, is that the Greek peoples were themselves Homer. (Vico 1948, 290, §875)

Even more radically than Vico's 'biography' of Homer, Emerson's 'biography' of Shakespeare comes to light through a self-reflexive movement of the soul.

Shakspeare is the only biographer of Shakspeare; and even he can tell nothing, except to the Shakspeare in us, that is, to our most apprehensive and sympathetic hour. [...]

Hence, though our external history is so meagre, yet, with Shakspeare for biographer, instead of Aubrey and Rowe, we have really the information which is material. (Emerson 1904f, 208)

It is a paradox of Shakespeare's biographies that not even Shakespeare himself would be able to edit them.

Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history. [...]. A man is the whole encyclopædia of facts. [...]

This human mind wrote history, and this must read it. (Emerson 1904a, 3-4)

Just as "the Greek peoples were themselves Homer", so the 'Saxon race' are themselves Shakespeare.

Act II: Digging

The breadth of the problem is great, for the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth. (Emerson 1904c, 5)

A new order of cognitive power is announced in these words: no less than Gloucester's in *King Lear*, Emerson's search for Shakespeare as 'the Poet' is, imaginatively, a jump in the void. It lands him on one of interpretation's blank spaces: not the time-honoured and by now stale issue of 'representation', going back to Plato's myth of the cavern, but the entirely modern topic of 'representative-ness'. Emerson does, for American letters, what the early settlers were doing for the American continent.

The entrepreneurial pioneers owned the land and also identified with it. [...]
This "primordial wilderness" was also "vacant": when the European settlers saw themselves as quickening a virgin land, the modern spirit completed its genesis by becoming flesh in the body of the American continent. (Jehlen 1986, 4)

The American 'Shakespeare' becomes flesh in the body of the American continent.

There is somewhat touching in the madness with which the passing age [...] registers every trifle touching Queen Elizabeth, and King James, and the Essexes, Leicesters, Burleighs and Buckingham; and lets pass without a single valuable note the founder of another dynasty, which alone will cause the Tudor dynasty to be remembered. (Emerson 1904f, 202)

A harsh judgment, considering how thoroughly Shakespeare's text had been worked upon during the last century and a half. But also a glimpse of Harold Bloom's 'inventor of the human' (Bloom 1998).

[The] English genius [...] is wise and rich, but it lives on its capital. It is retrospective. How can it discern and hail the new forms that are looming up on the horizon, new and gigantic thoughts which cannot dress themselves out of any old wardrobe of the past? (Emerson 1904g, 246)

Gigantic thoughts will dress the future anew out of Emerson's American Shakespeare,

the man [...] on whose thoughts the foremost people of the world are now for some ages to be nourished, and minds to receive this and not another bias. (Emerson 1904f, 202)

The 'Shakspearized' thought of the present time bears the unmistakable brand of "the Germans, those semi-Greeks, who [...], by means of their height of view, [...] think for Europe" (Emerson 1904g, 254).

Our poet's mask was impenetrable. [...]. It was not possible to write the history of Shakespeare till now; for he is the father of German literature [...]. It was not until the nineteenth century, whose speculative genius is a sort of living Hamlet, that the tragedy of Hamlet could find such wondering readers. Now, literature, philosophy and thought are Shakspearized. His mind is the horizon beyond which, at present, we do not see. (Emerson 1904f, 203-4)

In the casual note taken by an anonymous member of the original audience, one can 'hear' Shakespeare being presented as an 'influencer', perhaps for the first time:

Mr. Emerson once defined the cultivated man as "one who can tell you something new and true about Shakspeare". [...]

In writing of Great Men in 1838 in his journal, he says: "[...] Shakspeare has, for the first time, in our time found adequate criticism, if indeed he have yet found it: – Coleridge, Lamb, Schlegel, Goethe, Vary, Herder [...]" (Emerson 1904d, 347)

The German spirit ought to be thanked, if adequate criticism of Shakespeare can be found in Lamb, de Quincey, Hazlitt and, of course, Coleridge, the master of them all. By them a new mode of looking at the 'Characters of Shakespeare's Plays' as properties, or requisites, of the critic's performance has been invented, and passed on to the popular stages. Squeezed in between German high speculation, British literary gossip and, last but not least, the vanity of the stages, what way was left open for the American scholar to say something 'new and true' about Shakespeare?

Malone, Warburton, Dyce and Collier have wasted their oil. The famed theatres, Covent Garden, Drury Lane, the Park and Tremont have vainly assisted. Betterton, Garrick, Kemble, Kean and Macready dedicate their lives to this genius; him they crown, elucidate, obey and express. The genius knows them not. (Emerson 1904f, 206)

One might wonder whether the genius knew the Sage of Concord, busy – all alone in his study on the other side of the Pond – with etching for him a new, unedited profile. Very likely he did not. It took most of the time it took America to grow as a nation for the genius to acknowledge the powerful, however de-centralized – or maybe powerful *because* de-centralized – likeness of himself produced, early on, in that distant province of his Empire.

Act III: Reaping

But whatever scraps of information concerning his condition these researches may have rescued, they can shed no light upon that infinite invention which is the concealed magnet of his attraction for us. (Emerson 1904f, 205-6)

At some point it must have been clear to Emerson that his quest for Shakespeare as the American Poet was growing into a quest for the American Critic. He had pointed the searchlight on himself, and from this reversal of the critic's standard gesture a re-positioning of Shakespeare had ensued. If the Poet's infinite invention was destined to remain a concealed magnet, the critic's capacity for feeling its attraction was open to self-scrutiny. The moment Shakespeare's attraction is acknowledged as being 'for us', the critic's persona moves centre-stage as the arbiter of Shakespeare's 'influence'.

A magnet must be made man [...] before the general mind can come to entertain its powers. (Emerson 1904e, 9-10)

The concealed magnet must be made man 'for us': that is, for the myriad readers, or audiences, who, in the most various formations, are, and will be, interested in entertaining the attraction so powerfully shaking and shaping their breasts. The American Critic knows that the surest path to 'Shakespeare; or, the Poet', is via his own heart (plus, of course, Homer and his gods), and would like to share this knowledge, and the joy it brings with it, with as many as possible of his readers and audiences.

Man is that noble endogenous plant which grows, like the palm, from within outward. (Emerson 1904e, 6)

Man is endogenous, and education is his unfolding. The aid we have from others is mechanical compared with the discoveries of nature in us. (8)

Like the palm, the Critic-as-Philosopher projects his own mind from within outward. At first sight not the most orthodox of cognitive strategies. While testing it on Shakespeare, he finds that his text is the American continent, and his goal no longer the interpretation, but the appropriation of Shakespeare for America.

Gigantic thoughts are brewing.

Well, in good faith, we are multiplied by our proxies. How easily we adopt their labors! Every ship that comes to America got its chart from Columbus. Every novel is a debtor to Homer. Every carpenter who shaves with a fore-plane borrows the genius of a forgotten inventor. (Emerson 1904e, 12)

Ten years earlier, thrilled at the first lightening of the idea, he had jotted it down with the fervour of the Unitarian divine:

Life only avails, not the having lived. Power [...] resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state [...]. This one fact the world hates; that the soul becomes; for that forever degrades the past. (Emerson 1904b, 69)

Now at the zenith of his career as a writer and philosopher, he knows how to substantiate with facts that abstract proposition. Far from degrading it, labour, as a force applied to nature, enhances the past, by ‘publishing’ the unstoppable transition of substances from old to new states.

Justice has already been done to steam, to iron, to wood, to coal, to loadstone, to iodine, to corn and cotton; but how few materials are yet used by our arts! The mass of creatures and of qualities are still hid and expectant. It would seem as if each waited, like the enchanted princess in fairy tales, for a destined human deliverer. (Emerson 1904e, 9)

Dazzled by America’s ‘ample geography’, the observer’s imagination is fired with enthusiasm for America’s ‘incomparable materials’. Not even the polar divide from Columbus to a forgotten inventor – from ‘great man’ to workman – is too great to be bridged, were it only by proxy. But the mass of creatures and qualities is still waiting to be delivered and made representative of human labour by use.

Man, made of the dust of the world, does not forget his origin; and all that is yet inanimate will one day speak and reason. [...] Thus we sit by the fire and take hold on the poles of the earth. This quasi omnipresence supplies the imbecility of our condition. [...] [W]e wish for a thousand heads, a thousand bodies, that we might celebrate its immense beauty

in many ways and places. Is this fancy? Well, in good faith, we are multiplied by our proxies. (Emerson 1904e, 11-12)

“This is” pure “Orphic Emerson: shamanistic, anarchic, devoted to self-union” (Bloom 2015, 157). Endogenous, like the palm. Of the degrading of the past implicit in the ‘becoming’ of the soul, he has no fear. Quite the contrary: what might be felt as a miscegenation exalts his soul to the delirium of ‘quasi omnipresence’, of which the twin utopias of full expression and unrestrained joy are the outposts.

Act IV: Shakespeare

Shakespeare is not literary, but the strong earth itself. (Emerson 1904d, 347)

If power resides in the moment of transition, the biggest accumulation of power is the earth itself, with its still unfathomed reservoir of materials, deep in the process of passing from a past to a new state. To the eyes of the American critic, Shakespeare, who is not literary but the strong earth itself, has the appeal of America’s incomparable materials.

This pleasure of full expression [...] is the secret of the reader’s joy in literary genius. Nothing is kept back. There is fire enough to fuse the mountain of ore. Shakespeare’s principal merit may be conveyed in saying that he of all men best understands the English language, and can say what he will. (Emerson 1904e, 15)

Shakespeare can say what he will – no doubt about that – yet his is not – nor could it ever be – the full-throated ease of Keats’s nightingale.

[T]hese unchoked channels and floodgates of expression are only health or fortunate constitution. Shakespeare’s name suggests other and purely intellectual benefits. (Emerson 1904e, 15-16)

Unrestrained utterance can only signal a healthy body and a happy constitution. But the other, purely intellectual benefits, by which Shakespeare is made a ‘representative man’ – perhaps the most

representative of the six taken into consideration – are still to be dug out².

Unpublished nature will have its whole secret told. Shall we say that quartz mountains will pulverize [...] till they are made vehicles of more words?
(Emerson 1904e, 12)

Shakespeare's capacity for full expression is continuous with fire's capacity for fusing the mountain of ore. Priceless raw materials will be made the vehicles of more and more words... One cannot not think of the costly minerals encrypted in those unsurpassed vehicles of words that are our cell phones; of battles fought to the death, in order to gain control over those minerals: at bottom, over more words...

As plants convert the minerals into food for animals, so each man converts some raw material in nature to human use. (Emerson 1904e, 8)

Each material thing [...] has its translation, through humanity, into the spiritual and necessary sphere. (11)

'Material' does not translate so well into 'spiritual'; nor into 'intellectual' either. Or, if it does, it does so symbolically, or metaphorically. But nothing could be further from Emerson's mind than this abstraction. In his system, substances – no less than men, and especially 'great men', have their translation into the spiritual

² In 1850 Emerson published *Representative Men*, a collection of essays derived from his lectures. Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Napoleon, Shakespeare and Goethe are the champions presented. The seventh and introductory essay is provokingly titled "Uses of Great Men". To our idealistically-trained minds, 'greatness' and 'use' make strange bedfellows. But a title like that must have startled original audiences as well. It was all right for the six 'representative men' to be labelled with their respective qualifications: all right for Plato to be the Philosopher, Swedenborg the Mystic, Montaigne the Skeptic, Napoleon the Man of the World, Goethe the Writer, and Shakespeare, of course, the Poet. But that each of these daunting 'greatnesses' should be checked against their respective 'uses' must have sounded embarrassing even to Puritan ears. Wasn't it a duty for all men to be 'useful'? For a 'great man' to be indexed under the heading 'use' was tantamount to having his strong singularity dissolved into the myriad trades and professions that were making great the American nation of the mid-century. Once made transferrable – like money – the very idea of singularity was lost.

by the mediation of their 'uses'. This is what he calls "having justice done to", or "being representative". It remains to be seen in what way this applies to Shakespeare.

Man in society, with all his passions and his pleasures, [...] becomes the object of the passions and pleasures of man; an additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expressions; and language, gesture, and the imitative arts become at once the representation and the medium. (Shelley 1915, 76-77)

In Shelley's seminal text, Emerson found Wordsworth's legacy augmented and transcended. The language of poetry was not just 'recollection', but a complex of verbal and bodily elements. The formula 'both the representation and the medium' seemed to open the way to further, unheard of, developments. Four years later, he would go back to those words.

The poet is [...] the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart. (Emerson 1904c, 6)

The power to receive and to impart – or, to become *at once the representation and the medium* – is at its highest in Shakespeare, whose words are, consubstantially, received from the earth – wherefrom else? – and imparted to men. Justice has been done to steam, iron, wood, coal, loadstone, iodine, corn, cotton, by their uses. But all these materials, and possibly many more, are waiting to be 'published' by Shakespeare. By entering art's dominion they are made 'representative', to a higher degree than in the everyday use of the words. The power of words in poetry manifests itself in their double nature. In one and the same act, they are both the representation and the medium.

Great genial power, one would almost say, consists in not being original at all; in being altogether receptive; in letting the world do all, and suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind. (Emerson 1904f, 191)

The received opinion according to which a literary genius must be, first of all, an 'original' is abolished; 'representative' and 'original'

seem here to live at opposite ends. Great genial power does not consist in pouring your never-heard-of inventions on the expectant world. It is rather a voiding of the self, executed as a preliminary to letting the spirit of the hour pass unobstructed through you. One might even think that a camera would provide that type of 'unobstruction'.

In short, he [Shakespeare] is the chief example to prove that more or less of production, more or fewer pictures, is a thing indifferent. He had the power to make one picture. Daguerre learned how to let one flower etch its image on his plate of iodine; and then proceeds at leisure to etch a million. There are always objects; but there was never representation. Here is perfect representation, at last; and now let the world of figures sit for their portraits. No recipe can be given for the making of a Shakspeare; but the possibility of the translation of things into song is demonstrated. (Emerson 1904f, 213-14)

A project of infinite reproducibility is implied by Emerson's work on 'representative-ness'. The unexpected appearance, in this context, of the photographer Daguerre confirms the presence of that strain, or variant, in the blood of American Shakespeare. Just because they are 'medium', Shakespeare's words are not 'original' but 'representative': that is, deep in the process of passing from a past to a new state, like the earth.

[H]e borrows very near home. [...]. He knows the sparkle of the true stone, and puts it in high place, wherever he finds it. Such is the happy position of Homer perhaps. (Emerson 1904f, 197)

Shakespeare is here the gold digger who looks at 'the cropping out of the original rock' and sees the sparkle of the true stone in it: a more 'American' portrait of the Poet could not be conceived. The scenario is the mythic one a number of western movies have imaginatively fixed for us to mid-nineteenth century: however unwittingly, those hunters for riches were fully contemporary with Emerson's passionate search for an American Shakespeare. With Homer's shadow peeping round the stage door...

Shakspeare knew that tradition supplies a better fable than any invention can. [...] [A]t that day, our petulant demand for originality was not so much

pressed. [...] He is therefore little solicitous whence his thoughts have been derived; whether through translation, whether through tradition, whether by travel in distant countries, whether by inspiration. (Emerson 1904f, 196)

Representative men are made 'great' by their capacity for 'publishing', or re-presenting, nature's uses. This capacity is at its fullest in literary genius. The American Shakespeare makes his entrance on a waste land of literary materials and – like Homer, who invented 'Greece' – invents the 'Elizabethan age', contextually making of it a precious heritage for generations yet to come.

At the time when he left Stratford and went up to London, a great body of stage-plays of all dates and writers existed in manuscript and were in turn produced on the boards. [...] All the mass has been treated, with more or less skill, by every playwright, and the prompter has the soiled and tattered manuscripts. It is now no longer possible to say who wrote them first. They have been the property of the Theatre so long, and so many rising geniuses have enlarged or altered them, inserting a speech or a whole scene, or adding a song, that no man can any longer claim copyright in this work of numbers. Happily, no man wishes to. (Emerson 1904f, 192-93)

By a sort of diplopia, or double vision, Shakespeare's image is here projected against the background of a 'primordial wilderness' of letters. Like the entrepreneurial pioneers of Emerson's own time, who saw themselves as quickening a 'virgin' land – virgin to their rapacious eyes, but as old and lived upon as the rest of the created globe – this new Shakespeare of Emerson's invention looks at the mass of soiled and tattered manuscripts – or better *pulp scripts* – that are left-overs from other stages, and what his 'tyrannous eye' descries in them is a boundless expanse of 'incomparable materials', both immensely old and startlingly new, not unlike those whose picture he so much admires in Homer. And unsurprisingly like those the early settlers were discovering, and doing justice to, at that time, in America.

[H]e borrows very near home. [...] He knows the sparkle of the true stone, and puts it in high place, wherever he finds it. Such is the happy position of Homer perhaps. (Emerson 1904f, 197)

The mountain of waste stock is waiting to be pulverized into words and, in the absence of authors and copyright claimers, any experiment can be freely tried on it. According to a method of work strongly reminiscent of the labour of the *chiffonniers*, or dustmen, active on the streets of nineteenth-century Paris and London, and known to Emerson from the pages of Dickens and Baudelaire. But there were rag-and-bone men in sixteenth-century London too. And second-hand clothes trade was flourishing.

The greatest genius is the most indebted man. [...]

The Genius of our life is jealous of individuals, and will not have any individual great, except through the general. There is no choice to genius. (Emerson 1904f, 189-90)

Shakspeare did owe debts in all directions, and was able to use whatever he found. (195)

The Poet whose genius consists in looking at the mass of accumulated literary materials and seeing Homer's gods in them is the 'American Shakspeare'. That genius, and not another, will give the world, as a bias, America's challenging perspective: through his eyes, and not another's, what will be called "the Elizabethan age" is perceived, for the first time, as a *spatially* remote age. The Old World did not entertain other than a *temporal* image of that remoteness.

But the most dizzying fact, on reading Emerson on 'Shakspeare', is the impression of nearness produced by that extraordinary distance in space. The ensuing somersault is Emerson's own gift to the reader. Looking from today's perspective, it appears almost obvious that Shakespeare's 'lack of originality' should be the source of his infinite productiveness: not in terms of the number of dramas brought on the stage, but of the power displayed in them, to re-use the past, and invent a future which was from the start a heritage. All but ignored by the intellectuals of his time, Shakespeare was loved by his public – all too prompt in following the scent of a possible future – and made his fortune.

As a counter evidence, reference may be made to Shakespeare's contemporary reception:

The unique fact in literary history, the unsurprised reception of Shakspeare – the reception proved by his making his fortune; and the apathy proved by the absence of all contemporary panegyric – seems to demonstrate an elevation in the mind of the people. Judge of the splendor of a nation by the insignificance of great individuals in it. (Emerson 1904g, 237)

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Faltering in the Fight: *Pierre* and *Hamlet*

David Greven

Melville's 1852 novel *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* foregrounds its intertextual link to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This essay focuses on several subjects: incest, framed as an all-encompassing allegory for the problems within and posed by the family; sexual ambivalence, which both the tragedy and the novel thematize in the hero's horror at the thought of adult genitality; and an episode that links *Hamlet* to *Pierre* and combines concerns with authorship and dismemberment, the reference to the myth of the amputated Giant Enceladus. *Pierre* is notable for being the most sustained depiction of female sexuality in Melville's work. The titular hero's possible half-sister Isabel can be considered a version of Shakespeare's Ophelia, just as the character of Mary Glendinning, *Pierre*'s mother, revises *Hamlet*'s mother Gertrude. Melville's transformation of Shakespeare's female portraits is fascinatingly problematic. He uses the precursor text to imagine forms of subversive female power but also reifies images of the woman as, respectively, narcissistic and siren-like, a doom to men. At the same time, Melville reimagines Milton's Eve, specifically the moment where she ponders her own reflection in a pool. The novel's most resistant element is its *Hamlet*-like depiction of masculinity as "faltering in the fight" compromised and embattled. Melville's Shakespearean and ekphrastic uses of the Enceladus myth allow him to develop an allegorical register for his mutually illuminating explorations of the failure of the artist and the failure of American masculinity.

Keywords: Melville, Milton, Female sexuality, Masculinity, Narcissism, Incest

Herman Melville's work reflects the centrality of Shakespeare's influence, rivalled only by Milton's, for American Romanticism. As Jonathan Arac notes: "During the romantic period the most consequential writers of the various Western national cultures found Shakespeare an indispensable means of defining their own

innovations" (Arac 2011, 6)¹. Melville's novel *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, published in 1852, passionately evinces this Shakespearean indispensability in its intertextual relationship with *Hamlet*. "Shakespeare saturated" the writing of *Pierre*, Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker note in *Reading Melville's "Pierre; or, The Ambiguities"* (Higgins and Parker 2006, 21). They buttress their claim that no writer of fiction before Melville had so closely attended to "the complex workings of the psyche" by crediting Shakespeare as the author to whom Melville was "deeply indebted" for this achievement (23). Consultation with digitized Melville's copy of *Hamlet* at the website *Melville's Marginalia Online*, a digital archive of books Melville owned, borrowed, and consulted, confirms Melville's deep engagement with the text, which contains many markings in pencil and also an annotation written in the margins: "Here is forcibly shown the great Montaignism of Hamlet" (Shakespeare 1837, 7:297)².

Pierre's strong incestuous overtones echo *Hamlet* and synthesize the centrality of incest discourse in nineteenth-century America³. Incest gave Romantic writers a capacious metaphor for

¹ In the Romantic era, Shakespeare assumed the God-like power of the Bible; his works and the Bible were both seen "as the expression of an incomparable inner power requiring endless exegesis" (Arac 2011, 15).

² Melville rediscovered Shakespeare in 1849 and read him avidly, comprehensively, and intensely, the occasion being Melville's acquisition of the 1837 American edition of the Hilliard, Gray *Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare*. This seven-volume set, in which Melville marked thirty-one plays, is digitized at *Melville's Marginalia Online*. *Melville's Marginalia Online* allows readers to search these volumes for Melville's markings, annotations, and so forth, several of them newly recovered through digital technology. As Christopher Ohge et al. elucidate: "Computational approaches to [Melville's] marginalia allow readers to complement assessments of word counts and frequencies, word variety, topic clusterings, and sentiment associations, with informed acts of close reading and source elucidation that reveal Melville constructing new paths in his own writing from his experiences of reading Shakespeare" (Ohge et al. 2018, 65).

³ For an analysis of the thoroughgoing importance of incest to literary production and social arrangements in the early republic and the antebellum period, see Connolly 2014. Connolly draws on Butler's theory of the "melancholia of gender identification", noting that the incest prohibition, rooted in the prior ban on homosexual desire for the same-sex parent,

the artist's relationship to the world, their own creativity, and sexuality. In *Pierre*, the Shakespearean incest theme centered in the mother-son relationship is expanded to include the titular protagonist's improbable, increasingly intense relationship to a woman who identifies herself as his half-sister Isabel Banford. Incest complexly provides the logic of human relationships generally here, as Cindy Weinstein has argued, linking Pierre Glendinning's relationships not only with his mother and Isabel but also with his deceased father, claimed by Isabel to be her father as well (Weinstein 2004). Melville's reworking of *Hamlet's* incest themes allows him to reflect on the gender politics of authorship, creativity, and literary influence.

Hamlet, Incest, and Fratricide

Before turning to *Pierre*, I want to highlight aspects of Shakespeare's tragedy salient for the novel. Hamlet's understanding of Claudius as "more than kin, and less than kind" (Shakespeare 2016, I.ii.65) and his nausea over his mother's second marriage clarify that he associates family with overbearing intimacy and a potential for cruelty. Yet this disposition includes a fixation on his biological parents' sexual relationship, his mother's sexuality, and his father's sexual magnetism. Implicitly, Hamlet idealizes parental sexuality as wholesome and satisfying, everything that Gertrude's and Claudius's could never be. Yet his sexual disgust, noted by critics from Freud and Ernest Jones forward, especially vivid in his interactions with Ophelia and Gertrude, exceeds the parameters of his justifiable anger. Before the Ghost conscripts his son into a revenge plot, Hamlet expresses contemptuous feelings towards Claudius and his mother and seems particularly horrified by the thought of their sexual

establishes heteronormativity as norm. As he notes, however pervasive incest discourse was, it remained silent on the subject of same-sex incest. "Every iteration of incest in nineteenth-century America presumed, and in doing so produced, heterosexual subjects" (Connolly 2014, 17). For a related discussion, see Jackson 2014, 70-71.

intimacy. One could argue that it is disgust at the thought of his own parents' sexual relationship that Hamlet displaces onto the "shadow-couple", in Raymond Bellour's phrase (Bellour 2000, 254), of Gertrude and Claudius, who both fail to live up to his idealized standards. Hamlet's revulsion from sexuality, in its intensity, suggests underlying grief and anger.

That Claudius is a substitute for his father allows Hamlet to have the Oedipus complex without guilt – he can kill the father's image *in* Claudius rather than the father himself, kill it because it so poorly reproduces the father. The sense of Claudius as an inadequate substitute for his father deepens in the closet scene where Hamlet terrorizes Gertrude. Holding up two images before her eyes, one of his father, the other of Claudius, "[t]he counterfeit presentment of two brothers" (Shakespeare 2016, III.iv.52), Hamlet explicitly commands that she look at them and implicitly that she draw the same conclusions that he does⁴. Claudius is a poor imitation of "[s]o excellent a king", Hamlet says of his father, who was "Hyperion" to Claudius's "satyr" (I.ii.139-40). Hyperion was one of the Titans who overthrew their devouring father Cronos; I will discuss the intertextual significance of Titans and Giants, often confused with one another in the reception of classical mythology, as Melville typifies when he categorizes the Giant Enceladus (a figure central to our discussion) as a Titan.

One of Hamlet's ingenious maneuvers is to force Claudius to relive his homoerotic fratricide by forcing him to watch the play-within-the-play that reenacts this episode. Melville takes this homoerotic-incest theme and embroiders it, envisioning both brother-sister incest and a homoerotic bond between male cousins as metaphors for the unspeakable topic of homosexuality, as James Creech forcefully argues in his book on *Pierre, Closet Writing/Gay Reading* (1993).

Dying into freedom, as Harold Bloom evocatively puts it, Hamlet finds a way to resolve his conflicts over his own wayward masculinity and his attitudes towards parental heterosexuality by

⁴ In the Globe's original production of *Hamlet*, "it is likely that miniature portraits would have been used" (Wilder 2010, 124).

destroying nearly all the participants in this sexual pageant (Bloom 1998, 517). But his beloved friend Horatio survives, the witness to this endless scene of sexual crime. That the loving friend, who regards Hamlet as a “sweet Prince” (Shakespeare 2016, V.ii.343), remains standing is a suggestive touch. Horatio takes over Hamlet’s witnessing role. Such an ardent testimonial to male friendship will be one of the most savagely overturned elements of Melville’s reworking of *Hamlet* in *Pierre*, where, unlike in *Moby-Dick*, Melville cannot imagine either survival or ardent male ties.

Pierre and the Law of the Mother

Moby-Dick had not done well, partly due to the disastrous first publication of the novel in England that failed to include the final chapter revealing Ishmael’s survival. *Pierre* was an outright disaster, sparking the New York *Day Book*’s infamous headline, “HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY”, on 8 September 1852 (Parker 2002, 632). Melville parodied the sentimental novel and Gothic fiction in this tale of a once-prosperous young man’s descent into madness when he meets a woman who claims to be his half-sister and decides to be her salvation.

Nineteen years old and handsome in the manner of Billy Budd, Pierre Glendinning, named after his father, enjoys an idyllic, unassuming life in Saddle Meadows (upstate New York). His flirtatious relations with his mother, Mary, fill even the relatively tranquil earlier chapters with unease. The son and mother’s tensely cheerful interactions verge on the incestuous: he calls his attractive mother “Sister Mary”, and she calls him “Brother”; Pierre plans to marry the appealing, blonde Lucy Tartan, who emerges from the tradition of the romance, a union that his controlling mother supports⁵. But when Pierre meets the enigmatic, dark-haired young woman Isabel Banford, haunted

⁵ Higgins and Parker note that the romance tradition frequently depicts “golden-haired, blue-eyed heroines as so rarefied or almost disembodied in their beauty that they seem angelic” (Higgins and Parker 2006, 46).

and haunting, he becomes entranced by her and her story. She claims that her mother was a European refugee, and, it is insinuated, also a victim of the French terror, and that she and Pierre share a father.

Isabel's remarkable dreamlike, sustained narrative of her life before she met Pierre is one of the novel's high points. Drawn to Isabel in a manner that nearly explicates the palpable but unspoken incest theme, Pierre decides on a radical plan to solve the dilemma Isabel endures and poses. He breaks off his engagement to Lucy and marries Isabel, the marriage ostensibly a platonic one. Isabel evokes the Victorian *femme fatale* whose appearance radically alters the male protagonist's life when he becomes hopelessly infatuated with her. Isabel, however, is a deeply melancholy siren who seems to be lured by her own death song. She is associated with music, her emblem the guitar that speaks for her: "Now listen to the guitar; and the guitar shall sing to thee the sequel of my story; for not in words can it be spoken. So listen to the guitar" (Melville 1971, 126).

Determined to ensure that Isabel receives her fair share of their father's money but too frightened by his mother's wrath to tell her the truth, Pierre tells Mary that he has secretly married someone else and broken off his engagement with Lucy. In a fury at his decisions, Mary disowns him. Pierre and Isabel, joined by a socially ostracized young woman named Delly Ulver, the disgraced victim of a rake, move to New York City, where Pierre's cousin, Glendinning Stanley, resides. Pierre believes that Glen will be his sanctuary, but, far from helping, Glen rejects and shuns him. Glen's behavior stuns and wounds Pierre because he and his cousin were extremely close in youth; their shattered relationship reflects Melville's consistent depiction of male relations as fractious, prone to betrayal. When Mary dies, she vindictively leaves all her money and property to Glen, who further vanquishes Pierre's legacy by becoming engaged to Lucy Tartan. Lucy, however, remains tethered to Pierre and, in a surprising move, joins him and the other women at a boardinghouse known as the Church of the Apostles. Glen and Lucy's elder brother Frederic violently tussle with Pierre, but cannot prevent Lucy from entering his abode. Finally, overcome by financial difficulties

and his failure as a writer, Pierre murders Glen, shooting him in the street, and (like Bartleby in Melville's most famous short story) is sent to the prison known as The Tombs. When Isabel and Lucy visit him there, Lucy hears Isabel referring to Pierre as her brother and dies of shock. Pierre drinks from the vial of poison that hangs from Isabel's neck. When Frederic bursts into the prison cell in search of Lucy, he discovers her and Pierre's corpses. Recalling fond times when they were younger, he expresses penitent regret. Rebuking Frederic, Isabel then drinks from the same poison vial and dies: "her whole form sloped sideways, and she fell upon Pierre's heart, and her long hair ran over him, and arbored him in ebon vines" (Melville 1971, 362).

While there is an almost inexhaustible amount of material to explore in *Pierre*, in terms of its revision of *Hamlet* I will focus on three major dynamics: Melville's depiction of femininity, especially Mary and her role in the central mother-son relationship, contrasted with Pierre's idealized father; the incest theme, which ultimately unites Pierre and Hamlet in a shared refusal of normative heterosexual desire; and the use of the Enceladus myth, which effectively links Shakespeare's and Melville's protagonists as defeated would-be giants.

Pierre's mother represents one of the most formidable female characters in nineteenth-century American fiction (Higgins and Parker link her to Shakespeare's Volumnia, Coriolanus's fearsome, militaristic mother [Higgins and Parker 2006, 22]). With Shakespearean notes echoing throughout his language, Pierre contemplates his relationship with Mary as well as his own fate.

She loveth me, ay – but why? Had I been cast in a cripple's mold, how then? Now, do I remember that in her most caressing love, there ever gleamed some scaly, glittering folds of pride. Me she loveth with pride's love; in me she thinks she seeth her own curled and haughty beauty; before my glass she stands – pride's priestess – and to her mirrored image, not to me, she offers up her offerings of kisses. Oh, small thanks I owe thee, Favorable Goddess, that didst clothe this form with all the beauty of a man, that so thou mightest hide from me all the truth of a man. Now I see that in his beauty a man is snared, and made stone-blind, as the worm within its silk. (Melville 1971, 90)

Pierre's own thoughts, this passage offers an analysis of woman's desire for power and the role that male beauty plays in women's efforts to achieve and exert power. Most tellingly of all, it represents a male's fantasy of these female fantasies, Pierre's as well as Melville's. The question of Melville's treatment of femininity generally is a vexed one; *Pierre* contains his most extensive exploration of femininity even if one thoroughly mediated through male eyes.

In the closet scene, often performed as if an explicit rendering of mother-son incest, Hamlet tells Gertrude, increasingly frantic in the face of her son's volatility: "Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge. / You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (Shakespeare 2016, III.iv.17-19). Hamlet wants to force Gertrude to confront her "inmost part", a conscription into self-recognition, as if visible perusal will produce interior reckoning. Adding the considerable arsenal of misogynistic associations between vain woman and reflective surfaces to his assault against his mother's character, Hamlet imposes the longstanding cultural narrative of narcissistic female vanity. Pierre follows suit. Melville reveals his hero's interiority through free indirect discourse, giving us access to his private thoughts in all their contours. While, from dialogue alone, we have considerable evidence of Mary's questionable character, our immersion in Pierre's private musings gains us a sense, *his* sense, of his mother's self-love and frustrated desires for power and the son's instrumental and frustrating role in these tangled aspirations. If Pierre does not treat Mary with the relentless rhetorical (and possibly physical) violence that informs Hamlet's treatment of his mother, he treats maternal authority as a rule to be opposed and overturned while idealizing the dead father. Melville's depiction of Mary as, arguably, the chief villain in the novel, certainly as the most powerful persona, accords with psychoanalytic theory's "law of the mother", which Juliet Mitchell describes as the ban against parthenogenesis (Mitchell 2000, 343-44). Mary wields an authority that she believes to be absolute, and Pierre's defiance of her shatters this fantasy. Her comeuppance is a necessary component in Pierre's fierce scheme to reorder the world and to remake his own identity. In effect, he refashions

himself as parentless, ultimately rejecting Mary as she rejected him but also destroying his father's "chair-portrait" (Melville 1971, 74), the emblem of his idealized love for his father.

The official drawing room portrait of Pierre Glendinning, Senior contrasts starkly with the chair portrait of him as a young man, which was painted in secret by his cousin, Ralph Winwood. The contrast between the official and the chair portraits has attracted scholarly attention over the years, including James Creech's extensive analysis of the queer implications of this contrast. These analyses have not frequently included a consideration of Melville's intertextual uses of Shakespeare and *Hamlet's* relevance to the paternal portraits' significance⁶. In *Closet Writing/Gay Reading*, Creech offers a heroically unflinching and intensive account of the "winking" rhetoric whereby Melville conveyed a coded but excavatable queer sensibility (Creech 1993). My argument here focuses on a dimension of the work that is not Creech's focus, Melville's intertextual relationship with Shakespeare, though I share Creech's premise that *Pierre* is a richly and disturbingly significant homoerotic text.

As Creech observes: "The bourgeois, heterosexual paterfamilias, flower of homosocial culture, is represented by a large oil painting which hangs prominently over the mantelpiece in the drawing room" (Creech 1993, 130). In sharp contrast to this depiction is "the small oil of Pierre senior as a young bachelor", which Pierre reverences and keeps in "a small chamber next to his bedroom. Melville consistently terms this space a 'closet'. A closet in this nineteenth-century usage was not the small wardrobe that

⁶ Readings of the paternal portraits in *Pierre* include Creech 1993, 130-52; Brown 1990, 153-54, 162; Higgins and Parker 2006, 68-69; Lukasik 2011, 186-230; Dinius 2012, 86-125. None of these treatments, however, sharp as they are, explore *Hamlet* as intertext for *Pierre*, with the exception of Higgins and Parker, who discuss *Pierre's* overlaps in other contexts with *Hamlet* and other Shakespeare works. Sacvan Bercovitch, who makes surprisingly cursory note of valences between both texts in *The Rites of Assent*, observes that Pierre consists of characteristics of "a variety of Shakespearean heroes, most notably (and self-consciously) Hamlet, but also Macbeth, Romeo, Coriolanus, and even for a moment (in the dialogue with Isabel) King Lear and his Fool" (Bercovitch 1993, 263).

it is today, but rather a more intimate chamber than the adjoining bedroom" (130). Creech reminds us that "autobiographical links" between Melville and his protagonist include the fact that these paintings "correspond point for point with extant portraits of Melville's father Allan who died when Herman was twelve years old" (131), a most tragic end mired in bankruptcy and madness for a once larger-than-life father.

Pierre's spinster aunt Dorothea contends that the chair portrait records Pierre's father's affair with a young French woman. According to Dorothea, cousin Ralph intended to capture Pierre Senior's pining desire in portrait form. In stark contrast to Pierre and his aunt's devotion to the chair portrait, Mary loathes it, claiming that it in no way resembles Pierre's father. Instead, she reverences the comparatively paunchy middle-aged official portrait of her husband that hangs in the drawing-room. The strong implication is that Mary knows the truth of her husband's youthful affair and that of Isabel's existence as well, hence her ire.

Nancy Fredricks considers *Hamlet's* relevance here, incisively observing in *Melville's Art of Democracy* that

For Hamlet and Pierre, the crisis of representation centers primarily around the world of the father and the patriarchal social structure that seeks to perpetuate itself through words and images. Both texts focus on imagery of portraiture as both heroes probe beneath the deceptive surfaces of appearance. Hamlet asks Laertes, "was your father dear to you? Or are you like the painting of a sorrow, A face without a heart" (4.7.106). Pierre reads his copy of *Hamlet*, "The time is out of joint, / Oh cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right" (235). Melville appears to be drawing on the imagery of framing in *Hamlet* to denote Pierre's crisis of representation. (Fredricks 1995, 96)

Fredricks remarks that the two portraits that Hamlet aggressively holds up to Gertrude – his noble "Hyperion" father and degenerate "Satyr" uncle – "illustrate for Hamlet a political and moral disjuncture" (96). While Pierre makes a similar discovery, "Melville avoids the melodramatic personifications of good and evil" when Pierre locates both Hyperion and Satyr in one man, his father (96).

Reflecting its sustained incest theme, *Pierre* focuses on the varieties of incest. Pierre's relationships with Mary and his half-sister Isabel are shocking enough in their openly erotic character, but Melville adds to this Pierre's homoerotic desire for his handsome young father as captured in the chair portrait and for his cousin Glen. Indeed, the chapter on Pierre and Glen's relationship, "The Cousins", is the most thorough analysis of homoerotic male relations in antebellum American literature. It implies that Glen's rejection of Pierre has a basis in their sexual relationship as adolescents, one that must be repudiated in adulthood.

Hamlet's fraught relationship with other men dominates the play: his egregious murder of Ophelia's father, Polonius, takes his contempt for the dithering old man to a grotesquely excessive level; his acid attitude to her brother Laertes as he grieves over his sister outrageously ignores Hamlet's culpability in Ophelia's death and the fact that he murdered Laertes' father; and if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his friends from university, betray him, Hamlet nevertheless seems to delight in vengefully securing their deaths. This leaves Claudius, certainly worthy of Hamlet's ire but less clearly the intensity of his disgust. In other words, had King Hamlet simply died and Claudius replaced him in terms of both crown and marriage bed, it is likely that his angry nephew would feel much the same animus toward him, minus the urgency of the revenge plot.

The Meanings of Incest

Hamlet provides a foundation for *Pierre's* foregrounding not only of the paternal image but of the paternal *as* image. Most relevantly, it establishes the horror of incest as a screen for its hero's fantasies of and revulsion against adult genitality. Analogously, *Pierre*, while in seeming thrall to an inescapable incestuous passion, takes a course of action that ensures his sexual

inviolability⁷. It cannot be overlooked that Pierre devises his outlandish plan to marry Isabel just when he is about to embark on a legal, socially affirmed marriage to Lucy Tartan. While some have argued the opposite, the novel makes no clear indication that, however erotically charged their relationship, Pierre and Isabel have sexual relations⁸.

If Isabel recalls the Victorian figure of the *femme fatale*, Lucy Tartan embodies her foil, the *femme fragile*, who models delicacy and innocence and always verges on being deathly ill; Lucy and Isabel typify the Victorian tendency toward female doubles (Braun 2012, 62-63). Isabel's backstory brims with dire specificities but always remains obscure, an index of femininity's traditional associations with the enigmatic and unknowable. Wendy Stallard Flory, in a key reading, likens Isabel to Romantic poetry's mythic images of woman as Muse, imagination, and symbol of artistic creativity (Flory 2006). Clear parallels exist between Isabel and Coleridge's "damsel with a dulcimer" in his fragment-poem

⁷ Pierre is yet another representation of a recurring antebellum figure, the sexually inviolate male, volitionally cut off from heterosexuality and male homosociality. For a study of the inviolate male in antebellum American fiction, see Greven 2005.

⁸ I am joined by critics Paula Miner-Quinn, in her essay "Pierre's Sexuality", Michael Paul Rogin, in *Subversive Genealogy*, and the great Newton Arvin, in his 1950 study *Herman Melville*, in viewing Pierre and Isabel's marriage as platonic. As Rogin outlines, Pierre's decision to marry Isabel expresses a desire to destroy the romantic image of the father and to replace him. But the taboo on incest prevents him from sexually consummating the relationship; "he can only masquerade as the romantic father. His father's romance, outside of marriage, produced a child. Pierre, masquerading as a husband, is celibate". In keeping with the Medusa motif in the novel, "Pierre is encased in stone" since "he can neither possess Isabel, nor free himself from her" (Rogin 1983, 171). R. Scott Kellner, in his essay "Sex, Toads, and Scorpions", argues that Pierre and Isabel do sexually consummate their marriage but that for Melville "[s]ex is man's downfall": "Man 'stoops' to sex. Pierre insists 'I do not stoop to thee, nor thou to me; but we both reach up alike to a glorious ideal!' (p. 192). This is a vision he is not able to maintain. In the end, the chivalrous knight Pierre wishes both Lucy and Isabel dead. 'For ye two, my most undiluted prayer is now, that from your here unseen and frozen; chairs ye may never stir alive' (p. 358). He has been ruined by his conflicting feelings about sex and women" (Kellner 1975, 19).

"Kubla Khan": "In a vision once I saw: / It was an Abyssinian maid / And on her dulcimer she played, / Singing of Mount Abora" (lines 37-41). Like this oneiric female figure, Isabel plays a musical instrument, her guitar, that puts the male in a state of exaltation and dread. Nothing about Isabel connotes a realistic attempt at portraying a female character; she recalls Poe's dark-haired siren-Muse Ligeia, similarly galvanizing and destructive.

I regard *Pierre* as a radical novel on two crucial levels: Melville's at times excruciating, often daring manipulations of language, typified by his transformation of one kind of word to another, such as verbs into adverbs (Pierre contemplates Isabel's journey across the sea in her mother's secret tow: "she had probably first unconsciously and *smuggledly* crossed it hidden beneath her sorrowing mother's heart" [Melville 1971, 137, emphasis mine]) and his sustained immersion in heightened rhetorical registers; and his depiction of a protagonist who eschews, indeed defies, traditional codes of masculinity. But the novel's depiction of Isabel as unreadable, unknowable, 'mysterious' – literally noted in the song that emanates from Isabel's guitar ("Mystery of Isabel!" and "Isabel and Mystery!" [126]) – circumscribes the woman as irrational other, anticipating Freud's infamous description of femininity as "the dark continent". A hazy, muffled, blurry presence, Isabel enters narrative as a decorporealized figure: a mesmerizing face, a series of incantatory utterances. Her ghostly quality throughout, alleviated only by her humanly jealous rivalry with Lucy Tartan, makes it possible to imagine that Isabel is an object of desire without that desire necessarily translating into sexual consummation.

Incest functions as a screen for sexual as well as social relations in *Pierre*. Its tantalizing/horrifying possibility allegorizes the longing and the antipathy that defines the novel's major relationships. Given incest's longstanding metaphorical uses as coded homosexuality, male-female incest here also stands in for same-sex desire. Registered with thoroughgoing dread in *Hamlet*, incestuous sexuality signifies more complicatedly in *Pierre*, suggesting at once utopian oneness transcending difference and the dread of intimacy. *Pierre* foregrounds the sense that all

sexuality is incestuous⁹. Family members – his mother, cousin, possible half-sister – constitute the hero's major relationships, all of which are erotically tinged; while his relationship with Lucy is a non-biological tie, she effectively becomes a family member by joining his small sorority at the Church of the Apostles.

As we have noted, the question of Gertrude and Claudius' shared perfidy sparks not only Hamlet's rage but also his sexual revulsion. The famous play-within-the-play scene, relevant in many ways for *Pierre*, collapses adultery, incest, and homoeroticism, as evinced by the prosy stage directions:

Enter [Players as] a king and a queen, the queen embracing him and he her. He takes her up and declines his head upon her neck. He lies him down upon a bank of flowers. She seeing him asleep leaves him. Anon come in [a Players as] another man, takes off his crown, kisses it, pours poison in the sleeper's ears and leaves him. The queen returns, finds the king dead, makes passionate action. The poisoner with some three or four [Players] come in again, seem to condole with her. The dead body is carried away. The poisoner woos the queen with gifts. She seems harsh awhile but in the end accepts love. (Shakespeare 2016, III.ii.128)

Claudius and Gertrude are forced to witness a scene that serves as a grotesque mirror for the crime undergirding their union. But it is a mirror for Hamlet as well; tellingly, it is the vulnerable, wronged Ophelia – in every respect Hamlet's chief victim, unconscionably

⁹ Many scholars have located the basis for the idea that all sexuality is incestuous in Michel Foucault's argument that, given the centrality, at once, of the family and sexuality to modernity, incest "occupies a central place; it is constantly being solicited and refused; it is an object of obsession and attraction, a dreadful secret and an indispensable pivot" (Foucault 1978, 109). But the thematization of incest in works such as *Hamlet*, *Paradise Lost*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *Pierre* hardly make such expedient use of the trope. The undermining of traditional concepts of the family, sexuality, and the couple in these works, complexly and diversely coordinated, refuses any stable deployment of incest themes even if they constitute a through line in these works. Which is to say, incest works specifically in each work while also adding to each work's resistant treatment of sexuality. Why Foucault's tightly rigid schemas have proven so indispensable a pivot for contemporary scholarship is fodder for a different discussion.

abused by him even as he has felt himself abused – whom he sits beside during this mock-performance. Just as Gertrude fails to honor Old Hamlet's memory in Hamlet's eyes, so too does Hamlet fail to honor his past intimacy with Ophelia, which the play suggests was sexually tinged¹⁰. The play-within-the-play's action rebukes Hamlet no less than the criminal adulterers he wishes to shame and expose.

Melville stunningly reworks this Shakespearean tableau. Pierre's marriage to Isabel reconceives marriage as parodic assault on compulsory sexual norms. A transgressive and volatile union, Pierre and Isabel's marriage threatens to bring ruin. Even the disgraced Delly Ulver, wronged and rejected, fears that their marriage will result in her greater perdition: "If I stay, then – for stay I must – and they be not married – then pity, pity, pity, pity, pity!" (Melville 1971, 321). Isabel's hostility toward Lucy when she joins them insinuates Isabel's more-than-sisterly tie with Pierre (especially since Isabel feels protective toward rather than competitive with the non-rival Delly). This theme of "sororophobia", to use Helena Michie's term (Michie 1992), is one indication among many that, far from signifying a utopian alternative to institutionalized heterosexual marriage, the sham marriage between Pierre and Isabel creates as many social divides as it transcends them.

Pierre's fantasy of male heroism – that he can somehow singlehandedly rescue not only Isabel and Delly but also Lucy – results ultimately in the deaths of Isabel and Lucy as well as himself. (It is not clear what fate befalls Delly, left alone in their quarters at the Apostles, but that it is a less grim one is unlikely). Melville here offers his own version of Hamlet's questionable behavior toward his mother and dishonorable treatment of Ophelia while combining Hamlet's bifurcated attitudes toward male relationships; Pierre's friendship-turned-enmity with Glen combines a Horatio-like love with a Laertes-like poisonous

¹⁰ If Hamlet and Ophelia had a sexual relationship, it was perhaps not conducted in the soft-core porn manner that Kenneth Branagh depicts in flashback in his 1996 film version of the play, in which he cast himself in the titular role.

rivalry. The collapse of male friendship and love into murderous hate further signifies a dark side to Pierre's attempts to break free of social strictures. This is not to suggest that Pierre's utopian impulses are themselves wrong. Rather, Melville cannot imagine a utopian effort at transcendent unities, heterosexual or homosexual, that escapes wreck and ruin. Pierre is earnest but also vaingloriously rash and foolish, ensuring the destruction of those he vows to protect and rendering the vulnerable even more vulnerable with him than without him. *Pierre* transforms *Hamlet's* elaborate climax involving poisoned lances and cups and a mass death scene into the prison cell's barren, desolate tableau in which the bodies of dead women festoon dead Pierre.

Fallen Giants

Pierre explicitly mentions incest six times; five of those times occur in the paragraph on Enceladus, one of the Giants who battled the Olympian gods in Greek mythology. The sixth mention of the term incest comes later, in Book 26, during a discussion of the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, at the time attributed to Guido Reni¹¹.

Of its many significant dimensions, *Pierre's* reference to Enceladus intriguingly nods to *Hamlet's* implicit one at the site of Ophelia's grave. Grief-stricken over her suicide by drowning and furious at the priest who balks at giving her a proper funeral service for this reason, Laertes leaps into Ophelia's grave. He then frames himself as a giant of grief by evoking the Giants who battled the Olympians: "Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead / Till of this flat a mountain you have made / T'o'ertop old

¹¹ This portrait beloved in the nineteenth century also figures prominently in Hawthorne's last published novel *The Marble Faun* (1860). Beatrice Cenci, whose mild expression in the portrait was interpreted by nineteenth-century artists as indicative of great reserves of grief and violation, killed her father, who forced her to have incestuous relations with him. Her fair complexion has a seraphic quality, a bloneness "veiled by funereally jetty hair", which materializes the symbolic "black crape of the two most horrible crimes (of one of which she is the object, and of the other the agent) possible to civilized humanity – incest and parricide" (Melville 1971, 351). For a discussion of the influence of Shelley's closet drama *The Cenci* on Melville, see Mathews 1984.

Pelion or the skyish head / Of blue Olympus" (Shakespeare 2016, V.i.240-43). The war between the Giants and the gods was retold by Ovid in Book 1 of *Metamorphoses*, which Shakespeare could have read in the original and in the translation of Arthur Golding (Findlay 1978, 985)¹². In order to reach heaven, the Giants piled mountains atop one another, heaping Ossa and Olympus on Pelion, or Pelion and Ossa on Olympus, hence the proverbial phrase "to pile Pelion on Ossa", meaning "to make a bad situation worse". Not to be outdone, Hamlet provocatively taunts Laertes, extending his rival's allusion and associating himself with the Giant Enceladus: "Dost come here to whine, / To outface me with leaping in her grave? / Be buried quick with her, and so will I. / And if thou prate of mountains let them throw / Millions of acres on us till our ground, / Singeing his pate against the burning zone, / Make Ossa like a wart" (Shakespeare 2016, V.i.266-72). J. Anthony Burton notes that *Hamlet's* several references to the Giants' rebellion inform the play's power dynamics. The Elizabethan audience would have understood that the Giants "were the polar opposites of the divine Olympians. Various described as impious, foolhardy, impetuous, treasonous, indiscreet, inglorious, beastlike, dangerous, vile, and tyrannous, their cause was always reprehensible" (Burton 1984, 6). So neither Laertes nor Hamlet cover themselves in glory when likening their affect or cause to that of the Giants.

As he tries and disastrously fails to become a writer, Pierre's mythological avatars emerge as Hamlet, Dante, and the Giant Enceladus, mistakenly identified as a Titan here, which underscores the frequent interchangeability of the two in the myth's reception. Nancy Fredricks observes:

¹² Jonathan Bate notes, in *Shakespeare and Ovid*, the millennium-long tradition of suppressing the erotic character of Ovid's works in favor of reading them allegorically, morally, and didactically, and this has relevance to the story of the Giants' battle against the gods: "Allegorical and biblical interpretations were set beside moral ones; thus the revolt of the giants against the Olympian gods was made to represent the building of the tower of Babel, but also the pride of any worldly human who rebels against the authority of God" (Bate 1993, 25-26).

Like Hamlet, who evokes the myth of Enceladus when he becomes disgusted by Laertes' feeble attempts to "outface" him at the grave of Ophelia, Pierre, in launching his attack on the world of seeming, imagines himself the Titan, Enceladus, the offspring of the incestuous marriage of two worlds, heaven and earth, forever beaten down by the Olympians who bury him alive. (Fredricks 1995, 96)

In an ekphrastic tour-de-force, Melville reads the sculptor Gaspard Marsy's work *The Enceladus Fountain*, sculpted in lead between 1675 and 1677 and prominently displayed in the Groves of Versailles, as an allegorical figure for the artist defying his oppressors. Shorn of limbs yet intransigent in the face of certain defeat, he "turn[s] his vast trunk into a battering-ram" (Melville 1971, 346). Even vanquished, the Giant transforms his dismembered body into a weapon against his enemies. Pierre, having a dream that could be called a nightmare, cries out in his sleep. "Enceladus! it is Enceladus!" (346). And the Giant faces him, though from that moment "Pierre saw Enceladus no more; but on the Titan's armless trunk, his own duplicate face and features magnifiedly gleamed upon him with prophetic discomfiture and woe"; the "ideal horror" of his dream transmutes into "all his actual grief" (346).

Interestingly, Melville provides the Giant's backstory after this oneiric vision.

Old Titan's self was the son of incestuous Cœlus and Terra, the son of incestuous Heaven and Earth. And Titan married his mother Terra, another and accumulatively incestuous match. And thereof Enceladus was one issue. So Enceladus was both the son and grandson of an incest; and even thus, there had been born from the organic blended heavenliness and earthliness of Pierre, another mixed, uncertain, heaven-aspiring, but still not wholly earth-emancipated mood; which again, by its terrestrial taint held down to its terrestrial mother, generated there the present doubly incestuous Enceladus within him; so that the present mood of Pierre – that reckless sky-assaulting mood of his, was nevertheless on one side the grandson of the sky. For it is according to eternal fitness, that the precipitated Titan should still seek to regain his paternal birthright even by fierce escalade. Wherefore whoso storms the sky gives best proof he came from

thither! But whatso crawls contented in the moat before that crystal fort, shows it was born within that slime, and there forever will abide.
(347)

Pierre aligns himself with Enceladus and with Hamlet, who did the same. Though not incestuous himself, Enceladus is the progeny of incestuous unions across generations. If all sexuality is incestuous, as the novel appears to claim, Enceladus models the sexual subject. In *Hamlet in His Modern Guises*, Alexander Welsh discusses Enceladus's context within *Pierre's* incest plot.

[Pierre's] dare to free himself and Isabel to incestuous desire, or to commit incest if he should so please, has more probably to do with the impossible quest for originality and Promethean heroics. Pierre seeks to make love to his own devoted mirror image and dreams of being the titan Enceladus, "the present doubly incestuous Enceladus within him" [...]. Once it becomes clear that Pierre is also a writer, the act of tearing works of Dante and Shakespeare to shreds can be seen as indicative of similar strivings. (Welsh 2001, 150)¹³

I do not see Melville as tearing his literary precursors to shreds but rather as reimagining and extending their ideas for his own purposes. He sparks off the Enceladus-related allusions and energies of *Hamlet* to envision a wayward contemporary version of Shakespeare's protagonist, one less counseled and guided and even more unmoored, whose revenge plan stumbles entirely because so diffuse and inscrutable.

¹³ Welsh notes that "Freudian interpreters" eager to maintain "the primacy of the Oedipus complex [...] tend to regard the half sister as a displacement of the mother and generally assume that Melville's glances at the 'wisely hidden' significance of *Hamlet* or the 'the hopeless gloom of its interior meaning' confirm some such reading" (Welsh 2001, 150). While Freud's readings of *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* inform my own, I do not view Isabel as a displacement of Mary Glendinning. That would suggest that something subterranean was at work in Melville's depiction of Pierre's relationship with his mother, but the author goes quite far in making the incestuous dimensions of the mother-son relationship palpable and nearly explicit.

Likeness Visible

In his essay "On Love", Percy Bysshe Shelley writes:

Thou demandest what is Love. It is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves. [...] [I]f we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own [...]. This is Love. (Shelley 1977, 473)

When we desire, we desire self-likeness. This potentially radical idea gets much less radical when it reifies misogynistic constructions of femininity as reflective surfaces for male self-likeness. Anne K. Mellor critiques "On Love" as reflective of the narcissistic sensibility that she calls "masculine Romanticism". She identifies the "fundamental desire of the romantic lover" as the effort "to find in female form a mirror image of himself", what Shelley calls in "On Love" the "anti-type" (Mellor 1993, 25).

In response to Mellor, Steven Bruhm writes that he has no wish "to deny that such Romantic narcissism effaces and destroys the represented woman" (Bruhm 2001, 21); nevertheless, he points out that the view of narcissism as pathological imposes an anachronistic paradigm on Romanticism and its uses of the Ovidian Narcissus myth. "Romantic male authors purposely exploited the implications of looking at – and looking into – oneself", which has relevance for "the dangerous and volatile field of same-sex relations within the homosocial spectrum" (21-22).

Melville upholds narcissistic desire's centrality to Romantic writing, in part by explicitly naming Narcissus in his work, which he does in *Moby-Dick*. Yet throughout *Pierre*, it is primarily the female characters who see *their* likeness in the male. Mary, if Pierre's interpretation of his mother's desire holds true, sees in him her own idealized likeness as well as her gender-based loss of opportunities. Pierre's aunt Dorothea fetishizes the chair portrait that she brings to Pierre's attention, seeing in it the image of her

brother that she prefers to the one Mary commissioned. Yet Dorothea verges on seeing *herself* in the portrait, as she suggests when explaining to the child Pierre her role in the portrait's creation:

My child, it was I that chose the stuff for that neckcloth; yes, and hemmed it for him, and worked P. G. in one corner; but that aint in the picture. It is an excellent likeness, my child, neckcloth and all; as he looked at that time. Why, little Pierre, sometimes I sit here all alone by myself, gazing, and gazing, and gazing at that face, till I begin to think your father is looking at me, and smiling at me, and nodding at me, and saying – Dorothea! Dorothea! (Melville 1971, 79)

Dating from the late eighteenth century, a cultural investment in the face as the visible manifestation of truth and authenticity became a preoccupation of American life, as Christopher J. Lukasik has shown¹⁴. The face connotes, at once, identity and non-identity in Melville's (and Hawthorne's) work. Isabel's maddening, mesmerizing face metonymizes her, goading Pierre to seek her once he glimpses it.

But Isabel maintains her own relationship to her face. In a passage that intertextually echoes Milton's Narcissus-like Eve and her narration of her nativity in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*, Isabel recalls having stared at her reflection in a smooth lake when she was a girl. She then sees that reflected image of herself in the face of the man who speaks the word "Father" to her and that she comes to believe *is* her father (Melville 1971, 124). When Pierre brings Isabel and Lucy into an art gallery and they discover a portrait of a man that recalls the image of Pierre's father, "*A stranger's head, by an unknown hand*", Isabel exclaims: "'My God! see! see!' cried Isabel, under strong excitement, 'only my mirror has ever shown me that look before! See! see!'" (349-50). Eugenia

¹⁴ In the early American republic, one's countenance revealed "a [...] permanent, essential, and involuntary sense of character [...] that no amount of individual performance could obscure" (Lukasik 2011, 10). A now commonplace maxim from this era began to define American social relations: "there is a face that you put on before the public, and there is a face that the public puts on you" (10).

C. DeLamotte has noted the recurring significance of ancestral portraits in the Gothic, usually for the purpose of authenticating a family's rightful heirs. But throughout *Pierre*, Melville "link[s] the quest for knowledge with the quest to express knowledge in art" (DeLamotte 1990, 87). Enceladus captures this idea, as a figure of the writer reaching for heaven "but trapped in the 'imprisoning earth'" (87). The art gallery holds "the walls of the world" amply filled with paintings, but these paintings are failures, miserably empty. The desire to know and the desire to express knowledge through art fail at once; seeing the portrait of the stranger's head by an unknown hand leads Pierre to question Isabel's blood-relation to him and whether art matters at all (87). As Wyn Kelley observes, Enceladus, "the product and victim of monstrously bad parenting", figures Pierre's domestic difficulties (Kelley 1998, 109). "Heroically resisting his progenitors' destructive family patterns in a spirit no less defiant than that of such female rebels as Fanny Fern's Ruth Hall or E. D. E. N. Southworth's Capitola, Pierre adopts a 'reckless sky-assaulting mood'" (109). "Like these female protagonists", Pierre tries "to escape the sins of his demonic fathers and grandfathers by resisting male authority [and establishing] a nonpatriarchal household" (109).

If Enceladus provides the Ur-image of the castrated artist, this artist is buried in the earth, immobile, immured along with his defiance. As Isabel's self-apprehension-as-paternal-image allegorizes, femininity is frozen in the image; Isabel can only recognize herself in the image of the male, unable to move beyond this spectatorial position even if knowledge of her own situation and desires emerges from it. Hamlet's forcing Gertrude to stare at the two different portraits, one of his father and the other of his hated uncle, provides an especially sadistic intertext in light of this Melvillean theorization of women's relationship to the image. In forcing Gertrude to acknowledge the inadequacy of the one and the "Hyperion"-like superiority of the other, Hamlet entombs his mother in a conceptualization of the gaze that always already leads to the recognition of male superiority. Melville takes this idea further and challenges it, but only to a certain extent. Pierre's ruminations on Mary's experience when seeing herself reflected in her comely young son's form offer fascinating insights into male

psychology, mother-son relationships, and the narcissistic self-regard that links Pierre to his mother. Yet the passage where Pierre contemplates his mother's fixation on him is a phobic one, evoking Mary's icy character but also rebuking the autonomous and forthright woman's desire. Isabel's apprehension of being reflected in the image of her ostensible father and in the "stranger's head" portrait leads to her further entrapment in the idealized male image. It also loosens Pierre's faith that they are related and deepens his suicidal futility that includes an increasing belief in the impossibility of both knowledge and art¹⁵.

Pierre ruminates on his relationship to his precursor.

Hamlet taunted him with faltering in the fight. Now he began to curse anew his fate, for now he began to see that after all he had been finely juggling with himself, and postponing with himself, and in meditative sentimentalities wasting the moments consecrated to instant action. (Melville 1971, 170)

Hamlet taunts both Pierre and Melville, and in tribute to this prior text Melville envisions a hero forever "faltering in the fight". Pierre's ceaseless faltering grimly revises *Hamlet*: Hamlet's qualified triumph at the play's climax, compared to Pierre's nihilistic achievement, seems comparatively optimistic. Melville concludes with faltering, his hero's Pyrrhic victory a testament to Melville's own intransigence in the face of literary giants.

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¹⁵ Wai Chee Dimock argues that the quest for knowledge conducted by so many in the novel is ultimately a fruitless one, the enterprise revealing its own futility. The quest for knowledge reflects the nineteenth century's investments in individualism: "the obsessed drama that emerges from the book – the drama of wanting to know and the plight of being known – ultimately registers a historical phenomenon: the emergence, organization, and deployment of knowledge as a technology of control, a technology at once consonant with and intrinsic to the institution of individualism" (Dimock 1989, 157).

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“Hamlet Wavered for All of Us”: Notes on Emily Dickinson as a Reader of Shakespeare

Barbara Lanati

In New England, Shakespeare’s work was welcomed with alternating success. It was censored at first for several reasons: the Puritan law found his stories too sensuous and indecorous and his language was considered foreign to the New World. Even Emerson, despite his wide culture, objected to the fact that his contemporaries should consider Shakespeare immortal, claiming that he embodied a past that needed to be left behind.

If Shakespeare was frowned upon by the supercilious older generations, troubled by his moral and linguistic ambiguity, Emily Dickinson and her young contemporaries devotedly admired his work and read about it. The environment Emily Dickinson grew up in refined her taste vis-à-vis her readings and led her to an idea of drama as a possible and less intimidating double for real life. Drawing on hidden and more overt allusions, this essay explores the ways in which Shakespeare’s dramatic voice offered her the opportunity of interweaving fancy and daily life, imagination and real events.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Poems, Letters, Allusions to Shakespeare, Shakespeare in New England

Words and Flowers

Emily Dickinson left nothing but words, and flowers. Her words, her flowers. In the summer of 1877, Emily Dickinson sent a note to Mrs Higginson:

Dear friend

I send you a flower from my garden – Though it dies in reaching you,
you will know it lived, when it left my hand –

Hamlet wavered for all of us – (L512)¹

It caught my attention, not only for its fitting reference to Shakespeare's tragic hero, but also because it discloses some relevant features of Emily Dickinson's personality, of her facets and contradictions. From her self-imposed reclusion she writes to the invalid wife of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the man she had always considered her "Preceptor" and with whom she had started a long correspondence a decade earlier. Despite never having met her (and she never would), she reaches out to her enclosing a cape jasmine flower from her garden, although it would inevitably wither in reaching its recipient. Life and death are entangled in this highly laconic (unsigned) note. Was Emily Dickinson underlining, as she did throughout her life, the relevance of Shakespeare's work for her and her contemporaries ("all of us"), or was she identifying with Hamlet's figure and his tragedy? Perhaps the answer is both.

Discovering Emily Dickinson

As she lived, Emily Dickinson had already composed most part of her poetic production by 1877: almost two thousand poems, most of which she meticulously collected herself in hand-sewn booklets ('fascicles') and hid in her desk. They were hermetic, complex poems deemed by many as "confessional", or autobiographical, and as drawing on sixteenth-century metaphysical poetry. To many more her poems seemed beyond any possible interpretation. Then as today, critics could only speculate on what was hiding behind those minimal *ante litteram* Imagist compositions. They are not sonnets, that we know for sure. They are not hymns. They are not psalms. Certainly she did look at the three genres and drew upon their large production. Her meter is generally a four-line stanza with metrical experiments in nearly every one of them.

Despite the complexity of their formal structure, if compared to the poetry I was acquainted with, when I first read them as a young

¹ Emily Dickinson's letters used throughout the text will be quoted from Dickinson 1958 and referred to by number.

student, I was struck by the unique, dramatic juxtaposition of subjects and lyrical motifs:

Escape is such a thankful Word
I often in the Night
Consider it unto myself
No spectacle in sight

Escape – it is the Basket
In which the Heart is caught
When down some awful Battlement
The rest of Life is drop –

'Tis not to sight the savior –
It is to be the saved –
And that is why I lay my Head
Upon this trusty word – (no. 1347)²

"To escape", "to die", "to forget": Emily Dickinson 'adjusted' her life to the semantic areas related to these verbs, or rather she chose to cope with them. Apparently, they haunted her imagination and imagery, hence most of her poems sounded as precious as music to her. She was highly unpredictable both in her private and sentimental life, not to mention her writings, which were unlike any school of poetry, either Romantic or Transcendental, that she knew of but decided to ignore.

Jeune fille bien rangée, she was brought up in a well-off milieu, but like the "thief" in her poems (inspired by Mr and Mrs Browning's *Dramatis Personae*, she liked to disguise behind a variety of masks) she would sneak books and magazines from her father's library. She had knowledge of the Civil War end, the Gold Rush, of English poetical diction, as well as physics and medicine, but she was in love with words and the imagery she borrowed from Shakespeare, the Bible, the Book of Revelation, and metaphysical poetry. So she shaped a world nobody could break into. A world of words that were precious to her, and certainly a world of poems

² Emily Dickinson's poems used throughout the text will be quoted from Dickinson 1955 and referred to by first line and number.

and letters (no diary was ever found³), a world where the apparently fragile girl, and then woman, confronted the very concept of identity. A daring choice for her years. Her own identity: silent and proud. Ironic, self-ironic, and aggressive (like “a Loaded Gun” as in “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun”, no. 754) in opposition to the ambiguities of the fake middle class that surrounded her, whose members could not come to terms (with the exception of Walt Whitman) with the concepts of solitude and identity. It took decades for her poems to be discovered, before modern poetry (and Freud) realized what she did not know she knew, but she knew:

Soto! Explore thyself!
 Therein thyself shalt find
 The “Undiscovered Continent” –
 No Settler had the Mind. (no. 832)

As she lived, her poems remained unpublished.

In 1862, Emily Dickinson withdrew from social life. She isolated in the world she had built for herself, where she kept busy reading books, magazines, and newspapers, and writing: writing pages she would edit herself, scribbling on any paper scrap she had at hand, poems and letters, some of which she never mailed.

In that same year she wrote the first letter to T. W. Higginson, who was the editor of the magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*. She wrote to him asking for his guidance, inspired by his “Letter to a Young Contributor”, the lead article for the April 1862 issue, where he invited beginning writers, young gentlemen *or* young ladies, to send in their work to be reviewed, and eventually published. She never suspected that, though he firmly refused to publish her poems as she lived, he would actually later read them to his intellectual circles in Boston and Cambridge and would be her first editor after her death.

Emily’s first letter to Higginson, dated 15 April 1862, sounded (deliberately) affected and even beseeching. For the first time she

³ Following Emily’s instructions, after her death, her sister Lavinia presumably destroyed all her diaries along with most written material she found in her room other than her *poems*.

was unveiling her private compositions to a potential publisher, and in seeking an audience she dared to appear extravagant, closing her note with one of her many Shakespearean quotes:

Mr Higginson,

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?

The Mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly – and I have none to ask –

Should you think it breathed – and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude –

If I make the mistake – that you dared to tell me – would give me sincerer honor – toward you –

I enclose my name – asking you, if you please – Sir – to tell me what is true?

That you will not betray me – it is needless to ask – since *Honor is it's* [sic] *own pawn*⁴ – (L260, emphasis mine)

With the above (unsigned) letter Emily Dickinson enclosed a card on which she wrote her name and attached four poems: "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (no. 216), "The nearest Dream recedes – unrealized" (no. 319), "We play at Paste" (no. 320), and "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" (no. 318), which Higginson labeled "spasmodic" and "uncontrolled", deeming them too crude and too distant from the conventional Romantic poetry her contemporaries could accept and appreciate.

Unscathed by his criticism, she replied to him a few months later (7 June 1862):

Dear friend.

Your letter gave no Drunkenness, because I tasted Rum before – Domingo comes but once – yet I have had few pleasures so deep as your opinion, and if I tried to thank you, my tears would block my tongue –

[...]

⁴ Quote from *Richard II*, "mine honour's pawn" (I.i.74), and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, "her honour's pawn" (I.iii.47). All Shakespeare quotations are taken from Shakespeare 2005.

Your second letter surprised me, and for a moment, *swung* [...]. Your first – gave no dishonor, because the True – are not ashamed – [...] Perhaps the Balm, seemed better, because you bled me, first.

[...]

If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her – if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase – and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me – then – my Barefoot-Rank is better – You think my gait “*spasmodic*” – I am in danger – Sir – You think me “*uncontrolled*” – I have no Tribunal.

Would you have time to be the “friend” you should think I need? I have a little shape – it would not crowd your Desk – nor make much Racket as the Mouse, that dents your Galleries –

[...]

The “hand you stretch me in the Dark”, I put mine in, and turn away – *I have no Saxon, now* –

[...]

But, will you be my Preceptor, Mr Higginson? (L265, emphasis mine)

This time she did sign it “Your friend / E Dickinson –”.

Her brother Austin, who knew her best, confirmed that Emily was ‘posing’ as a naive young woman writer, longing for guidance to get her potential career as a poet started. Higginson did intervene, not by publishing any of the poems she enclosed, but by prompting her to ‘adjust’ her verses by adding titles and more rhymes, to make it ‘more orderly’ – which (given her temper) she ignored to do, but she did carry on her correspondence with him.

It was Higginson himself who eventually provided the titles, after Emily’s death, when he co-edited with Mabel Loomis Todd⁵, Austin’s mistress, the fragments of the letters and poems she had left behind in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, published for the first time in 1890, and subsequently in 1891 and 1896. So did Emily’s

⁵ After Emily’s death, with Austin’s permission, Mabel Loomis Todd began sorting through Emily’s papers, transcribing them: letter scraps, scribbled pages, and unsent messages. Later she would also contact Emily’s friends, relatives, and acquaintances to collect the letters sent by Emily in her lifetime, through Lavinia, who used to mail them for her. Some of the recipients sent the letters back, others transcribed them, some refused to disclose their content. She published her transcriptions in *Letters of Emily Dickinson* in 1894 (Dickinson 1894). What about those transcriptions? Were they faithful to the originals? Were any letters accidentally lost, or perhaps purposely burnt?

closest, life-time friend and sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson, who jealously kept the poems and letters in her possession (more than two hundred and seventy-six known poems Emily sent or personally delivered to her through the little path that connected the Homestead and the Evergreens), maintaining till the very end that she was the only one who had the right to publish them. She never did, it was ultimately her daughter who edited and published them a few years later, in 1925.

Hence, Emily Dickinson's poems were first published altering her peculiar punctuation, adding new rhymes and periods, eliminating dashes, and substituting capital letters, forcing her work into a more subdued replica of contemporary poetry, such as Frances Sargent Osgood's or Helen Hunt Jackson's.

Oddly enough, none of the first editors seemed to consider that capital letters were used regularly by both Shakespeare and metaphysical poets.

To many Emily Dickinson's poems appeared "strange" – or at least so they were to her contemporary American readers, who were not familiar with medieval and Renaissance English expressions such as (and I am choosing at random among Shakespeare's and Donne's sonnets): "thou" for "you", "dos't" for "does", "phantom" for "ghost", "shalt" for "shall", "hath" for "has", "gaus't" for "gave". Or, with the way Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the metaphysical poets used to spell: "doth" for "does", "thine" for "your", "pow'r" for "power", "nought" for "nothing", "addeth" for "add", "brethren" for "brother". Moreover, they were filled with literary allusions and quotes that were certainly not easy to decipher. One wonders how many of her contemporary authors would have written in a poem:

Where Thou art – that – is Home –
Cashmere – or Calvary – the same –
Degree – or Shame –
I scarce esteem Location's Name –
So I may Come –

What Thou dost – is Delight –
Bondage as Play – be sweet –
Imprisonment – Content –

And Sentence – Sacrament –
Just We two – meet –

Where Thou art not – is Wo –
Tho' Bands of Spices – row –
What Thou dost not – Despair –
Tho' Gabriel – praise me – Sir (no. 725)

Not only were the subjects of her poems hard to decode, for the most part, but their form was quite unusual. Besides the absence of rhyme, they were also generally quite short, and the lines ended with a dash, a very unusual habit in nineteenth-century poetry. Many times she used them to stress the relevance of a specific lexeme, although she certainly knew when to use quotation marks, as in:

The Heart has many Doors –
I can but knock –
For any sweet “Come in”
Impelled to hark –
Not saddened by repulse,
Repast to me
That somewhere, there exists,
Supremacy – (no. 1567)

She seems to ask her readers not to put an ‘end’ to their reading, inducing them to take a ‘break’, to pause or linger on the very last line, or to return to its very beginning. After all isn’t this what poetry is? A suggestion to be pondered.

Since Higginson’s preface to *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* in 1890, where he presented them as “flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life”, Emily Dickinson was ‘doomed’ to be the poet of “Life, Nature, Love, Time, Eternity” for some decades. It is a fact that when she edited *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* published by Little, Brown & Company (Boston), her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi still presented her aunt as a “romantic” poet, who wondered about the “relationship” between time and eternity, time *versus* eternity. Dickinson Bianchi did not provide a preface to her collection, nor a description to support her

perspective. She seemed to – and probably did – forget what Higginson had written, asking Dickinson's readers to go beyond her apparently "romantic" approach to life and poetry. Conversely, in 1945, Mabel Loomis Todd's daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham wisely included Higginson's preface in her precious publication *Ancestors' Brocades*:

This selection from her poems is published to meet the desire of her personal friends, and especially of her surviving sister. It is believed that the thoughtful reader will find in these pages a quality more suggestive of the poetry of William Blake than of anything to be elsewhere found – flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life; words and phrases exhibiting an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power, yet often set in a seemingly whimsical or even rugged frame. They are here published as they were written, with very few and superficial changes; although it is fair to say that the titles have been assigned, almost invariably, by the editors. (Bingham 1945a, 416-17)

After refusing to publish Dickinson's work during her lifetime, four years after her death Higginson finally recognized her genius behind her "insight into nature and life". Though few of Emily Dickinson's critics (very few) ever liked his approach to her poetry, he was among the first to introduce it to the public. In his first preface, he cared to inform her readers that her poems had no title and were charged with "an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power", and that when touched upon by her, a "shipwreck" had nothing to do with an Ancient Mariner's ballad, but rather with a "mental conflict" (417):

[...] we can only wonder at the gift of vivid imagination by which this recluse woman can delineate, by a few touches, the very crises of physical or mental struggle. And sometimes again we catch glimpses of a lyric strain, sustained perhaps but for a line or two at a time, and making the reader regret its sudden cessation. But the main quality of these poems is that of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable. After all, when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence. (417)

Higginson's highly effective, and one would dare say 'poetic', words in describing Emily's lines as "poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them" (417) sound like something she might have wished could have been written about her verse. What he once deemed too 'rough' to be published had eventually turned into and "uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable".

Mabel Loomis Todd's preface to the second edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* gave readers and editors to come some key directions to follow:

As a rule, the verses were without titles; but "A Country Burial", "A Thunder-Storm", "The Humming-Bird", and a few others were named by their author, frequently at the end – sometimes only in the accompanying note, if sent to a friend.

The variation of readings, with the fact that she often wrote in pencil and not always clearly, have at times thrown a good deal of responsibility upon her Editors. But all interference not absolutely inevitable has been avoided. The very roughness of her own rendering is part of herself, and not lightly to be touched; for it seems in many cases that she intentionally avoided the smoother and more usual rhymes.

[...] [T]he very absence of conventional form challenges attention. In Emily Dickinson's exacting hands, the especial, intrinsic fitness of a particular order of words might not be sacrificed to anything virtually extrinsic; and her verses all show a strange cadence of inner rhythmical music [...] – appealing, indeed, to an unrecognized sense more elusive than hearing. (419)

Millicent Todd Bingham also included her mother's preface in the above mentioned *Ancestors' Brocades* where she recounts her mother's heartfelt involvement in collecting, editing, and publishing Emily Dickinson's work. A precious publication indeed, as it shed a new light on Emily Dickinson's mysterious figure and offered a fresh perspective on her work. After her mother's death, she was allowed to read and transcribe passages from her mother's journals and diaries, along with the yet unpublished manuscripts her mother had locked in a camphor-wood chest, which she collected in *Bolts of Melody* published that same year:

Most of them were smothered with alternative words and phrases crowded into every available space – around the edges, upside down, wedged between the lines. (Bingham 1945b, xii)

Ancestors' Brocades follows a philological approach, through which Mabel Loomis Todd's daughter discloses how Emily literally abandoned her poems and letters in the hands of her future editors.

Emily placed a great responsibility upon her editors by leaving to them so often the choice of a key word. For it authorized them to color her thought with their taste. [...] [T]hey might be tempted to go further, to *change* a word to fit their own preference – a dangerous leeway, for the thought is timeless while taste may change. [...]

[...] Emily's habits with regard to punctuation were individual to say the least. The editors decided that her way of beginning important words with capitals would not convey in print the nuance of emphasis intended. Capitals must be used sparingly if at all. Another pet device, that of underscoring for emphasis, would look exaggerated as italics on the printed page. Superfluous quotation marks, too, were scattered through the poems. Were they intended as guideposts, the editors questioned, if the strangeness of a word was considered too shocking? Or did Emily use them because she wanted to reassure the reader that she meant what she said? (Bingham 1945a, 38-39)

Hence, with some controversy and taking a few editorial liberties, four women probed into and shaped Emily Dickinson's work according to the roles they had in her life: her brother's 'other woman' Mabel and her daughter Millicent Todd Bingham, her brother's wife Susan and her daughter Martha Dickinson Bianchi. The former two trying to keep her writings the way they were, faithfully transcribing them, the latter two trying to stress the relevance of Emily's relationship with her sister-in-law.

Millicent revealed how laborious the exchange of letters and opinions between Emily's editors, publishers, and critics had been, so that her work could finally be known to her contemporary and future readers.

Susan, so that no one would forget that she was the closest to Emily, also authored her obituary in the *Springfield Republican*:

One can only speak of “duties beautifully done”: of her gentle tillage of rare flowers filling her conservatory, into which, as into a heavenly Paradise, entered nothing that could defile, and which was ever abloom in frost or sunshine, so well she knew her subtle chemistries; of her tenderness to all in the home circle; her gentlewoman’s grace and courtesy to all [...]. Like a magician she caught the shadowy apparitions of her brain and tossed them in startling picturesqueness to her friends, who, charmed with their simplicity and homeliness as well as profundity, fretted that she had so easily made palpable the tantalizing fancies forever eluding their bungling, fettered grasp. So intimate and passionate was her love of Nature, she seemed herself part of the high March sky, the summer day and bird-call. Keen and eclectic in her literary tastes she sifted libraries to Shakespeare and Browning; quick as the electric spark in her intuitions and analyses, she seized the kernel instantly, almost impatient of the fewest words by which she must make her revelation. To her life was rich, and all aglow with God and immortality. With no creed, no formalized faith, hardly knowing the names of dogmas, she walked this life with the gentleness and reverence of old saints, with the firm step of martyrs who sing while they suffer. How better note the flight of this “*soul of fire in a shell of pearl*” than by her own words? –

Morns like these, we parted;

Noons like these, she rose;

Fluttering first, then firmer,

To her fair repose. (Dickinson 1998, 266-68, emphasis mine)

She obviously described Emily Dickinson as she knew her, offering a concise and splendid image of what she was to her. The image of a “*soul of fire in a shell of pearl*” is something that Dickinson never used to describe herself, but the image of the pearl often appeared in her poems, (directly or indirectly) echoing Shakespeare’s Ariel and his “*Those are pearls that were his eyes*” (*The Tempest*, I.ii.401):

Best Things dwell out of Sight

The Pearl – the Just – Our Thought.

Most shun the Public Air

Legitimate, and Rare –

The Capsule of the Wind

The Capsule of the Mind

Exhibit here, as doth a Burr –
Germ's Germ be where? (no. 998)

Ultimately, fame did belong to Emily, and to her words. And through her words, there she was: as in a blurred daguerreotype, Emily Dickinson began to acquire a shape and a physiognomy, until she finally and legitimately became one of the most famous poets of nineteenth-century American literature, along with Walt Whitman.

As she lived, mystery and gossip surrounded her life. She was already a myth in Amherst, at least to the eyes of her acquaintances and family, as Mabel Loomis Todd once described her in her journal (15 September 1882):

Emily is called in Amherst "the myth". She has not been out of her house for fifteen years. [...] She writes the strangest poems, & very remarkable ones. She is in many respects a genius. She wears always white, & has her hair arranged as was the fashion fifteen years ago when she went into retirement. She wanted me to come & sing to her, but she would not see me. She has frequently sent me flowers & poems, & we have a very pleasant friendship in that way. (Quoted in Sewall 1980, 217)

She was an apparently fragile woman. She seemed discreet and shy, but was resolute enough to live in solitude, as Mabel Loomis Todd would point out in her introduction to the second publication of Emily's poems in 1891: "She had tried society and the world, and found them lacking" (Bingham 1945a, 419).

Kinsmen of the Shelf: Shakespeare in Amherst

Unto my Books – so good to turn –
Far ends of tired Days –
It half endears the Abstinence –
And Pain – is missed – in Praise –

As Flavors – cheer Retarded Guests
With Banquettings to be –

So Spices – stimulate the time
Till my small Library –

It may be Wilderness – without –
Far feet of failing Men –
But Holiday – excludes the night –
And it is Bells – within –

I thank these Kinsmen of the Shelf –
Their Countenances Kid
Enamor – in Prospective –
And satisfy – obtained – (no. 604)

The Homestead where Emily grew up had a well-stocked library that inspired her readings and discussions with relatives, friends, and tutors. Most of the volumes, along with the publications of her poems and letters, are now part of the Emily Dickinson Collection in the Houghton Library at Harvard. From Chaucer to contemporary authors, the Old and New Testaments (one edition dated 1843 she received as a gift from her father when she was fourteen years old). And then Cervantes, Romantic literature, metaphysical poets, Dickens, Emerson, William G. Howells, Henry James (the installments published in *The Atlantic Monthly* of *The Europeans*), Keats, and, among her contemporaries, Longfellow and Tennyson. In addition to the Bibles, some other religious texts, such as *Christian Believing and Living* by F. D. Huntington.

Certainly, alongside the scriptural passages from the Old Testament she surely perused *The Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare* (1840) edited by Charles Knight, a collection of paintings and drawings, screen printings, which her father had bought to keep in the family library. She was welcomed to look at them and she certainly found inspiration in them. It is by no coincidence that some of the characters (one amongst many, Puck) she mentions in her writing seem a literary version of the iconographic ones pictured in one of Knight's volumes. One of the volumes shows several markings and loose pages that suggest it must have been often used in the Dickinson household.

To the family library one must add Emily's school books, the texts she worked on and studied while attending Mount Holyoke

College. Among others: *The Evidences of the Christian Religion* (1832) by Archibald Alexander; *Elements of History, Ancient and Modern* (1828) by Joseph Emerson Worcester; *Catalogue of Plants Growing without Cultivation in the Vicinity of Amherst* (1829) by Edward Hitchcock; *A Practical System of Rhetoric* (1827) by Samuel Phillips Newman; *A Class-book to Botany* (1851) by Alphonso Wood, and, last but not least, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667).

Conscious of the extensiveness of the reading material she could approach in her family library, in April 1862 she wrote to Higginson:

I had a terror – since September – I could tell to none – and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground – because I am afraid – You inquire my Books – For Poets – I have Keats – and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose – Mr Ruskin – Sir Thomas Browne – and the Revelations. I went to school – but in your manner of the phrase – had no education. When a little Girl, I had a friend, who taught me Immortality – but venturing too near, himself – he never returned – Soon after, my Tutor, died – and for several years, my Lexicon – was my only companion – (L261)

Though she omits Shakespeare here, who was clearly one of her masters, she categorizes books and fear on the same level, revealing that her lexicon was her companion, the precious glossary that would help her go through the day. Being reading and writing a way to overcome fear and solitude. What about her terror? What was it?

She once admitted to her close family friend Joseph Bardwell Lyman that writing would save her:

We used to think, Joseph, when I was an unsifted girl and you so scholarly that words were cheap & weak. Now I don't know of anything so mighty. There are [those] to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting princelike among their peers on the page. Sometimes I write one, and look at *his outlines till he glows as no sapphire*. (Quoted in Sewall 1980, 675, emphasis mine)

Sometimes she calls words an empty space: a "gap" to be filled, an "abyss", as in "To fill a Gap" (no. 546). She feels danger ("Peril

as a Possession", no. 1678), despair ("It was not Death, for I stood up", no. 510). She herself seeks fear and loneliness, as she clearly states in the poem "The Loneliness One dare not sound" (no. 777):

The Loneliness One dare not sound –
 And would as soon surmise
 As in its Grave go plumbing
 To ascertain the size –

The Loneliness whose worst alarm
 Is lest itself should see –
 And perish from before itself
 For just a scrutiny –

The Horror not be surveyed –
 But skirted in the Dark –
 With Consciousness suspended –
 And Being under Lock –

I fear me this – is Loneliness –
 The Maker of the soul
 Its Caverns and its Corridors
 Illuminate – or seal –

Words complemented her. Emily had to write so that her words could flow into music, cancel mourning, melt into the whispering of the wind, opening up to alarming appearances, as in "Conscious am I in my Chamber" (no. 679).

She had to write to embody and define a solitude enhanced by silence:

The words the happy say
 Are paltry melody
 But those the silent feel
 Are beautiful – (no. 1750)

She had to write so that words could bring to the surface of language the very paradoxes and contradictions that remain concealed in speech and that the act of digging into the single word could unveil:

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day. (no. 1212)

After being treated for an eye problem in 1865, she wrote to J. B. Lyman to share her joy, for she could read her beloved books again, and one author in particular:

How my blood bounded! Shakespear [sic] was the first; Antony & Cleopatra where Enobarbus laments the amorous lapse of his master. Here is the ring of it.
"heart that in the scuffles of
great fights hath burst the
buck[l]e on his breast"
then I thought why clasp any hand but this. Give me ever to drink of this wine. Going home I flew to the shelves and devoured the luscious passages. I thought I should tear the leaves out as I turned them. Then I settled down to a willingness for all the rest to go but William Shakespear [sic]. Why need we Joseph read anything else but him. (Sewall 1965, 76)

Some years later (about 1873), in a letter to F. B. Sanborn, an acquaintance of hers, she wrote about her strong bond with books and her predilection for Shakespeare:

I am glad there are Books.
They are better than Heaven for that is unavoidable while one may miss these.
Had I a trait you would accept I should be most proud, though he has had his Future who has found Shakespeare – (L402)

In New England, Shakespeare's work had been welcomed with alternating success. It was censored at first for several reasons: the Puritan law found his stories too sensuous and indecorous and his language was considered foreign to the New World. Even Emerson, despite his wide culture, objected to the fact that his

contemporaries should consider Shakespeare immortal, claiming that he embodied a past that needed to be left behind.

However, if Shakespeare was frowned upon by the supercilious older generations, troubled by his moral and linguistic ambiguity (puns and wits were dangerous ways of playing with words), Emily and her young contemporaries devotedly admired his work and read about it. Even her beloved women poets could not compare to “the Master” whom she referred and paid tribute to in her writing, borrowing from him what could suit her poetry and enrich her letters.

In a November 1871 letter to Higginson, she praised women poets, but even her favorite writers were minuscule compared to the Master:

Mrs Hunt’s Poems are stronger than any written by Women since Mrs – Browning, with the exception of Mrs Lewes – but truth like Ancestor’s Brocades can stand alone [...]. While Shakespeare remains Literature is firm –

An Insect cannot run away with Achilles’ Head. (L368)

Notwithstanding the Puritan New England milieu, the Bard was certainly not a menacing presence in the Dickinson household, and Emily and her siblings were well acquainted with his work. Certainly Austin and Lavinia did not miss the events staged in Boston or the plays at the Boston Museum, a popular theatre on Tremont Street. Shakespeare became more and more the object of society discussions and cultural debates. As the years and the republishing of his plays went on (a similar fate befell Emily Dickinson’s poems), Shakespeare’s works were eventually associated with an ethical message also suited for young women. Though there is no evidence that Emily ever attended one of Shakespeare’s plays with her siblings, we know for sure that she was deeply fascinated by Shakespeare, to the point that, along with a group of fellow students, she had founded a reading club in Amherst where they read his work aloud and discussed the articles that appeared in the local magazines *The Indicator* and *The Amherst College Magazine*. Emily deeply admired him and his work to the point that when the morality of his verse was once questioned, she

refused to read a redacted version stating: "There's nothing wicked in Shakespeare, and if there is I don't want to know it" (Dickinson 1894, 129-30).

Theaters, magazines, and periodicals promoted Shakespeare's work. The lectures on Shakespeare by Richard Henry Dana, Sr. – a brilliant, albeit very conservative, essayist and speaker – were a popular attraction of the time. In 1850, he was in Amherst for a series of his Shakespeare lectures. The first one, titled "The Influence of Literature on Our Characters in Daily Life", was published in Amherst College *Indicator* and focused on the principle that reading poetry would lead to high and eternal truth and that Shakespeare's work would expand "our imagination activity and [...] our fancy". In all likelihood, Emily attended the lectures with her family and certainly, being the avid reader that she was, she could not have missed the many articles on Shakespeare that repeatedly appeared in local newspapers and student magazines, such as *The Amherst Student* praising him: "He's ourselves, our lesson, our flesh and blood", or the *Hampshire Franklin Express* that published Dana's talk on "Woman". Nor could she have ignored the above mentioned *Indicator*, which published an essay titled "Shakespeare's Women", presenting Shakespeare's heroines as consistent and trustworthy "models of femininity" and appreciating the fact that there were no "female Hamlets".

Nevertheless, weren't Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cleopatra, like Hamlet, victims of a world they had not been able to come to terms with? Emily liked that. It was a world that needed decoding, which was exactly what Emily did.

The environment Emily Dickinson grew up in refined her taste vis-à-vis her readings and led her to an idea of drama as a possible and less intimidating double for real life. Whose dramatic voice better than Shakespeare's could have offered her the opportunity of interweaving fancy and daily life, imagination and real events?

We dream – it is good we are dreaming –
 It would hurt us – were we awake –
 But since it is playing – kill us,
 And we are playing – shriek –

What harm? Men die – externally –
 It is a truth – of Blood –
 But we – are dying in Drama –
 And Drama – is never dead –

Cautious – We jar each other –
 And either – open the eyes –
 Lest the Phantasm – prove the Mistake –
 And the livid Surprise

Cool us to Shafts of Granite –
 With just an Age – and Name –
 And perhaps a phrase in Egyptian –
 It's prudenter – to dream – (no. 531)

Though de-codifying allusions to Shakespeare's work might prove a difficult but possible task as far as her letters are concerned, the procedure becomes altogether challenging if one attempts to search in her poems. As if to hide them, she mingled references to Shakespeare's work, with passages from the Book of Revelation, with news from Amherst's daily life, together with her personal reflections. Word after word, she slowly entered that interregnum she deemed consonant with her identity, and with what she suspected was and would be her identity as a woman, and her literary *persona*.

If as a poet, "drama" was her stance, why not select among Shakespeare's characters, the ones she felt closer to? Rebel, dissenter, and isolated as she was, I would suggest to start with the figure of the 'fool' – as in Shakespeare, the privileged recipient of truth.

One of the essays published by *The Indicator* addressed the matter of Hamlet being actually crazy, settling the question as follows: "If its madness was real, it was reasonable, it feigned faultless"⁶. This could shed a light on the question mark closing the poem "The first Day's Night had come" (no. 410):

My Brain – begun to laugh –
 I mumbled – like a fool –

⁶ See Finnerty 2006, 194.

and tho' 'tis Years ago – that Day –
My Brain keeps giggling – still.

And Something's odd – within –
That person that I was –
And this One – do not feel the same –
Could it be Madness – this?

One could speculate why this very poem was not published until 1947. Were her editors afraid it would disturb her readers' expectations? We know that in the States, nineteenth-century asylums were built not only to confine the 'insane' but in the attempt to free society altogether from all the troublesome, 'difficult' figures. Asylums and jails were meant to preserve a supposedly respectable society.

The rhetorical question mark at the end of the poem echoes the madness of Shakespeare's fools and their way to wisdom: the very wisdom that Hamlet shares in the apparently playful fiction he sets up, behind which his own tragedy, and not only his, hide.

KING CLAUDIUS

Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.
(*Hamlet*, III.i.191)

HAMLET

[L]et those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.
(III.ii.38-45)

Not to mention the exchange between the Fool and King Lear:

FOOL

If a man's brains were in his heels, were't not in danger of kibes?

LEAR

Ay, boy.

FOOL

Then, I prithee, be merry: thy wit shall ne'er go slipshod.

[...]

FOOL

The reason why the seven stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason.

LEAR

Because they are not eight.

FOOL

Yes. Thou wouldst make a good fool.

LEAR

O, let me not be mad, sweet heaven!

I would not be mad.

Keep me in temper. I would not be mad. (*King Lear*, I.v.8-12, 34-38, 45-47)

Shakespeare's style also inspired Dickinson's taste for assonance, alliteration, and repetition. A beating rhythm of lines that, depending on the circumstances, may sound sinister, as in *King Lear's* case ("And my poor fool is hanged. No, no life" [V.iii.300]), or pounding, as in:

JAQUES

A fool, a fool, I met a fool i'th' forest,

A motley fool – a miserable world! –

As I do live by food, I met a fool,

Who laid him down and basked him in the sun,

And railed on Lady Fortune in good terms,

In good set terms, and yet a motley fool.

"Good morrow, fool", quoth I. "No, sir", quoth he,

"Call me not fool till heaven hath sent me fortune".

And then he drew a dial from his poke,

And looking on it with lack-lustre eye

Says very wisely "It is ten o'clock".

"Thus we may see", quoth he, "how the world wags.

'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,

And after one hour more 'twill be eleven.

And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,

And then from hour to hour we rot and rot;

And thereby hangs a tale".

(*As You Like It*, II.vii.12-28)

LEAR

O, that way madness lies. Let me shun that.

No more of that.

[...]

This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.

(*King Lear*, III.iv.20-21, 70)

Lines that seem to perfectly integrate with Emily Dickinson's final lines in "The Wind didn't come from the Orchard – today" (no. 316):

And a hoarse "Get out of the way, I say",

Who'd be the fool to stay?

Would you – Say –

Would you be the fool to stay? (emphasis mine)

Another rhetorical question: "Would you be the fool to stay?". Sane? Sanity? Who is sane in Shakespeare's tragedy? Who is sane in Dickinson's poems? As she dared to maintain:

Witchcraft was hung, in History,

But History and I

Find all the Witchcraft that we need

Around us, every Day – (no. 1583)

And:

A little Madness in the Spring

Is wholesome even for the King,

But God be with the Clown –

Who ponders this tremendous scene –

This whole Experiment of Green –

As if it were his own! (no. 1333)

Year after year, Emily read the books she received as presents from her father and relatives as well as from the Evergreens, where Austin and his family lived. As time went by, however, she seemed to remain true to one volume in particular that has quite rarely been taken into account: *The Imitation of Christ* written around 1420 by Thomas à Kempis in medieval Latin. It was a devotional book,

written for young monks, that had become highly popular, to the point of being translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, and of course English. Susan and Emily shared a copy dated 1857 (notes and underlining might have been marked by either or both of them) until 1876, when Susan gave Emily another copy as a Christmas present (now at the Houghton Library, inscribed: "Emily with Love"). Both girls were fascinated by this book. It was especially popular among young women, while considered 'dangerous' by their families for an alarming exhortation: it invited its readers to choose to be "as strangers and pilgrims in this world" and learn the relevance of "the Love of Solitude and Silence" which one should practice in order to find peace and fulfillment, needless to say, to be "saved" (Kempis 1952, 167 and 50). Hence, a 'dangerous' book: not only vis-à-vis the sensual, secular attitude towards life, love, and personal interaction that Shakespeare had already been encouraging in his readers and audience (happy and tragic endings included), but mainly in relation to the personality of the recipient of Susan's gift. Emily avoided going to church, hiding in the Homestead cellar while her whole family was attending mass. She preferred to share with Susan "the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing" (L77, about February 1852). Certainly the Dicksinsons did not suspect that she would eventually call God a "Merchant", "Banker" (no. 49), "Eclipse" (L261, 25 April 1862), 'Necromancer' (no. 177) and "distant – stately Lover" (no. 357).

Her passion for writing and reading and her independence from a heavenly God was so strong that she never did give up reading despite the book's suggestion that praying would be better than reading.

Kempis' book was indeed 'dangerous' for this self-secluded young lady. She most certainly took the author's invitation "to go abroad but seldom" and "to avoid being seen" and her choice of "Solitude and Silence" (Kempis 1952, 50-52) certainly found endorsement in the chapter dedicated to "Personal Humility" which presented it to her as the right and only one: "[...] but a good life refreshes the mind, and a clean conscience brings great confidence in God" (28-29).

She certainly did abide by Thomas à Kempis' lesson, yet we can presume it was Shakespeare and not God she trusted. We can also

presume that imitating Christ interested her less than imitating Shakespeare's earthly search and characters.

Herald of a New Age

Dickinson's fascination with Shakespeare remained unshakable throughout her life. He was her literary model, her master. His heroes and heroines were her companions. In 1882, she declared to her sister-in-law: "With the exception of Shakespeare, you have told me of more knowledge than any one living – To say that sincerely is strange praise" (L757, about 1882).

Shakespeare did bring Susan and Emily closer together, in a deeper transitive way. The two shared their fascination for Shakespeare, reciting his lines, quoting him in their letters, exchanging quips from their copies of a daily Shakespeare calendar keeping his words and lines alive between them. Lines to which Emily often added her own poems, at times even dedicating them to her sister-in-law, who collected them one after the other, unaware that they were somehow shaping Emily's *persona* and identity, for her readers to come.

Despite not being the first one to publish her sister-in-law's work, Susan unknowingly became the main intermediary between Emily and us. She was certainly one of the main recipients of Emily's letters, flowers, and poems. In her private collection, Susan transcribed lines of Emily's poems splitting them into shorter lines, such as "Those not live yet / Who doubt to live again" (no. 1454), also adding an interesting note at the bottom of the poem: "To read to friends". She used to read them to her guests. Sometimes she even cut out Emily's signature to send it as a gift to those who admired her the most, and wanted to know more about the white-clad recluse and her untraditional poetic compositions.

Before becoming her husband's mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd was one of those guests she read them to. She wrote about those soirées in her diary: "Went in the afternoon to Mrs. Dickinson's. She read me some strange poems by Emily Dickinson. They are full of power" (quoted in Sewall 1980, 217).

Full of power they were indeed, because obscure, terse, enigmatic, weaved with literary echoes, quotations from the Book of Revelation and from Shakespeare.

So if Emerson published "Ode to Beauty", Emily, who had learned from Keats the meaning of Beauty, would answer "I died for Beauty – but was scarce" (no. 449) and "Estranged from Beauty – none can be" (no. 1474). When her poem "Success is counted sweetest" (no. 67) was anonymously published in *The Brooklyn Daily Union* in 1864 and mistakenly credited to Emerson, she could not care less. Nor did she care about Susan's house parties, where Emerson was a habitual guest, unaffected as she was by his considerations and thoughts. He believed in Nature, in the possibility that a whole "Circumference" would enclose Nature and Man, whereas Emily was more fascinated by Platonic ideas ("I never saw a Moor", no. 1052) and she would rather ask questions than suggest answers. As her letters proved, she was more concerned about European literature and Shakespeare's oeuvre, although she would still state:

To see the Summer Sky
Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie –
True Poems flee – (no. 1472)

In the same years in which Emerson recognized Walt Whitman – who believed in a world where one's identity would merge with that of others – as the new voice and identity of American poetry, Emily Dickinson – who claimed not to have read his work – would write "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (no. 288), reversing Whitman's approach to the "self".

Emily's feelings never seem to be filled with doubt. For both "Nature and God" know her "so well", to the point of 'startling' her, 'executing' her "identity", erasing it from her own vision of the world:

Nature and God – I neither knew
Yet Both so well knew me
They startled, like Executors
Of My identity.

Yet Neither told – that I could learn –
My Secret as secure
At Herschel's private interest
Or Mercury's affair – (no. 835)

Nevertheless, she knows she is lying to herself, as "God cannot be found" as she states in "Those – dying then" (no. 1551). She knows that the world and *her* world are split by God's "amputated hand". Just like Hamlet, she knows that "time is out of joint" and lets Hamlet doubts "for all us" .

Let us go in together,
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let's go together.
(*Hamlet*, I.v.187-91)

Shakespeare's lines, where 'pauses' meant an expectation of change, or allude to a sidereal uncertainty (albeit not for the spectator), turn any statement upside down into its opposite, as in *Hamlet*:

POLONIUS
[...] Will you walk out of the air, my lord?
HAMLET
Into my grave.
POLONIUS
Indeed, that is out o'th' air. (*Aside*) How pregnant sometimes his replies are! [...] My lord, I will take my leave of you.
HAMLET
You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal – except my life, my life, my life.
POLONIUS
(*going*) Fare you well, my lord.
(II.ii.208-11, 215-20)

Hamlet's pauses as he doubts, but at the same time he knows his choice is the right one. He is a character as well as an actor in the

play-within-the play he performs in the castle of Elsinore. He is in doubt, and reasonably so, but nonetheless speaks and interacts with ghosts. Hamlet knows about insanity. So does King Lear – and his Fool, the King’s double. Emily Dickinson calls on Shakespeare’s tragic heroes and heroine as she expresses the drama of the human heart in “Drama’s Vitallest Expression is the Common Day” (no. 741):

Drama’s Vitallest expression is the Common Day
That arise and set about Us –
Other Tragedy

Perish in the Recitation –
This – the best enact
When the Audience is scattered
And the Boxes shut –

“Hamlet” to Himself were Hamlet –
Had not Shakespeare wrote –
Though the “Romeo” left no Record
Of his Juliet,

It were infinite enacted
In the Human Heart –
Only Theatre recorded
Owner cannot shut –

As Dana had commented in his lectures on Shakespeare, Hamlet was the “Idealistic poet estranged from the real world”⁷. Just like Emily, who never identified with a contemporary writer around her, but only with her beloved Shakespeare.

In a letter to Higginson (February 1879), she once confessed:

Mother’s hopeless illness, overwhelmed my Moments, though your
Pages and Shakespeare’s, like Ophir – remain – (L593)

To her, Shakespeare was “like Ophir” – according to King Solomon (the Bible), a source of wonders, riches, silver, gold, sandalwood,

⁷ See Finnerty 2006, 193.

ivory pearls.

She often took on Hamlet's role. She quotes Hamlet's "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow [...]. The readiness is all" (V.ii.165-68) in a letter to Mrs Bowles, after Mr Bowles' death on 6 September 1881:

Mr. Samuel "sparrow" does not "fall" without the fervent "notice".
(L724)

In a letter dated August 1885 to Samuel Bowles' son, she uses Shakespeare's words again (*Hamlet*, II.ii.50):

If ever of any act of mine you should be in need, let me replay with the Laureate, "Speak that I live to hear!" (L1012)

Emily had literally entered Shakespeare's world. As in one of her notes to her sister-in-law, when she used Hamlet's lines to express her feelings: "Do you remember what Hamlet whispered to 'Horatio'?" (L1028).

Courting Susan allows her to wear different masks, in her letters she becomes alternatively a male and a female *persona* as she pleases, as when quoting *Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii.232-33:

Will my great Sister accept the minutiae of Devotion, with timidity that is no more?
Susan's Calls are like Antony's Supper –
"And pays his Heart for what his Eyes eat, only –" (L854, about 1883)

Similarly, in a letter to Otis Phillips Lord:

Was it to him the Thief cried "Lord remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom", and is it to us that he replies, "This Day thou shalt be with me in Paradise"?
The Propounder of Paradise must indeed possess it – Antony's remark to a friend, "since Cleopatra died" is said to be the saddest ever lain in Language – That engulfing "Since". (L791, about 1882)

Shakespeare's characters are ubiquitous in Emily's letters: Emily is in turns Hamlet, Cleopatra, Desdemona, Macbeth, and, last but

not least, Othello.

The actor Tommaso Salvini played the role of Othello in his American tour in 1873-74. Critics unanimously praised his performance as a “masterpiece of elocution”. Emily, who presumably related to Othello’s distress, once wrote in a letter to Mrs Whitney: “Othello is uneasy, but then Othellos always are, they hold such mighty stakes”. She also tells her how Austin, who knew about her fascination for Othello and admiration for the Italian actor, “brought” her a “picture of Salvini when he was last in Boston”. And she adds:

The brow is that of Deity – the eyes, those of the lost, but the power lies in the *throat* – pleading, sovereign, savage – the panther and the dove!
(L948, autumn 1884)

Emily’s relationship with Shakespeare’s characters “wavered”. Just like Hamlet. After wearing Hamlet’s mask, she takes on Othello’s and then Antony’s.

In a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd dated March 1885:

Nature forgot – The Circus reminded her –
Thanks for the Ethiopian Face.
The Orient is in the West.
“You knew, Oh Egypt” said the entangled Antony – (L978)

In one of her letters to O. P. Lord from whom she had received a copy of the *Complete Concordance to Shakespeare*, she dedicates these lines to him:

Dont [sic] you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer
– dont [sic] you know that “No” is the wildest word we consign to
Language?
[...]
It is Anguish I long conceal from you to let you leave me, hungry, but
you ask the divine Crust and that would doom the Bread.
That unfrequented Flower. (L562, about 1878)

Like Cleopatra, she is unattainable. She was in fact reluctant to meet the male recipients of her letters – provided she ever actually

mailed them – such as T. W. Higginson, Judge O. P. Lord, Samuel Bowles (editor of the *Springfield Republican*) and Reverend Charles Wadsworth, her third potential suitor, as her gossip sister-in-law maintained.

In her hesitation to meet anyone in person, Emily liked to be mysterious, elusive, playing various roles and identities depending on her interlocutors.

She was actor and actress. She was both male and female, echoing the gender play in Shakespeare's comedies. She must have also known about British actress Charlotte Cushman who could cross the gender line, performing flawlessly in both male and female roles, playing for instance Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*, Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or Cardinal Wolsey in *Henry VIII*. Though lacking any direct reference to Cushman, Emily must have known about her, about her contralto voice, at least from reading the *Springfield Republican* which described the actress as "the most passionate of Romeos" and the "fiercest of Ladies Macbeth"⁸.

Emily was fascinated with Romeo's figure, which she often quotes in her letters.

In a letter to Elizabeth Dickinson Currier (17 April 1886), she quotes Romeo (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.i.37):

"I do remember an Apothecary", said that sweeter Robin than Shakespeare, was a loved paragraph which has lain on my Pillow all Winter, but perhaps Shakespeare has been "up street" oftener than I have, this Winter. (L1041)

Again in January 1882, she writes to Mrs J. A. Sweetser quoting *Romeo and Juliet's* line "As is with bud bit with an envious worm" (I.i.157, Montague), to tell her about her cherished plants:

Last was a fatal season – An "Envious Worm" attached them – then in early Autumn we had Midwinter Frost. (L746)

Reference to death and the worm had already appeared in one of her earliest known poems ("The *worm* doth woo the *mortal*, death

⁸ See Finnerty 2006, 197.

claims a living bride”) published anonymously in the *Springfield Republican* in 1850, a “valentine” (no. 1), where, echoing Shakespeare’s sonnets, she invites a single young man to choose among “Six true, and comely maidens”, in a parody of romantic love. In a second valentine young Emily wrote that same year, she played with biblical language, closing her letter with the “all hail” of Macbeth’s witches (*Macbeth*, I.iii.46-48, 67)⁹.

This Was a Dream

Yet another image, that of the worm, which can be traced back to several of Shakespeare’s passages, along with that of winter: heaven and hell, pleasure and pain (intertwined with love) as in his tragedies and sonnets, seem to lead, as T. S. Eliot knew, to a “wasteland” inhabited by dirt, empty streets, dry paper, and silent tormented human beings. The worm and the snake then. I will not enter the labyrinth of potential Freudian readings for either one¹⁰ but have found a specific pertinent presence in the passages below:

No longer mourn for me when I am dead
 Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
 Give warning to the world that I am fled
 From this vile world with the vilest *worms* to dwell.
 (*Sonnet 71*, 1-4, emphasis mine)

CLEOPATRA

Hast thou the pretty *worm*
 Of Nilus there, that kills and pains not?
 (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.238-39, emphasis mine)

MERCUTIO

Her wagoner, a small grey-coated gnat
 Not half so big as a round little *worm*
 Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid.
 (*Romeo and Juliet*, I.iv.65-67, emphasis mine)

⁹ Presumably to George Gould, an associate of her father (Sewall 1980, 419-21).

¹⁰ See, for instance, Dickinson 2010.

CLIFFORD

The smallest *worm* will turn, being trodded on,
And doves will peck in safeguard of their brood.
(3 *Henry VI*, II.ii.17-18, emphasis mine)

HAMLET

Not where he eats, but where he a is eaten. A certain convocation of
politic *worms* are e'en at him.

[...]

A man may fish with the *worm* that hath eat of a king, and eat of the
fish that hath fed of that *worm*.

(*Hamlet*, IV.iii.20-21, 27-28, emphasis mine)

The image of the worm/serpent is of course used as a disturbing element of the natural world: it blights flowers and crops, feeds on rotten flesh or, when transfigured into a viper or a deadly snake, it poisons to death a sensual, healthy, flesh, as in Cleopatra's death. Despite snakes being obviously more sinister than worms and potentially malignant – considering their size and venom – Shakespeare introduces them even in his lighter plays, such as *Henry VI* and *As You Like It*, that do not end tragically.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the Fairies sing:

You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen;
Newts and blindworms, do not wrong;
Come not near our Fairy Queen.
Philomel with melody,
Sing in our sweet lullaby. (II.ii.9-14)

and Rosalind in *As You Like It*:

Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not
for love. (IV.i.99-101)

I see love hath made thee a tame snake. (IV.ii.70-71)

And in 2 *Henry VI*:

QUEEN MARGARET

Or as the snake rolled in flow'ring bank
 With shiny chequered slough doth sting a child
 That for the beauty thinks it excellent. (III.i.228-30)

Emily Dickinson offers the image of the snake as "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (no. 986). A poem that is worth mentioning here because it is narrated through the eyes of a boy. As she sometimes used the masculine in referring to herself in both poems and letters, for her dramatic *persona* in this particular poem she chooses to wear that of a "barefoot boy":

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
 Occasionally rides –
 You may have met Him – did you not
 His notice sudden is –

The Grass divides as with a Comb –
 A spotted shaft is seen –
 And then it closes at your feet
 And opens further on –

He likes a Boggy Acre
 A Floor too cool for Corn –
 Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot –
 I more than once at Noon
 Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
 Unbraiding in the Sun
 When stooping to secure it
 It wrinkled, and was gone –

Several of Nature's People
 I know, and they know me –
 I feel for them a transport
 Of cordiality –

But never met this Fellow
 Attended, or alone
 Without a tighter breathing
 And Zero at the Bone –

Unaware of danger, a boy comes across and touches what he believes to be a "whip", which turns out to be a snake, 'wrinkling away' as a snake would. In the last two quatrains, the boy has become an adult, aware of the risk he has just run. However, the final line does not allow readers to abandon the scenery they have entered. Its final dash opens to more possible readings. Dickinson feels "a transport / Of cordiality", which is hoped and looked for in the quatrain preceding the last one. It freezes the reader, though promising an irreversible emotion that Dickinson encapsulates in a highly impressive "zero at the bone".

Albeit undated, the poem seems to juxtapose itself and entangle with "In Winter in my Room" (no. 1670), where the encounter with the snake turns the monologue into a dramatic exchange between the lyrical subject and the frightening being she encounters in her room, later to realize, at the very (happy) end, that it was just a dream. An encounter that, as mentioned above, some critics have interpreted as the account of a sexual initiation.

In Winter in my Room
I came upon a Worm –
Pink, lank and warm –
But as he was a worm
And worms presume
Not quite with him at home –
Secured him by a string
To something neighboring
and went along.

A Trifle afterward
A thing occurred
I'd not believe it if I heard
But state with creeping blood –
A snake with mottles rare
Surveyed my chamber floor
In feature as the worm before
But ringed with power –
The very string with which
I tied him – too
When he was mean and new
That string was there –

I shrank – “How fair you are”!
 Propitiation’s claw –
 “Afraid”, he hissed
 “Of me”?
 “No cordiality” –
 He fathomed me –
 Then to a Rhythm *Slim*
 Secreted in his Form
 As Patterns swim
 Projected him.

That time I flew
 Both eyes his way
 Lest he pursue
 Nor ever ceased to run
 Till in a distant Town
 Towns on from mine
 I set me down
 This was a dream.

The poem foresees a seduction that echoes a fairy tale (as in “Once upon a time”) where fear and horror – as in most fairy tales – are coupled and intertwined with the expected happy ending. If one considers the suggested Freudian interpretation as plausible, we might see why Higginson decided not to publish Dickinson’s “Wild nights – Wild nights!” (no. 249) about two lovers longing to meet each other: that very poem, according to Higginson, would have turned the pure “virgin recluse” (as her acquaintances and friends considered her) into a less virginal New England young girl. As he wrote in a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd, dated 21 April 1891, discussing the second series of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*:

Let us alter as little as possible, now that the public ear is opened.
 One poem only I dread a little to print – that wonderful “Wild Nights”
 – lest the malignant read into it more than that virgin recluse ever
 dreamed of putting there. (Quoted in Bingham 1945a, 127)

Realistically speaking, snakes like the very poisonous copperhead snake did inhabit the New England grounds, and it is

very likely that Emily had learned about their existence from her textbooks, but also during a solitary walk in the wilderness, a habit for her – which also suggests that she was not so reluctant to venture out of the house on her own. I would however argue that in this poem she tried, as she rarely did, to give shape to a nightmare she had, or perhaps only imagined, carefully crafting music and images, with assonance and alliteration, and possibly recalling Cleopatra's destiny in one of her favorite tragedies. It seems to echo the final scene where the Queen, waiting for the "pretty worm / Of Nilus" is about to give her clearsighted awe-inspiring monologue, which ends with her death:

Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have
Immortal longings in me. Now no more
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.
[...]
Yare, yare, good Iras, quick – methinks I hear
Antony call. I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act. I hear him mock
The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come.
Now to that name my courage prove my title.
I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.275-85)

A death that Shakespeare envisaged immersed in silence, as she closes her life 'royally':

FIRST GUARD
Where's the Queen?
CHARMIAN
Speak softly. Wake her not.
FIRST GUARD
Caesar hath sent –
CHARMIAN
Too slow a messenger.
[...]
FIRST GUARD
What work is here, Charmian? Is this well done?

CHARMIAN

It is well done, and fitting for a princess
Descended of so many royal kings.

[...]

CAESAR

Bravest at the last,
She levelled at our purposes, and, being royal,
Took her own way.
(314-16, 320-22, 329-31)

To death and silence Cleopatra, just like Hamlet, is doomed.

To die, to sleep.

To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life,
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time.
(*Hamlet*, III.i.66-72)

Emily Dickinson too knew what silence could mean, as in "Great Streets of silence led away" (no. 1159), "Silence is all we dread" (no. 1251), and "Speech is one symptom of Affection" (no. 1681). It was silence, like night, and darkness that allowed her to reach the dark, warm language of poetry. Surrounded and protected by silence, her words could become strong, dramatic, absolute.

Unpathed Waters and Undreamed Shores

Nevertheless, the point to be addressed in most of Emily Dickinson's poems, in my opinion, is not that of sexuality that some literary criticism has pursued, but rather that of 'sensuousness'.

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses – past the headlands –
Into deep Eternity –

Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land? (no. 76)

'Twas such a little – little boat
That toddled down the bay!
'Twas such a gallant – gallant sea
That beckoned it away!

'Twas such a greedy, greedy wave
That licked it from the Coast –
Nor ever guessed the stately sails
My little craft was *lost!* (no. 107)

In that sense, I would suggest looking at poem no. 520, "I started Early – Took my Dog", whose line "We met the Solid Town", comparable to the final line "This was a dream" in "In Winter in my Room", implies that the *persona* has survived a threat: not that of a deadly snake bite, but that of being swept away by the ocean. The innocent and inexperienced girl has escaped the danger of being swallowed, or perhaps seduced as the third stanza implies, by the tide:

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Bodice – too –

Dickinson first depicts the ocean as a voracious man and then as a knight who, "bowing – with a Mighty look", eventually relinquishes his hold of her. The sea allows the girl, who was at first innocently dreaming of "Mermaids" and "Frigates", to go back to "the Solid Town", the community she belongs to and where she is safe. Her virginity (hasn't the sea tried to undress her?) is safe, or at least the way she copes with it. She underlines the strength of the *persona* involved, though probably doomed to subdue, eventually, to the mighty waves and tides cited in other poems, such as "Water, is taught by thirst" (no. 135) and "I think that the Root of the Wind

is Water" (no. 1302). Knowing how sensitive she was in her readings, one can easily trace the reference to Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:

Like as *the waves make towards the pebbled shore*,
 So do our minutes hasten to their end,
 Each changing place with that which goes before;
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
 Nativity, once in the main of light,
 Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned
 Crookèd eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
 And time that gave doth now his gift confound.
 Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,
 And delves the parallels in beauty's brow;
 Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.
 And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
 Praising thy worth despite his cruel hand.
 (*Sonnet 60*, emphasis mine)

When I have seen *the hungry ocean gain*
 Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
 And *the firm soil win of the wat'ry main*,
 Increasing store with loss and loss with store.
 (*Sonnet 64*, 5-8, emphasis mine)

Shakespeare too depicts a threatening sea where the motion of the waves symbolizes birth and the irreversible journey towards death:

MESSENGER
 The ocean, overpeering of his list,
 Eats not the flats with more impetuous haste
 Than young Laertes, in riotous head,
 O'erbears your officers.
 (*Hamlet*, IV.v.97-100)

Attracted and repulsed by danger, Emily's *persona* "wavers" one step in and one step away, while the sea follows her and caresses her feet "overflow[n] with Pearl". She paints here an image we all

loved as children: seeing our feet in the shallow water covered with shiny bubbles of water. Readers appreciate that image and its memory just like she does, sensing the wonder she feels. The *persona* has been held and then released by the very element that was going to seduce her, thus staging a peculiar game. Who is the seducer? And who is being seduced?

So much for the struggle between the *persona* and the strength of water. What about the more explicit metaphor of her being the 'prisoner' of an unidentified executioner?

In this respect Emily's readers have also wondered about the hidden meaning of the poem "He put the Belt around my life" (no. 273), whose sensuous subject could relate to that of the above mentioned poems (nos. 1670 and 76).

It was Elémire Zolla, the first Italian scholar to go beyond the early stereotypes that Emily Dickinson's critics were 'doomed' to face, who pointed out that the image of "the Belt" might have been taken from medieval mystical knowledge (Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 1670). I would complement Zolla's useful remark quoting "Did the Harebell loose her girdle" (no. 213). Both poems address the image of a subdued condition, where the "Belt" and the "girdle" in the two titles imply enclosure and imprisonment, the confinement from which the dramatic *persona*, the supposed female victim, wants to 'free' herself.

Needless to say, Shakespeare too had played with the image of the girdle:

KING HENRY

Into the sea; and other times to see
The beach *girdle* of the ocean
Too wide for Neptune's hips.
(*2 Henry IV*, III.ii.48-50, emphasis mine)

ROBIN

I'll put a *girdle* round about the earth
In forty minutes.
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.i.175-76, emphasis mine).

Considering the sensuousness that exudes from many of Emily Dickinson's poems and letters alongside her 'religious' quest, I

often wondered why some of the questions I was frequently asked either by my students at the end of a seminar, or by my audience at the end of a lecture, were: “Did she ever have a lover?”, “Did she know what a sexual encounter was?”, “Was she really the distressed, fragile, and withdrawn woman that so many critics assumed her to be?”. I have always let her writings answer – “Poetry or love coeval come”:

To pile like Thunder to it's close
Then crumble grand away
While Everything created hid
This – would be Poetry –

Or Love – the two coeval come
We both and neither prove –
Experience either and consume –
For None see God and live – (no. 1247)

After all, poetry was an emotional (and physical) affair for Emily Dickinson. As she wrote to Higginson in a letter dated 16 August 1870:

If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way. (L342)

In closing, given that Shakespeare was one of *the* constant reference points in Emily Dickinson's readings and writings, and Hamlet a plausible mask of hers, let me recall Frank Kermode's reading of the figure of Hamlet, in which he points out: “[N]o one much like Hamlet ever existed before. That is why images of Hamlet usually reflect what came after, not before him. To take him as a herald of a new age is neither idolatrous nor hyperbolic. In this new age we need not expect matters to be made easy for us. The new mastery is a mastery of the ambiguous, the unexpected, of conflicting evidence and semantic audacity. We are challenged to make sense, even mocked if we fail” (Kermode 2000, 125).

Let us accept Kermode's challenge. If, in Mabel Loomis Todd's

words, Emily Dickinson's poems were "strange" and "full of power", we may add they were very 'audacious'. Audacious vis-à-vis her contemporary fellow poets and readers, and why not, even today. Her message and the way she shaped it were as strong and mysterious as her life. It was 1863 when she wrote "One need not to be a Chamber – to be Haunted" (no. 670).

One need not to be a Chamber – to be Haunted –
One need not be a House –
The Brain has Corridors – surpassing
Material Place –

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
External Ghost
Than its interior Confronting –
That Cooler Host.

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
The Stones a'chase –
Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter –
In lonesome Place –

Ourselves behind ourselves, concealed –
Should startle most –
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least.

The Body – borrows a Revolver –
He bolts the Door –
O'erlooking a superior spectre –
Or More –

She opened up to questions her contemporaries were not even dreaming of. How does identity get shaped? Does it get shaped at all? And if it does, how can it be managed? Is identity concealed? Is it 'oneself behind oneself'? Does one's identity hide behind what we assume is our public identity?

Dickinson had no answers but wrote about it, and as if apologizing, in a letter to Mrs Holland, dated early August 1856, she 'asked': "Pardon my sanity [...] in a world *insane*" (L185).

How could she dare? She, *sane* among *insane* people? Was she self-centered? Audacious, heretic? The latter she was (that we know) and certainly audacious too. Self-centered? Perhaps.

Shakespeare never used the word “identity”, it was not a category of his times. Not yet! Influenced, or inspired by the characters he had created, Emily Dickinson shaped it for us, mainly through her words. Words that take contours, words that live in being pronounced and written, words that draw meaning through monologues (even a dialogue becomes a dramatic soliloquy for her) ending in a mysterious laconic “Finite infinity”:

There is a solitude of space
 A solitude of sea
 A solitude of death, but these
 Society shall be
 Compared with that profounder site
 That polar privacy
 A soul admitted to itself –
 Finite infinity. (no. 1695)

The ‘itself’ she eventually discovered, and we with her, was *her own self* – the thing she had sought throughout her erratic, spasmodic, barefoot life.

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Henry James and the Better Part of Discretion

Arnaud Zimmern

This article begins with the realization that American students today experience Shakespeare's dramas in one of two predominant ways, both of which are informed by a scholarly *ethos* of discretion. One invokes the imperative to set aside any foolhardy desire to pin down the biography of the Bard, unknowable as it is. The other insists on travelling abroad to get to know, if not the man himself, then at least his *umwelt*, breathe the air he breathed, walk the streets he walked, and dive deeper into ever-frustrated intimacy. Both approaches promote a form of discretion that has little to do with *withholding* what we *do* know and everything to do with disclosing what we *might* know despite all the things we know we *cannot* know. The trials and opportunities, the acts of courage and cowardice which such discretion imposes upon readers were well-known to Henry James. Scholars have paid due attention to his introduction to *The Tempest* or his famous short story "The Birthplace". But one must also revisit "The Jolly Corner" through the lens of that champion of discretion, Sir John Falstaff, to better glimpse James's critique of a trending pusillanimity.

Keywords: Sir John Falstaff, The Jolly Corner, The Birthplace, Discretion, Discreteness

Midway through Henry James's short story "The Birthplace", Morris and Isabel Gedge, the newly-employed wardens and tour-guides of "the early home of the supreme poet, the Mecca of the English-speaking race" (James 2017, 5), have a domestic spat, the outlines and stakes of which are all too familiar to students and teachers of Shakespeare. Morris, more scrupulous than Isabel, worries he is lying through his teeth every time tourists visit the upstairs room of the historic house and ask whether it is indeed, truly, 'the birthplace'. When he finally has the gumption to confront his wife on the topic, whom he knows to be a devout believer in the birthplace's authenticity, it is with a weak conviction that truth, or at least the dignity of not having to lie, should have some

negotiating power against the economic obligations that keep them tethered to their current presentation. “Couldn’t you adopt [...] a slightly more discreet method?”, he timidly proposes, as much to himself as to her (25). Any number of oblique approaches – a deference to tradition or lore, a mode of speech that highlights the factuality of facts, a reserve or strategic hesitation – would, Morris suggests, alleviate the pressure put on truth and still meet the financial constraints which their contract with the Poet’s heritage foundation enjoins:

“[...] [I]s this really [...] the very *spot* where He was born?” “So it has, from a long time back, been described as being”. Couldn’t one meet Them, to be decent a little, in some such way as that? (25)

Isabel rejects Morris’s proposal – “I decline to let the place down” (26) – but academics in America have taken Morris to heart even as they, too, decline to let the birthplace go.

Around the unknowability of ‘Shakespeare the man’ have grown two critical habits: one, a disavowal of all biographical criticism that treats the plays as guides to the psyche of the author; and the other, a need to see, taste, smell, and analyze the material landscapes where he allegedly breathed them into life. Generations of student audiences have been taught a number of “more discreet methods” for reading Shakespeare *sans* Shakespeare, some pronouncing “the death of the author”, others beckoning to “always historicize” but never speculate biographically or psychologically. At the same time, and at first glance paradoxically, generations of students’ tuitions have fed the touristic-academic industry that promotes getting to know the Bard by visiting his homeland and becoming intimate with his works in the environs in which they were composed.

This unusual intertwining of Isabel and Morris’s positions in American academia emerges from the very concept of discretion invoked but not defined in the Gedges’s dispute. As all study-abroad-in-London alumni will remember, the one thing we all know and can say with certainty about Shakespeare is that we know next to nothing about Shakespeare. In a clear role-reversal of James’s “The Birthplace”, the unknowability of the Bard is today

the clear, core, and imperturbable dogma that the authenticity of his birthplace was for the Isabels of ages past. If Oxfordians occasionally rattle the cages, or if proponents of Shakespeare as crypto-Catholic or closet-trans seasonally make waves, a scholarly bulwark stands ready to re-echo Morris's discretionary agnosticism: "I grant you there was somebody. But the details are naught. The links are missing. The evidence [...] is *nil*" (26). The very success of that discretionary agnosticism works, counterintuitively, to stoke the insatiable curiosity of those who visit the birthplace. The radical unknowability of Shakespeare has made the need to trace his footsteps all the more urgent, compelling, and self-evidently fundamental if one is to get any real sense of the writer. What is left of Shakespeare when you get rid of the person is the place in which his life took place: short of getting to know him, go and get to know that.

American academia may want it both ways in its approach to Shakespeare, but in adopting this stance, it takes the word "discretion" far beyond its usual precincts. The "more discreet method" of side-stepping the biographical abyss has led us into new territories of discretion. Here discretion has very little to do with preserving truth from error, exaggeration, embarrassment, or overreach, and still less to do with the usual understanding of guarding unpublishable secrets from uncivil leaks. Scholarship is not concerned with what ought *not* be said given what *is* known but with what *is* left to say given what *cannot* be known. Discretion, as asserted in America's classrooms and conference-rooms, is no longer a convention regarding what we agree to never air publicly about Shakespeare; it is an evolving decorum about what we resign ourselves to never knowing about Shakespeare.

In that sense, discretion remains an epistemic value as well as an aesthetic, social, and moral code, and a changing one at that. It takes a learned gentility, an educated rhetoric to maintain that you simultaneously presume to know nothing about Shakespeare the person (if he or she ever truly existed) yet to admire everything admirable about the works. This strange combination of being passive in unknowing yet active in appreciation requires a heady mixture of urbanity and mystic sensitivity; but it can result in moments of unintended presumption and embarrassment (ask any

doctoral student coming home from their first Shakespeare conference whether they feared making some gauche remark like “What Shakespeare really meant to say is...” or “I feel as though Shakespeare would never have...”).

Nina Schwartz once described, with her characteristic precision, the similar dilemma and skirting of embarrassment that Henry James’s stories chronically induce in readers:

On the one hand, we may often feel as intensely as James’s characters do a desire simply *to know* the facts [...]. At the same time, however, we may also feel embarrassed by this desire, fearing it to be a sign of vulgar literal-mindedness. [...] [T]o require the specifics is to expose oneself as unaware of the general aesthetics of social order. To need to know the facts, that is, is to refuse the opportunity that a mystery offers, the chance to assert one’s civil sophistication by analogically inferring its solution. (Schwartz 1991, 69-70)

This civil sophistication that willingly accepts mysteries and infers the solution to ‘known unknowns’ is a class virtue that James’s protagonists and narrators reverently call “discretion”. Sometimes, as in Morris’s proposal to adopt a “more discreet method”, it is a useful lever with which to seize higher social ground, for one can never be discreet or decent enough. But at other times, as in James’s short story “The Jolly Corner” (1908) – and, I would argue, in the American Shakespeare classroom – it is crowned with a capital “D” and an exclamation point, like a modern-day “Eureka!” for the ways in which it allows us to cope and rest content with certain kinds of unknowing. “The Jolly Corner”, read through the lens of Shakespeare’s champions of discretion, Hamlet and especially Sir John Falstaff, proves an excellent primer for understanding the manipulable social and epistemic uses of discretion which have shaped Shakespeare in American classrooms. Especially in the pages of a journal like *Memoria di Shakespeare*, whose title evokes Borges’s story of the same name where a protagonist walks about mysteriously endowed with the memory of the real-life William Shakespeare¹, it behooves us to reflect on this “need to know the facts”, the embarrassments which it occasions, and the

¹ See Borges 2001. The original title is “La memoria de Shakespeare” (1983).

entanglements, ironies, perhaps even vices it begets in those learning and professing Shakespeare in today's America.

Today's legalese understands the term "discretion" as a form of jurisdiction based in private discernment, and so Harold Bloom once glossed it in defense of his beloved poltroon Falstaff: "the right to choose what should be done in a particular situation" (Bloom 2017, 119). Yet its more civil meanings – a resistance to ostentation, a trustworthiness with respect to the public disclosure of private matters, "a reserve of expression" (Levine 2002, xi)² – have never been lost on readers of Shakespeare, including James himself. In his introduction to *The Tempest*, James wrestles fiercely with that very high reserve of expression which has made Shakespeare, the man, an ungraspable figure to a reader of his plays. James's desire is an understandable but ill-fated one: he would cross-examine the slightest indiscretions of Shakespearean characters for clues to the playwright's otherwise inaccessible life and psyche. If scholars may discuss "the facts of the Poet", what "supremely interests" James is "the Man" *inside* the characters, who "remains as unseen of us as our Ariel, on the enchanted island, remains of the bewildered visitors" (James 1984, 1216). Neil Chilton, parsing the introduction in 2005 with tact for its ironies, proposed that for James "to develop intimate understandings of Falstaff and Hotspur it is, perhaps, at the expense of our knowledge of William Shakespeare" (Chilton 2005, 220). In James, as in the average American study-abroad student, Shakespeare's biographical unknowability stokes the fire of curiosity even as it establishes firm limits upon it. For James, however, unlike most undergraduates, it is more than mere curiosity, it is a vocational, indeed existential aspiration and exasperation: "How are we to arrive at a relation with the object to be penetrated if we are thus forever met by a locked door flanked with a sentinel [...]?" (James 1984, 1217).

For Shakespeare critics besides James, the various meanings of discretion take on special value, for phraseological and performative reasons as well as for broader historical and

² Levine invokes the term "discretion" more narrowly to refer to culturally imposed silencing or self-elected censorship with regards to what James's editor called "guilty love", adulterous themes, and other forms of sexual explicitness.

ideological ones. In citing Harold Bloom earlier, I have already discreetly nodded at Falstaff's much-cited line "The better part of valor is discretion", a renowned justification uttered shortly before the fat knight lies down to play dead rather than fight at the Battle of Shrewsbury (*1 Henry IV*, V.iv.122)³. One may just as well recall Hamlet's injunction to the visiting troupe of actors, "let your own discretion be your tutor" (*Hamlet*, III.ii.17-18), or Lysander, Demetrius, and Theseus's quips at Snug's expense, as the rude mechanical takes on the role of Lion in *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*:

LYSANDER

This lion is a very fox for his valor.

THESEUS

True, and a goose for his discretion.

DEMETRIUS

Not so, my lord, for his valor cannot carry his discretion, and the fox carries the goose.

THESEUS

His discretion, I am sure, cannot carry his valor, for the goose carries not the fox. It is well. Leave it to his discretion, and let us listen to the moon.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.245-52)⁴

Across these examples, the keyword fluctuates in meaning, or, as V. N. Vološinov once wrote, its "social accents" "clash and criss-cross" (Hillman 1996, 74)⁵. In one corner of the arena, we have the expectations placed on the Danish prince, the Athenian nobles, and the lords at the Battle of Shrewsbury, namely that their valor should match and "carry" their discretion, their courage complement their

³ All Shakespeare quotations are taken from the Folger Shakespeare Library's online open-access digital texts (<https://shakespeare.folger.edu>).

⁴ I am grateful to colleagues at INCH (the International Network for Comparative Humanists) for several of these suggestions.

⁵ As the philologist David Hillman reports, V. N. Vološinov, a Marxist linguist, called discretion "a little arena for the clash and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents" (Hillman 1996, 74). On the same page, Hillman adds that discretion "came to mean 'separation or disjunction' [...] toward the last decade of the sixteenth century", coincidentally the very decade when Falstaff, the character who boasts of containing multitudes, came to life.

prudence, not rival it. In the opposite corner, we have the discretion expected of Snug the Lion and enjoined by Hamlet upon himself and his troupe of actors: that of theatrical verisimilitude and illusion, that of not betraying one's secrets nor one's intentions.

Falstaff crisscrosses both meanings as he arises from his counterfeit collapse on the battlefield. To his mind, the better part of valor is knowing when and how to avoid calling upon valor. And to his credit, counterfeiting death proves more useful and salutary than counterfeiting bravery: "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.119-22). Nothing, for Falstaff, is more consonant with human existence than to pretend and dissimulate when discretion permits and the law of life demands. Yet thinking partly of Falstaff's other life as a philanderer with the merry wives of Windsor, Jacqueline T. Miller notes that discretion also admits of a feminine twist in the "arts of discretion", whenever a lady openly loved two men and exercised either her judgment in choosing one over the other or her self-possession in voicing a preference for neither (Miller 2006).

There is perhaps no better way to summarize the polyvalency of the term "discretion" than to echo the early sixteenth-century humanist Thomas Elyot, who lamented its "moche abuse" (Hillman 1996, 74). Falstaff proves more opportunistic than most Shakespearean characters in abusing the term, and none testifies better to the exquisite ironies such abuse enabled. If the exasperations of trying to peer indiscreetly past the locked door and the flanked sentinel into Shakespeare's hidden life give us one sense of what discretion meant to Henry James, it is his re-use of Falstaff for his short story "The Jolly Corner" that illuminates, by contrast, James's concern with the discretion that scholars (following Morris Gedge) invoke as remedy to the problem of Shakespeare's unknowability.

Spencer Brydon, the aristocratic protagonist of "The Jolly Corner", could be described as a man choked with discretion. He clamors for more discretion (self-sovereignty), a more discreet manner (self-reserve), a more discrete situation (remoteness from others), as well as more valor. For Brydon, it is "above all the bignesses" of New York City – not only its indecorously large

buildings or the girth of police officers patrolling its avenues at night, but especially the greed with which social peers demand his opinion on “so big a subject” as “everything” – that make his homecoming to America so ghastly an experience after thirty-three years’ sojourn abroad in “Europe” (James 2017, 203-4). The quotation marks with which he and the narrator systematically cordon off “Europe” underscore that predilection for an old world of self-restraint, proportionality, and well-defined boundaries. By comparison, the modern American cityscape – the jungle, the wilderness, as James’s characters often describe it – is a concrete accretion built for indiscretion. Its all-seeing and all-revealing glass skyscrapers, its ancient familial homes repurposed into multi-plex apartments, its body-on-body-piled tramways no longer afford the old distinction that the philosopher Hannah Arendt mourned when she diagnosed modernity as the emergence of a “social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking” (Arendt 1998, 28). The city’s capacity to cram more and more people into less and less space is a loss, particularly, for those who feel a need to keep to themselves.

Pockets of discretion do remain, however, and notable among them is the more cherished of the two Brydon family homes, the titular Jolly Corner. It is an ancestral house and haunt and, as its name implies, Brydon reserves it for sport and solace. Abundant “in nooks and corners, in closets and passages”, Brydon describes it as a place where an adult might yet play “hide-and-seek [...] in spite of the clear windows” without fearing “the cynical light of New York” (James 2017, 219). The home is kept unfurnished and vacant, to the befuddlement of the Irish cleaning lady Mrs Muldoon and to the measured curiosity of Brydon’s only bosom friend, that “well of discretion” Ms Alice Staverton (215). The great secret Brydon keeps from both women, as readers soon learn, is that he spends his nights there in solitary pursuit of childhood specters. His quarry – he speaks of it in terms of big-game hunting – is a vision of who he might have become had he stayed in America those thirty-three years, had he in fact become the powerful millionaire that he and Alice suspect he could have been.

One late night, Brydon senses that his quarry is hidden behind a closed door that Brydon, mysteriously, does not remember

closing. The door “stared, it glared back at him with that challenge; it put to him the two alternatives: should he just push it open or not?” (223). He chooses not to, invoking “the value of Discretion!” (224) as pretext and rationale. Discretion, Brydon goes on to articulate, bypasses that confrontation with hazardous knowledge, avoids the offense of closure or certainty, spares the secret of the hidden figure, and politely excuses Brydon from what Schwartz calls “the opportunity that a mystery offers”. Yet as if to thwart that discreet retreat, the same night Brydon does confront (or is confronted by – it is hard to tell which) the vision of a stranger with mutilated hands and pince-nez glasses. It is far more terrifying and less sporting an alter-ego than he ever expected to encounter. It proves to be more than he can face. The terror of being hunted by what he thought he was hunting makes him swoon. He awakens the next morning in the caring lap of Alice Staverton, who beguiles readers by revealing that she knew intuitively of Brydon’s secret nighttime escapades and that she understands, via her dreams, the nature of that mystic encounter. She tantalizes us with the identity of the threatening stranger – is he or is he not Brydon’s other self? – by disclosing a degree of liking for him: “why [...] shouldn’t I like him?”, “I *could* have liked him”, “And it may have pleased him that I pitied him” (235). The art of discretion, indeed! The story ends, however, with a tender rapprochement, as Brydon, in a moment of lucidity, discovers that the millionaire he might have been “has a million a year [...]. But he hasn’t you”, while Alice soothes Brydon’s conscience: “I don’t say I like him *better* [...]. And he isn’t – no, he isn’t – *you!*” (235).

We might at first glance deduce that “The Jolly Corner” centers more on a late-life Hamlet, with Alice Staverton in the combined roles of Ophelia and Horatio, than on a Sir John. Returning from a long stay abroad, this Prince of New York City seeks to encounter the phantom figure of something like himself, and we agonize with him over whether the vision is psychologically counterfeit, an induced forgery of jealousy, or numinous and therefore ominous. Its manifestation gives Brydon direction and momentum towards answering not the eternal question “To be or not to be?” but an equally impossible variant: “To be what I am now or to have been otherwise?”. Yet James laces Brydon’s ghostly encounter with a

humor that parodies this philosophical, psychological conundrum, turning the tenor of the story towards Falstaffian mock-heroism as Brydon invokes "Discretion!" to creep, in apparent cowardice, away from a moment of true valor.

The comparison of Brydon to Falstaff seems all the more valid on characterological grounds, where demeanors and comportments mirror tellingly. Brydon is middle-aged, grizzle-haired, and monocled; he toggles between aristocratic decadence and desuetude; he finances his hotel-plus-evening-club lifestyle by turning ancestral legacy into capital flow. Like Falstaff amidst his tavern friends and servants, he relishes both his superiority over the work-a-day contractors he enlists and his feigned equality with them. Caught in the living paradox of the juvenile senex, Brydon and Falstaff adjust the count of their years at their discretion. Falstaff famously either boasts of his youthful complexion or demands respect for his gray hairs, while Brydon asserts that he is only fifty-six but if "he were to reckon as he had sometimes, since his repatriation, found himself feeling; [...] he would have lived longer than is often allotted to man" (203). Both evade confronting their mortality through serpentine wit and discreet escapes from anything that might jeopardize life itself. What Falstaff achieves by lying on the ground and counterfeiting death among the common soldiery, Brydon likewise considers, pondering whether to escape the top floor of his haunted house by rope or ladder, even something as plebeian as "one of the vertiginous perpendiculars employed by painters and roofers and sometimes left standing overnight" (225). In the end, in a brief moment of similarity-with-a-difference rather than strict similitude, Brydon's panic induces the painless swoon that leaves him (curiously like Falstaff) on the ground yet unbruised. We might also note that at the juncture where James's trope of haunted family homes meets his other trope of deracinated protagonists, the critic Allison Booth sees a ready and ironic loan from Washington Irving and, by extension, from Falstaff (Booth 2004, 218)⁶.

⁶ For Booth, Irving's uprooted character Crayon in *The Sketch-Book* delights in the joys of a domestic sovereignty with no strings attached: "To a homeless man [...]"

The ironies surrounding discretion, however, are more obvious. Liquid among class hierarchies yet stiffened by their ambitions for power and wealth, Falstaff and Brydon share above all a fluid relationship with respect to courage and a propensity for drowning themselves in ‘what if’ scenarios. Falstaff is notorious for the abundant conditionals “if I” and “an I” that pepper his speech. Twenty-seven instances out of a total thirty-four in *1 Henry IV* are his, and sixteen out of twenty-five instances are his again in *2 Henry IV*. As Falstaff uses them, these conditionals serve to demote historical truth and to spin out fictitious pasts and futures, some of them wishful thoughts, others vain threats and prophesies: e.g. “An I could get me but a wife in the stews, I were manned, horsed, and wived” (*2 Henry IV*, I.ii.54-55), “If I do sweat, they are the drops of thy lovers and they weep for thy death” (IV.ii.12-14), “if I return, [...] I’ll make him a philosopher’s two stones to me” (III.ii.340-42). As we might suspect, they altogether serve his turn. Shortly after quipping about “the better part of valor”, “in the which better part I have saved my life”, he looks over nervously to the corpse of

there is a momentary feeling of something like independence and territorial consequence, when, after a weary day’s travel, he [...] stretches himself before an inn fire [...]. He is, for the time being, the very monarch of all he surveys. The arm-chair is his throne, the poker his scepter, and the little parlor, some twelve feet square, his undisputed empire. [...] ‘Shall I not take mine ease in mine inn?’” (quoted in Booth 2004, 218). Like Crayon (here citing Falstaff), Brydon takes pleasure in proprietorship without attachments. Giving Alice a tour of the ancestral home, he speaks magisterially “of the value of all he read into it, into the mere sight of the walls, mere shapes of the rooms, mere sound of the floors, mere feel, in his hand, of the old silver-plated knobs of the several mahogany doors, which suggested the pressure of the palms of the dead; the seventy years of the past in fine that these things represented” (James 2017, 209). She hints ever-so-discretely at the possibility of his putting down roots – “You may still, after all, want to live here [...] *with* such a home” – cutting herself off because “she had too much tact to dot so monstrous an *i*, and it was precisely an illustration of the way she didn’t rattle” (209-10). Yet he admits he is interested neither in “stay[ing] on” nor in selling the home for cash (209). Like Falstaff, Brydon is a king with a cushion for a crown, performing an aristocratic entitlement he has neither the finances nor the rootedness to back up. The irony of such domestic sovereignty remains that as these characters abide in the conviction of being at their ease in their own *chez-soi*, readers lick their chops in hopes of finally satisfying that curious hunger for indiscretion.

Henry Percy, the play's valiant and dangerous counter-hero, now seemingly dead at Prince Hal's hand, and wonders aloud:

Zounds, I am afraid of this gunpowder Percy, though he be dead. How if he should counterfeit too, and rise? By my faith, I am afraid he would prove the better counterfeit. Therefore I'll make him sure, yea, and I'll swear I killed him. Why may not he rise as well as I? Nothing confutes me but eyes, and nobody sees me. Therefore, sirrah, (*stabbing him*) with a new wound in your thigh, come you along with me. (1 *Henry IV*, V.iv.122-31)

Brydon channels this Falstaffian manner of being-in-potential-worlds, where the dead may indeed rise and alternative histories abound, when he discovers the closed door that should not be closed. This revelation sends him instantly into the realm of counterfactuals, contingencies, and risk-management:

He *couldn't*, by any lapse, have blocked that aperture; and if he hadn't, if it was unthinkable, why what else was clear but that there had been another agent? [...] Ah this time at last they *were*, the two, the opposed projections of him, in presence; and this time, as much as one would, the question of danger loomed. With it rose, as not before, the question of courage – for what he knew the blank face of the door to say to him was “Show us how much you have!” It stared, it glared back at him with that challenge; it put to him the two alternatives: should he just push it open or not? (James 2017, 223)

Ever so briefly, the narration loses its Falstaffian tone and pivots to a Hamlet-like consideration of thought over action:

Oh to have this consciousness was to *think* – and to think, Brydon knew, as he stood there, was, with the lapsing moments, not to have acted! Not to have acted – that was the misery and the pang – was even still not to act; was in fact *all* to feel the thing in another, in a new and terrible way. How long did he pause and how long did he debate? (223-24).

But when the paralysis passes, the return of the Falstaffian mode and the eclipse of courage by discretion is pronounced and triumphant:

Brydon at last remarkably made up his mind on what it had turned to. It had turned altogether to a different admonition; to a supreme hint, for him, of the value of Discretion! [...] Discretion – he jumped at that; and yet not, verily, at such a pitch, because it saved his nerves or his skin, but because, much more valuably, it saved the situation. (224)

Rather than prove he is not afraid, Brydon opts to leave the door closed, indeed untouched, and to retreat, rehearsing a mode of evasion he employed in former days when he burned important letters “unopened” (211). Before abandoning the door and attempting to withdraw from the house entirely, Brydon addresses the as-yet-unseen figure in an *apologia* larded with Falstaffian paradiastole:

I spare you and I give up. You affect me as by the appeal positively for pity: you convince me that for reasons rigid and sublime – what do I know? – we both of us should have suffered. I respect them then, and, though moved and privileged as, I believe, it has never been given to man, I retire, I renounce – never, on my honour, to try again. So rest for ever – and let *me!* (224)

Under the new light of “Discretion”, the act he proudly goes on to call a “concession” and “surrender” (225) becomes, in his eyes, an act of necessary prudence, even justice, an act of sparing pity, perhaps of historical conservation, as though leaving undefiled a sacred presence that ought never to be disturbed again.

The conversion of cowardice into courage is the reverberating trademark of the Falstaffian heroic mode, but it points to a different and more upsetting conversion, that of ‘discretion’ into ‘Discretion’. The class virtue that James so often imposes upon his readers he satirizes here as a significant epistemic vice. If in its broadest and earliest definitions, discretion denoted forms of prudence to decide what is and is not to be concealed, and if in “The Birthplace” the “more discreet method” proved a way of respecting the unknowable *qua* unknowable to better inflame insatiable curiosity, it becomes in “The Jolly Corner” a means to spare ourselves from the knowledge we most desire, to avoid unlocking the closed door or confronting the sentinel who might, even as we turn away, suddenly choose to confront us against our will. James, in “The

Jolly Corner", discredits Discretion and seems to propose a need for a much more confrontational and honest encounter with the hazardousness of mystery. Even the tale's comic-domestic resolution ends with a lesson on the value of indiscretion worthy of that unruly embodiment of domestic incivility, Falstaff's companion Mistress Quickly. Alice Staverton, repeatedly described as "a woman who answered intimately but who utterly didn't chatter" (209), suddenly does what Mistress Quickly does best: she chatters intimately, revealing much to the readers that we might otherwise never have known about Brydon's heart and her own. She divulges, in brief, what a "well of discretion" very rightly might hold. The irony is not lost on us, nor is its humor. Yet the more-than-mild reproach remains that discretion, especially when elevated into Discretion, fundamentally occludes all quest and renders all searching fruitless. Discretion, at some point, must be damned.

Discretion becomes, hence, the truest enemy to the kind of inspection and introspection James, in his introduction to *The Tempest*, yearned to perform and wished to see espoused broadly in Shakespearean criticism. He famously said of scholarship on *The Tempest* that it "abounds much rather in affirmed conclusions, complacencies of conviction, full apprehensions of the meaning and triumphant pointings of the moral" (James 1984, 1205). He deplored how "Questions, in the light of all this wisdom, convert themselves, with comparatively small difficulty, into smooth and definite answers" and how the more fragile topics of speculation are made to "bench themselves along the vista as solidly as Falstaff and as vividly as Hotspur" (1205)⁷. To be Falstaff, in James's idiom here, is not merely to be obvious and concrete, honest and unsophisticated, open and exposed. Many will argue Falstaff is not so, and James, were he called upon to respond, would surely have agreed, for the Falstaff he reshapes as Spencer Brydon, full of sophistication and complications, asserts as much. However, Falstaff remains the fit metaphor in James's mind for facts and forces that fascinate without requiring unpacking, for objects that

⁷ For closer readings of that introduction and of this passage in particular, see Cowdery 1982 and McCombe 2010.

do not demand penetration, for subjects that lend themselves to being known and, in that higher visibility, occlude other mysterious forms. Brydon, following in Falstaff's footsteps, proves the fit analogue (more so than Morris Gedge) for the kind of Shakespeare critic whose discretion renounces investigation of the figure behind the locked door. The question becomes whether James hoped to impart more valor to American Shakespeare critics or whether he believed there was a better part of discretion.

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Henry James, George Santayana, H. D., W. H. Auden: Four Versions of Shakespeare Out of Context

Robert L. Caserio

Shakespeare scholar James Shapiro's *Shakespeare in a Divided America*, a study of Shakespeare's impact in the U.S. since the 1830s, issues in Shapiro's sympathetic account of a 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* in New York. That production staged the play in terms of up-to-date conflict between Trump-allied Republicans and Clinton-allied Democrats. Shapiro's attachment of Shakespeare to current events is a sterling example of a prevailing mode of literary criticism, which ties the worth and relevance of literary art to its historical contexts, whether those contexts be present-day or historically past. But an alternative to the dominant critical mode is discoverable in meditations on Shakespeare by Henry James, George Santayana, H. D., and W. H. Auden. Although each author solicits contextual and historical dimensions of Shakespeare, each foregrounds Shakespeare's withdrawal from those dimensions. Perhaps these writers' emphasis on a de-contextualizing, de-historicizing component in Shakespeare – amounting to a retreat to what James calls “the blessed fictive world” – ought not to be overlooked or undervalued by literary and cultural criticism.

Keywords: Contextual literary criticism, Fictive world, Literature and religion, James Shapiro, Henry James, George Santayana, H. D., W. H. Auden

Shakespeare perhaps has influenced the course of American history – and for worse rather than for better. President Lincoln's assassination, the consequent collapse of post-Civil War Reconstruction, with its long legacy of race conflict, might be attributed to the poet-playwright's power. After all, Lincoln's assassin was a celebrated Shakespearian actor who identified with Shakespeare's Brutus. Arguably, the event in Ford's Theater in April, 1865, revived *Julius Caesar* to lasting effect on the nation.

Whatever the truth of the influence, the debt of the United States to actors who fuse politics and entertainment is undeniable – and Shakespeare too is an entertainer, even in the tragedies. In all his genres, he apparently shows an ability to inspire fusions of fictions with real life contexts. His fusing power is proposed and expounded in James Shapiro's *Shakespeare in a Divided America* (2020), a blend of advanced scholarship and address to a popular audience, named by *The New York Times* one of the year's ten best books. Shapiro, a leading American Shakespeare scholar, means to bring home to readers not only Shakespeare's appeal to Lincoln's murderer, but also Shakespeare's involvement, it seems, with every American crisis or controversy between the 1830s and the present. For example, in a chapter on a taste for Shakespeare among American generals prosecuting the war with Mexico in the 1840s, Shapiro writes: "[T]he performance of [Shakespeare's] plays forced to the surface the cultural tensions and shifts that otherwise prove so difficult to identify and might otherwise have remained submerged" (Shapiro 2020, 31). There was nothing submerged about the conflict into which the assassin John Wilkes Booth intruded his performance, but Shapiro evokes Shakespeare either as an identifiable material force defining and provoking our battles, or as a ghost permanently stalking them.

Shapiro's involvement of Shakespeare with social and political controversies is not only interesting for itself, but also for its sterling example of a prevailing pursuit in literary criticism, whether in America or elsewhere: a desire to claim the immediate relevance of the verbal arts. If Shakespeare (or any poet, dramatist, or novelist) can target and illuminate the news of the day, then, it would seem to follow, his cultural value, as well as that of literature generally, is assured. That desire for assurance seems to underwrite *Shakespeare in a Divided America*. In his introduction and final chapter, Shapiro recounts his ties with a production of *Julius Caesar* by the New York Public Theater in New York's Central Park in summer 2017. The production's director presented Caesar as a double for President Trump, and he added numerous provocative allusions to speak "directly to the political vertigo many Americans were experiencing" (xvi). The overall aim, according to Shapiro and to the director's publicity releases, was to represent all sides of the

“vertigo” for the sake of a dialogue; indeed, for the sake of fidelity to “Shakespeare’s habit of presenting both sides of an argument” (xxvi). The immediate political opportunity for reinforcing Shakespeare’s continuing authority seemed a no-brainer.

I begin this essay with Shapiro, and at its close I will return to him and to the result of the Central Park production, as an opportune framework for pursuing another side of another argument – and yet one in which Shapiro and my own critical perspective are embedded. That argument is about the literary-critical desire I’ve named above, and the possibility of a justifiable dissenting relation to it. As I absorb Shapiro’s pursuit of relevance, despite its impressiveness, I have found myself thinking that the cultural value of literature might be better affirmed if it keeps a distance from obvious measures of immediate concern – the enviroing news of the day; and if it also be granted a suspended relation to past referents – not be exclusively tied to historical context. I therefore am soliciting *Shakespeare in a Divided America* as a foil for an alternative view of criticism’s objects and interests. I find that alternative in the treatments of Shakespeare by the four figures named in my essay’s title. Their writings about him solicit contexts and contextual relevances, but also move him and his works beyond contextualization. Thus, I think, they figure an important other model for literary criticism. In sympathy with their model, I range myself with recent challenges to the now decades-long prestige of suturing literary works to historical contexts¹. Shapiro’s suturing is masterful, but, as I follow the lead of my quartet of authors, I hope a contrastive value of de-contextualization comes into view for academic colleagues, and for non-specialist readers too (i.e., the same mixed audience targeted by Shapiro). Because I debate Shapiro’s method largely in terms of his 2020 volume, I necessarily engage American particulars. But the literary-critical matter at issue transcends national containers. That James, Santayana, H. D., and Auden have only a loose attachment to American nationality resonates with my purpose.

¹ For representative challenges, see Attridge and Staten 2015, Bové 2021, and Bronstein 2018, and my review of Bronstein 2018 (Caserio 2020). For my further dialogue with contexts, see Caserio 2019, esp. 25-57 and 205-46.

To prepare the ground for the plausibility of de-contextualization's value, and as a final preliminary, I want to make explicit a few doubts about the method of which Shapiro's critical practice is an exemplary token. His claim that Shakespeare "forced to the surface [...] tensions and shifts that [...] might otherwise have remained submerged" assigns Shakespeare a causal power that strains belief. One might want Shakespeare to have nation-shaping or nation-shaking power as part of one's passion for his texts. But Shakespeare in the middle of everything is at once powerful and powerless. John Wilkes Booth's passion for him, only nominally engaging *Julius Caesar*, confused Shakespeare with a drama in the actor's head. Lincoln was no Caesar, and his assassin, a die-hard pro-slavery Confederate, was no Brutus. The fusion and confusion of aesthetic and historical realms – taking the fictive for real, the real for fictive – was problematic in the past, and remains so. An 'American' Shakespeare, historically regarded, is one thread in an all but impossibly complex weave. A plethora of possible historical actors, offstage and on, congests any scholarly attempt to select cultural go-betweens who can be said to definitively determine and affect, and be affected by, what "otherwise prove[s] so difficult to" measure.

Given that plethora, when it comes to assessing the practical ramifications of artworks, an historicizing and contextualizing critic gains a simplifying advantage (simplifying for the sake of a critical argument's plausibility) if two things are done: the fixity of an author's identity is taken as a focal lens; and an intermingling of the writer's character, life, and work with a national context is assumed by the critic without an admission of a significant gap between work and context. But who better than 'Shakespeare' to resist the conveniences of scholarly analysis? On reflection after reading Shapiro, 'Shakespeare' in his book seems to be an identity as divided as the America he is 'in'. Did 'he', or his work, cause Booth's derangement, or cause the 1849 Astor Place Riot (about theater ticket prices and the challenged superiority of American actors), or were 'he' and his work innocent bystanders dragged into extraneous quarrels? An articulation of Shakespeare's constituent parts – is 'he' a text apart from its actors, is 'he' a center of meanings apart from occasions that 'illustrate' 'him'? – could have better

established, and left more open to debate, the impact Shapiro wants to claim for Shakespeare. Exploring historical cause and effect, Shapiro wonders: "Why has America embraced Shakespeare?" He answers: "All one can safely say is that Shakespeare took root in the United States because he spoke to what Americans cared about" (xi). If that is a 'safe' causal-contextualizing saying about what Shakespeare spoke to (or speaks to), it is a vague one.

Vagueness does not usually characterize the historicizing school of Shakespeare studies that Shapiro exemplifies. That school has so successfully pursued an intellectual positivism that it confidently reads Shakespeare's mind. In Shapiro's book about the genesis of *King Lear*, one finds causal explanations that penetrate Shakespeare's thought process: "[H]owever counterintuitive it might have seemed, Shakespeare saw that the best way for him to grapple with the present was to engage with the past, refurbishing an old and unfashionable Elizabethan plot" (Shapiro 2015, 26). Hence the meaning of the play depends on, and fuses, with up-to-the-minute political contexts. Shakespeare's increasing "steadier grasp of the forces shaping this extraordinary time" (7) was about the political division between England and Scotland – a division that *King Lear* supposedly allegorizes. Shapiro observes: "In pressing the case for Union [with Scotland], the Scottish monarch [King James] had foisted upon his subjects an identity crisis [...]. What was proving unsettling for the culture at large proved to be a gift to a dramatist who had made a career out of exploring identity crises" (41). The historical Shakespeare, a man whose identity has been a center of crisis in the past, now appears to be a stable coherent self whose plays express his sure contemplation of the identity crises of others.

This current historical transit from mystery to assurance, this tight interweave of fiction and fact, has established itself hegemonically: a norm of literary and cultural criticism. The contrasts that I mean to bring forward from James, Santayana, H. D., and Auden don't resolve themselves into contextualizing certainty about what Shakespeare was thinking. That does not mean they altogether eschew the relevance of context. This is a group whose thoughts are complex. But for certain, although they at times approximate today's critical aims, they undermine facile

fusions of art and environment. For all four, whatever variants of 'division' in Shakespeare the author or his texts matter, they signify not something to resolve or cure, or with which to close a gap in relevance, but their own self-divisions, and an inevitable distance between fiction and reality. The distance remains for them an intellectual and emotional provocation that is vital: more vital for cultural memory of Shakespeare, I will wager in my final pages, than the critical currents underlying a politically-inspired revival of *Julius Caesar* in 2017.

1. "The blessed fictive world"

Henry James found Shakespeare to be unbearable – on stage. Over the course of twenty years, repeatedly voicing his aversion, especially to Henry Irving's productions of Shakespeare, James concludes in 1897 that "there is absolutely no representing him" (James 1949d, 288). "The more [the represented Shakespeare] is [...] solidified, the less it corresponds or coincides [...] with our imaginative habits" (287-88). "Solidification" for James apparently means making Shakespeare look 'realistic', and thus betraying what James in an 1889 critical dialogue calls "the blessed fictive world" of the drama (James 1949b, 226). When one leaves the playhouse, one undergoes "a horrid relapse into the real" (226).

Clearly, James wants sharply to distinguish "imaginative habits" from contextual reality's "ugly" "star[e] at you" (226). His intention would be dismissed as dated and illusionary by the critical assumptions I've associated with Shapiro's. But a dismissal would miss James's tireless testing of his own convictions, his approximation of historicist values. His career retains the 'blessing' in explicit conscious tension with its opposite, for example in his admiration of Ibsen. "I like Shakespeare better [...] 'for reading'; but I like Ibsen better for [...] the theatre" (James 1949d, 288-89). He likes Ibsen better for reality's sake: "[Ibsen's] ugliness of surface [...] is a sort of proof of his fidelity to the real" (James 1949c, 248). But at the same time James values Ibsen's reality-as-context, he experiences Ibsen's fidelity as magic, as "the [...] Ibsen *spell*", which provokes "the surrender of the imagination to [Ibsen's] [...] confined but completely constituted world, in which, in every case,

the tissue of relations between the parts and the whole is of a closeness so fascinating" (James 1949d, 289). An Ibsen play provides, internally, in its interrelation of parts and whole, a model of contextualization that literary-cultural historians might envy. But what if such a model is only available, and only to be realized, as magic, which is to say, as fiction, in fiction? In real life contexts, James observes, things "happen clumsily, stupidly, meanly"; in the theater (and in fiction) they "happen" according to "symmetrical, satisfactory form, with unmistakable effect and just at the right moment" (James 1949b, 228).

In his writing about Ibsen, James expresses a dualism – reality and fiction are in conflict – and at the same time a unity: the two are not opposed. The unity is divided; the division is unified. Expressed in that shorthand way, however, the necessity for James and the difficulty for him of honoring the conflict, even while pursuing the conflict's resolution, is not adequately evoked. To take the conflict's full measure, one must turn to James's essay on *The Tempest* (1907) and to his parabolic fiction about Shakespeare, "The Birthplace" (1903).

The Tempest throws James into an agony of curiosity about the play's generating context and about its possible ultimate context, its author. This curiosity matches the impulse of our hegemonic critical norm. James endorses every attempt to extend the "supremely dim and few" facts that in 1907 "mock [...] at our unrest" (James 1907, xxxi). First and last in his essay, he ticks off "the meagre circle of the items of our knowledge about it" (xiv), such as its composition in 1611 and its revival at court in 1613, the year of Shakespeare's retirement. His complaint is that Shakespeare the person seems to sit in front of the stage curtain as an "immitigably respectable person", about whom "there is nothing [...] to explain" (xxv); whereas "the figure who supremely interests us, remains as unseen [...] as our Ariel" (xxvi). But how can the man be detached from his work, in apparent confirmation of the "strangest of all fallacies, the idea of the separateness of a great man's parts" (xxvi)? Two questions especially torture James: what, he wonders, could have been "the effect on [the writer] of being able to write *Lear* and *Othello*" (xxviii); and "[w]hat manner of human being was it who *could*" simply stop writing in 1613, thereby taking

the “freedom to ‘elect’ [...] to cease, intellectually, to exist”. James “can accept” that stop “only in stupefaction” (xxiii-xxiv).

Like Shapiro, James wants to penetrate Shakespeare’s mind. Yet James celebrates the work that incites his stupefaction. Although he complains that “we are dealing too perpetually with [Shakespeare] the artist, the monster and magician of a thousand masks” (xv), *The Tempest* remains for James a wonder of the fictive sphere. “It renders the poverties and obscurities of our world [...] in the dazzling terms of a richer and better” (xix). That rendering depends on “imaged, creative Expression, the instant sense of some copious equivalent of thought for every grain of the grossness of reality” (xiii). Shakespeare “works” not “in the very elements of experience” but “all in the terms of the artist’s specific vision and genius” (xix). A “momentous conjunction” is achieved “between [Shakespeare’s] human curiosity and his aesthetic passion” (xvi). That “conjunction” is so ‘momentously’ rare that James, almost chillingly, likens Shakespeare and “his aesthetic passion” to a musician in solitude, performing for himself alone. Precisely that isolation is what makes it impossible for James to satisfy *his* “human curiosity” about the master of the music. Yet if a pathos of separation from “the very elements of experience” is the price art must pay for achievement of *The Tempest*’s kind, James endorses it.

But James, no less than Shakespeare, desires both sides of an argument. “The Birthplace” startlingly contrasts with James’s endorsement of *The Tempest*’s aesthetic – and seems better to suit our historicist-critical temperament. James’s story, one might say, knocks the stuffing out of Shakespeare, perhaps out of art too; for it suggests that if an artist cannot be available to contextual documentation, and becomes therefore an “historic void” (James 1903b, 207), then the artist cannot be posited as truly living – and the artist’s work accordingly, whatever its quality, will lose its human relevance. Such certainly would seem to be the moral of James’s narrative of Mr Gedge, a learned man elevated by a body of trustees of “the Birthplace” – which James insinuates is Shakespeare’s natal house in Stratford – to exhibit that site of international renown to tourist “pilgrims” (193) and to represent to them the genius of “Him” (never referred to by any proper name) with an array of historical “facts” and artifacts. But as time goes by,

Gedge, who “know[s] the difference between realities and shams” (182), begins to doubt the evidence, to see it as “preposterous” (193). If there is no contextual witness of “Him”, Gedge finds himself up against a vision of “Nothing!” (194). He will confess to a visiting American couple, who, unlike their gullible compatriots, signal a skepticism of their own, that “[p]ractically [...] there *is* no author [...]. There are all the immortal people – *in* the work; but there’s nobody else. [...] There was somebody [...]. But They’ve killed him [“They” meaning especially the opinionated public, careless of “the difference between realities and shams” when it comes to a celebrity]” (207). Gedge’s skepticism kills “Him” too, ironically. Out of guilt for his disbelief, Gedge steps up the showmanship with which he broadcasts to the pilgrims what he now knows are lies. His flair for performance makes him too a celebrity. The trustees and the public give his salary a desperately needed raise, so that he can keep what he calls “the ‘Show’” (193) going. He keeps it going, and thus is locked into fiction doubly: into the fiction of the historical “Him”, and into his own hyped-up substitute of ‘Something’ for ‘Nothing’.

So far, I have read “The Birthplace” in alignment with James’s agitation about the author of *The Tempest*. The story is an historicist’s protest, in fictional form, against fiction. It negatively demonstrates a need to guarantee a fusion of imaginative texts with real contexts. But true to James’s allegiance to art that is *not* founded on “the very elements of experience”, I want to propose another way of viewing “The Birthplace”. “[W]hen the curtain rises on Shakespeare”, James wrote in 1889, “we are conscious of a certain divine dissatisfaction, or a yearning for that which isn’t” (James 1949b, 233). This “that which isn’t” expresses a contrast in value – and in substance – to Gedge’s indignant, despairing “Nothing!”. A religious aura pervades “The Birthplace”. Gedge is described repeatedly as the priest of a temple, whose central room is the “Holy of Holies” (James 1903b, 192). The story’s “Him” is virtually a founder of a global religion. In this way, James intertwines a satire on religious faith and service with a sympathetic account of a sorrowful loss of faith. Despite the loss, “that which isn’t” still impends: in the “immortal” elements “*in* [His] work”; in a transfer

of a religious element to “the blessed fictive world”, and to that world’s detachment from the historical real one.

It is probably superfluous to note that the historicism of *Shakespeare in a Divided America* is a form of materialism; it does not engage such a transfer. Because H. D. and Auden will engage it, and because Santayana will consider the same phenomenon, I shall draw out James a bit more as a preface to his successors’ negotiations.

The historicist side of James is part of *his* context. It is significant that the couple who share Gedge’s disbelief in “Him” are Americans. The American Delia Bacon in 1856 initiated the identification of Shakespeare’s writings with those of Francis Bacon. Even if ‘Shakespeare’s’ writing figured “immortal people”, for Delia Bacon and her supporters they would have to be caused by a bona fide mortal, and a more plausibly contextualized and educated person than a middle-class theater recruit from Stratford. The quest for the historical Shakespeare, belonging to the numberless waves of nineteenth-century historicizing researches, has a parallel in the quest for the historical Jesus, epitomized in Ernest Renan’s *Life of Jesus* (1863). Without doubting Jesus’s existence, Renan reconstructs Jesus’s environments to loan “Him” empirical credibility, and to support a realistically psychologizing revision of ‘divinity’ (“Sometimes”, Renan writes, “one might have said that [Jesus’s] reason was unbalanced” [Renan 1915, 315]). Fantastic now as some of the results of the researches might appear, they impressed major minds (Emerson, among Baconians; Freud, among Oxfordians) who shared a hunger for empirical reality. Aligned with their hunger, James (albeit the son of a Swedenborgian) assigns his characters a realist’s psychology, detached from ‘spirit’.

Nevertheless, a leading aspect of Gedge’s (and James’s) alliance with his American couple concerns his shared glimpse with them of a world apart from the world: a “good society [...] of people to whom he hadn’t to talk rot” (James 1903b, 208); a virtual utopia². By the fatal turn of his talent for showmanship, Gedge is

² O’Hara’s study of “The Birthplace” brilliantly expounds the implications for English studies of Gedge’s idea of a “good society” (O’Hara 1995).

condemned “to talk rot” to the end of his salaried days. But for him and for James’s reader, the sacred character of the temple, the antithesis of “rot”, is not cancelled; it relocates itself in Gedge’s alliance, through his pair of sympathizers, with “that which isn’t”, in a possible social good that compensates for divine dissatisfaction. A “good society”, however small and secular, insofar as it is only minimally worldly, serves as the renewal of the religion implicitly invested in “Him” and “His” works. But that religious legacy also finds a match in another of what might be religion’s descendants: the reality-redeeming “confined but completely constituted world” in which, as in an Ibsen play, “the tissue of relations between the parts and the whole” is modeled.

Suggesting that the “fictive world” (or the utopian one) is a religious holdover, James converges with Renan, whose reduction of Jesus to purely human terms means to preserve Jesus even as it undoes his supposed transcendent sanctity. But Renan wants to accommodate Jesus the fiction to Jesus the reality. According to the aspect of James’s vision of “the blessed fictive world” that I trace as a contrast to our critical norm, a fruitful interdependence between the art of fiction and its context’s ‘ugly stare’ is not always possible or desirable – even despite Ibsen. For James at his most severe as a judge of worldliness, reality is surrendered to “rot”: increasingly to flim-flam substitutes for experience. Under economic coercion, and for profiteering reasons, art and intellect become “show”; and life itself, a simulacrum. A hollow mode of publicity and public relations covers it all. As the source of such assertions, I don’t draw only on “The Birthplace”. James’s placement of his story as the penultimate entry in his volume *The Better Sort* (1903) is meaningful as a preface to the novella which concludes James’s book, “The Papers”. Together story and novella provide urgent reasons for extricating a latter-day equivalent of religious life or vision from modern environments – and from literary-critical adhesion to contexts.

In “The Papers”, context matters for the reactive retreat it inspires. Its protagonists are two young journalists who have realized that truthful ‘reporting’ is indistinguishable from promotional entrepreneurship. But competition keeps them going. They decide to stake their rivalrous careers on the result of one of

them 'following' a mediocre novelist who craves celebrity and of the other 'following' a man of no character or importance who nevertheless is a celebrity because "the papers" have fabricated him as one – to indestructible effect. The outcome of the journalists' pursuits is terminal disillusion with the public sphere. They resign their jobs. A prospect of their marital union suggests that together they will build a miniature "good society" as a claustal defense against "rot". Their narrative's tissue of relations justifies their resignation. Yet the history of James's journalists is an imaginary history, juxtaposed by James with recognizable elements in historically real and recognizable communications media. If it were not for the imaginary part of the tale, however, no critical light – no "ironic passion" (James 1903c, 296), as the story calls it – would vitally estrange the reader from the non-fictional environmental givens. Those givens lock Gedge and "the papers" into permanent falsity or inauthenticity. Their alternative belongs to a version of truth that, albeit fictive, has for James the character and aura of a sacred place. Without discovering affirmative terms for such a place, literary criticism risks identifying itself merely with the news.

2. "There was the way of stark reality and there was escape from that reality"

Henry James wandered away from his 'birthplace'. Self-divided as an 'American', James's uncertain national identity perhaps is mirrored in his dual allegiances: to the representation, in his novels, of determining historical-national contexts; and to the supreme value of an autonomous fictive realm. Like James, the philosopher George Santayana exemplifies a like national indeterminism: is he 'American' or a citizen of elsewhere? And, resonant with James, but with full explicitness, Santayana involves his meditations on Shakespeare with religion and aesthetics. The overlap between religion and aesthetics is not part of *Shakespeare in a Divided America*, which engages only secular divisions. H. D.'s and Auden's engagements, in their lyric "commentaries" on *The Tempest*, are not as limited. Santayana sets the stage for them.

The philosopher finds Shakespeare almost unbearable – for reasons that echo James’s. Santayana would quarrel with any attempt to make Shakespeare seem “real” to America in 1915 (Santayana 1998, 70). On the other hand, Santayana undertook such an effort, to comic effect. Inspired by an impulse worthy of today’s contextualizing custom, Santayana’s “Shakespeare: Made in America” translates the sonnet “When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes” into contemporary American parlance. The translation reveals the poem’s meaning to be clichéd and trivial. “I have not made the sonnet absurd on purpose”, Santayana says; but “how much old finery there is in our literary baggage”, he tartly concludes (71). Already in his “Hamlet” (1908) Santayana had guyed Shakespeare by pairing praise of the “expressive value” (Santayana 1956c, 125) of Hamlet’s vacillation with trenchant criticism of the play’s essential “incoherence” (135). His judgment entails a contemporary moral: we moderns esteem Hamlet, he says, because “the modern world [...] is compacted out of ruins” of past historical orders. Identifying with Hamlet, we vacillate among the ruins, and are the heirs of “hereditary incoherence” (135). For better or worse, we are “content” to be so (136).

Santayana is not “content”. For him the complacency, along with its social and political incoherence, flatters a literary and literary-critical disconnect. The “ruins” at issue are religious, first and foremost. In “The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare” (1896), Santayana addresses this absence in the context of a literary tradition that stems from Homer, Greek tragedy, and Dante. Those authorities underwrote their work with systemic religious vision. Shakespeare has none. It is a lack that Santayana terms “a vice”: “a vice in a dramatist, who has to render those passions to which the religious imagination has always given a larger meaning” (Santayana 1956b, 141). A “larger meaning” in Shakespeare is up for grabs. But this was not Shakespeare’s fault, Santayana concludes, but a problem of his context: the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries effected a deadlock between religion and a poetic “wholeness”, whose “value is not the value of truth, but that of victorious imagination” (147).

It is notable that Santayana finds it possible simultaneously to explain Shakespeare contextually and to honor “victorious

imagination". As for "truth", Santayana identifies it with his own systemic naturalism (the aesthetics of which he finds epitomized in Dickens and Proust). But if early modern religious strife blocked Shakespeare's way to what Santayana in "Tragic Philosophy" (1936) calls a "mastering living religion" or "philosophy" (Santayana 1956d, 269), nevertheless Shakespeare's art offers itself to be read in terms that can illustrate both Santayana's thought and Shakespeare's career. "Tragic Philosophy" describes religion as "a second life, native to the soul, developed there independently of all evidence"; and it attests that "such an inner fountain of life and thought is evidently akin to poetic inspiration" (273). "Poetic inspiration" for Santayana is not the same as "victorious imagination", however; it is headed to a tragic end, "for what is tragedy but the conflict between inspiration and truth?" (275). In the light of that question, Shakespeare could be classified among "inspired individuals, whose inspirations contradicted the truth and were shattered by it" (276). Shakespeare himself would thus be a tragic figure. Nevertheless, however shattered himself by truth, however 'incoherent' his art, the author endures, apparently, because "inspiration" suffuses his work. If Santayana is right, the suffusion occurred because Shakespeare withdrew into a version of "a second life": an interface between poetry and religion. He did so, perhaps, long before he retired to Stratford; he already had retired into his poems and plays. For criticism to bring him out of retirement to assign him worldly power might go against the grain of his genius.

H. D. warmly took up the puzzle of Shakespeare's retirement in *By Avon River* (1945-46; published 1949), involving it with a speculative history of Shakespeare's religious contexts and with a vision of his art's (and her own art's) autonomy. As if in answer to James's baffled curiosity about Shakespeare's 'stop', H. D. concludes (on her concluding page) that Shakespeare's love of his younger daughter Judith, the twin survivor of Hamnet Shakespeare (d. 1596), drew Shakespeare home. But the conclusion is more a sudden epiphany than a terminal proof. To arrive at it, H. D. pursues a strategy that might be recommended as a scholarly model – if, that is, a combination of poetry and prose, as well as a

gap between poetic inspiration and historical context, can be adapted for cultural analysis.

H. D. adapts it. Its form oscillates between divided alternatives. In Part 1 of *By Avon River*, three lyric sequences of poetry are focused on a character 'who isn't': Claribel, the daughter of Alonso King of Naples, and the sister of Ferdinand. She is a missing *dramatis persona* in *The Tempest*, although her wedding to the King of Tunis indirectly causes the action of Shakespeare's play, where it is reported. The third of the lyric sequences turns Claribel into a quest figure on a pilgrimage that is at once religious and aesthetic. In Part 2 of *By Avon River*, lyric gives way to a prose that exhibits H. D.'s narrative version of historical-contextual research.

The juxtaposition of genres on which H. D.'s form depends produces a pattern of disjunctive contrasts. Her form in the second part juxtaposes statements such as "We do not know what [Shakespeare] is thinking" (H. D. 1949, 34) with her momentary authoritative penetrations of his mind. In H. D.'s research mode – that is, as she gathers evidence for why Shakespeare "came home" (5) – the form collects sample lyrics of fifty-nine Elizabethan and Jacobean poets who are Shakespeare's immediate literary context. H. D.'s culling of specimen texts witnesses her purposeful objectivity. At the same time, however, she declares her reliance on inclinations and impressions: "it is better to follow one's own clues and have of each of these poets, a living and personal memory, rather than grow weary and confused with disputable facts about them" (43). Thus the fact-pursuing latter part of H. D.'s book – *her* quest for contextual causes – identifies an historical determinant of the poets' texts, against the simultaneous background of her search's first part, in which the end of Claribel's quest is offered us as an instance of "inspiration", indeed of "victorious imagination". These divisions exploited by H. D.'s form are explicitly described when she says that, wanting to know what Shakespeare was thinking, "[w]e wander through a labyrinth. If we cut straight through, we destroy the shell-like curves and involutions. Where logic is, where reason dictates, we have [...] broad highways" (34); but where Shakespeare is, we have a complex maze, something like a knot garden that H. D. thinks he wanted to plant, with Judith, at New Place in Stratford.

How exactly does H. D. thread the maze in her book's second, 'historical', part, and how does she arrive at her conviction about Judith's role in Shakespeare's retirement? H. D.'s anthology of poems by Shakespeare's contemporaries emphasizes their common subject matter: the fragility, the untrustworthiness, the darkness of mortal life. To explain this, H. D. reads the work as the collective expression of the aftermath of a shattering historical context: religious schisms and wars, dissolution of the monasteries, martyrdoms, and ravages caused by plague: "unbearable actuality [...]. From this mad world, there was no escape" (71). Historical environment rules.

And yet: "There was the way of stark reality and there was escape from that reality" (83). The escape route mapped by H. D. belongs to history; but to another, and alternative one – a history of poetry and poets. *By Avon River* proposes – and, I would say, reminds us – that the history of fictions is not identical with the history of events and facts; that the time of literature is transtemporal, and a contrast to the time and empiricism of conventional historiography.

H. D. assigns Shakespeare's time to earlier centuries as well as to his own: to the eras of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Provençal literary tradition, which, she says, had "sprea[d] the germs of deadly heresy, the worship of beauty [...], disguised [...] in terms of earthly passion. But this passion was never requited. In other words, the love of the troubadour was love of the Spiritual" (82). Because of the spiritual dimension, the female object of the poet's love "was set apart" (82). The poets themselves became "set apart". "The poet is always suspect [...]. These heretics were [...] martyrs, in that they [...] were unconscious of the source of their inspiration. Reason [...] was well within the intellectual range of each one of them. But love was stronger. The power of love built up a kingdom" (83). The kingdom, which H. D. figures as a "spiritual inheritance" from "love of the Spiritual", was a "dream greater than reality" (84). Although not fully conscious of this dream, the poets inhabited it. It was "a phantom more real than the incontinent world of cathedral and of court" (85). H. D. figures it as a space (as well as a time) withdrawn from the world, a "heretical church", yet one whose credo and congregation – the poets – harbored "no

schism and no dissension" (85). Sadly, some poets, unable to sustain their space apart, surrendered their lives to historical strife. H. D. pointedly notes that William Shakespeare, "this cautious citizen of Stratford" (86), "unlike Christopher Marlowe, unlike Walter Raleigh, stands aside" from political engagement (68). To underline Shakespeare's detachment, H. D. imagines him being offered – by Lord Bacon – a diplomatic post in Italy. Shakespeare declines it, to remain in H. D.'s "phantom" space, where "the seeds of the faith" (84), flowering as "heretical" poetry already for centuries, germinated again in him: "If Hell was implicit in court and city, there were flowers to sweeten the stench of death. There were flowers to heal" (67).

Having opened her account of Shakespeare to an alternative time, H. D.'s narrative toggles between transtemporal dimensions and empirical contexts. She plausibly supposes Shakespeare at New Place retrospectively considering flaws in his plays, in a self-divided state of mind (a condition matching H. D.'s research form), after he has spent an evening – a documented reunion, in fact – with Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton. His self-critical thoughts suggest that he did not 'stop' writing. H. D. also plausibly suggests that Judith drew Shakespeare "home", from one kind of retirement (he "[stood] aside") to another, because Judith made her father belatedly conscious of neglect of her. His "flowers" "sweeten[ed] the stench of death" elsewhere; they did not sweeten his daughter's long solitude succeeding the death of her twin brother. Shakespeare thus seems to have neglected philoprogenitive love: a version, arguably, of the "love of the Spiritual", at odds with the fleshly love that Shakespeare expended on the "*master-mistress of my passion*" (36). So, H. D. observes, "[h]e is planning the Knotte Garden" with Judith: "Judith understood what he wanted with the garden" (35-36). He wanted, H. D. gives us to deduce, a revitalized node of relation with her, "in the face of death, [...] somehow turned to light" (65). That "turn to" the "light", H. D. also implies, resisted destructive male eros: the garden would not include "deadmen's-fingers" (88), whose "country name" (36) is "bull's pizzles".

Nevertheless, an empirical historical gloom hangs over H. D.'s presentation of the garden. Shakespeare's final ruminations occur when "Judith has gone away" (35). H. D. does not tell the cause of

that departure, but ordinary historians do: a few months before her father's death, Judith at age thirty married. Her husband was almost immediately revealed to be faithless. Shakespeare changed his will to protect his daughter from her spouse. Does that change exemplify the power of "flowers to heal"? Perhaps Shakespeare's inspiration for the new "Knotte" "shattered" on a sorry truth (as Santayana would say) that could not be mitigated. Yet H. D.'s last penetration of Shakespeare's thought discovers him in a moment that precipitates his awareness of his retirement-motivating love for Judith. He often thought of Judith in the past, H. D. posits, as a likeness of star-crossed Juliet: Juliet, waking from sleep, discovered her lover's death; H. D. thinks that Judith, waking from sleep, discovered her brother's death. But now Shakespeare is presented as having a vision: he inwardly sees Judith, Juliet, and Eleanor of Aquitaine as identities of one another. Shakespeare has come home to Judith, H. D. concludes, not only lovingly conscious of her, but newly aware of the "heretical church" to which he belongs, and in which he sees her saved from sadness.

In the visionary moment H. D. assigns to Shakespeare, she fuses her two kinds of history, the transtemporal and the temporal. But if this constitutes reliable history, I expect my historicist-contextualist readers will say impatiently, so much the worse. It is not rationally grounded in evidence; its conjectural tissue is weakened by idealizing 'religious' dimensions; and H. D.'s darting in and out of 'Shakespeare's' supposed consciousness scarcely comes up to the mark of Shapiro's mind-reading of the playwright. Such impatience, however, trusts to history as the all-mastering discourse, the coldest truth. In placing James, Santayana, and H. D. alongside Shapiro's historicism, I am reminding us that a different discourse, a truth of its own epitomized for these writers by Shakespeare's identity and work, cannot be mixed easily with what we take to be "stark reality". Given H. D.'s organization of her book, history as it is ordinarily understood and researched is a belated secondary aspect of something more primary. Its truth either succeeds inspiration or imagination or is starkly separated or declined from them. That secondariness is driven home by Claribel's vision quest in *By Avon River's* first half. Claribel begins there as a mere name, "invisible, voiceless" (14), merely a name for

a distant daughter in *The Tempest*. But H. D. develops for her a character, linked to death-resisting flowers and herbs (rosemary especially), and to healing pacific “truce; / For strife / Is ended [...] / Not after death / But now and here” (12). In the final lyric sequence, “Claribel’s Way to God”, Claribel solicits religious authorities for knowledge of divinity. But she cannot identify with their established thought and practices. She identifies instead with an alternative religious-poetic tradition, avatar of the place apart retraced by H. D. in her book’s second half. Three variants of a Holy Trinity satisfy the “divine dissatisfaction” (to echo James) that sends Claribel on her search. One variant, abetted by St Francis, conjoins “[t]he spoken and the written Word” with “Poverty” (19); one, Arabic in origin, allegorizes “Worship of light” as “[a] tale of passion and of beauty, / Disguised as Lover and as Lady, / To hide the ineffable Mystery” (23); one fuses “the Dream, the Dreamer and the Song” (25).

In a new edition of *By Avon River*, Lara Vetter’s introduction celebrates the feminism of H. D.’s imagination of Claribel, but argues that H. D. also “denigrates” the retired Shakespeare, presenting him as a drinker with a failing memory (Vetter 2014, 24). His memory lapses mark his historical culpability: he is “indict[ed]” by H. D., Vetter says, “as a participant in the erasure of cultural memory”, an “erasure” that is a “facilitator of [...] continual cycles of warfare” (24). To be sure, Vetter says that H. D. is “[e]ver ambivalent” (24) about such matters; and one might assess the bipartite division of *By Avon River* as an expression of H. D.’s self-division, of her not trusting the certainties she seeks. Nevertheless, an ‘indictment’ of Shakespeare for causing wars by ‘facilitating’ them, and other indictments of his additional failures (he is a “plagiarist”, he is a “misogynist” [24]), if they are there in H. D. rather than in Vetter, might render H. D.’s volume incoherent from its very start, where H. D. pairs Shakespeare’s Ariel and her Claribel as figures who say “farewell” to “strife”. But, it appears, for an historicizing mind to grant credence to Claribel’s trinities, to H. D.’s “heretical church” of poets, or even to “the shell-like curves” of H. D.’s research method, would be for that mind to believe in airy nothings. If those nothings exist, they apparently do so only by the grace of their anchors in solidly material, empirical historical-

political contexts. Inasmuch as the historian, cultural or literary or both, might be like any character in *The Tempest*, the likeness would be to Prospero when he says farewell to Ariel, and retires from magic.

3. "Contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch"; or, Shakespeare in the Park

I have cited Vetter's account of *By Avon River* as another token, like Shapiro's, of a norm of critical approach to "the blessed fictive world" that is, paradoxically, less interested in the fictive world than in what James called reality's "stare". As I track a set of resistances to that "stare", I do not mean to denigrate critics or readers on the other side of the critical argument. "Opposition is true friendship", as William Blake says. Opponent-friends valuably sharpen important questions. Does "the blessed fictive world", magical or otherwise, have a special identity that divides it from its opposite number? Is it a mistake to pursue or advocate a divide, or at least a gap, between them? Can the art of poetry – and literary criticism – retire from magic, and exchange it for reality or 'context'? With these questions in mind, and to bring this essay full circle, I shall shortly return to the *Julius Caesar* in Central Park that insisted on the play's involvement with American politics, in effect on the play's subordination to current history, as if the less fictive the drama appeared, the better. But before I bring to that production the considerations expressed by the writers in my previous pages, it might be useful to add to them, briefly, answers to questions about art's identity in W. H. Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's "The Tempest"* (1944).

Auden's volume begins immediately after Shakespeare's play ends, hence with the re-shaping of Prospero's identity. Having renounced his fictive powers, Prospero will go home to Milan and be newly defined. His transition perhaps echoes – to sound a contextual note – Auden's wartime application for American citizenship during the writing of his "Commentary": a change of self from British to American. (It resonates with H. D.'s divided national self: is she American, or naturalized British?) Indeed, all the characters in *The Sea and the Mirror* are undergoing transitions

that are personal and political. They are self-divided changes because they measure their prospective selves against identities they now are leaving behind. Despite the self-divisions, however, the movement of most characters is toward unity and community, in contrast with the unchanging malevolent self of Prospero's kingdom-usurping brother, Antonio. His lyric refrains, darkly counterpointing the hopeful lyrics of his fellows, insist on his self-containment, his intransigent resistance to change and community.

Antonio's retirement from his fellows might be figured – by a self-divided Auden, I would say – as a likeness of art's intransigent divorce from its contextual surround. Auden's final segment of *The Sea and the Mirror*, under the heading "Caliban to the Audience", can be seen to confront and to work out this threatening possibility. Indeed the finale represents "the Audience" – in effect "The Audience to Caliban" – apparently demanding of art the same valuable separateness that I've traced in James and H. D. The audience asserts that there mustn't be an erasure of "prohibitive frontiers" (Auden 2003, 32) that separate fiction from reality. But this fear of erasure is not because art's identity matters to the audience members. Instead, they fear the loss of an anxiety-calming mirror, without which "we should never know who we were or what we wanted" (32). By soliciting its mirror image in art, by making art secondary to that image, the audience seeks confirmation of search-for-self as determining context³. "It is [the prohibitive frontiers] who donate to neighbourhood all its accuracy and vehemence. It is thanks to them that we do know with whom to associate, make love, exchange recipes and jokes, go mountain climbing or sit side by side fishing from piers" (32). If audience members would no longer be able to see themselves as they want to see themselves in the mirror, an "unrectored chaos" (29) would ensue.

Yet Auden makes chaos the very vehicle of the audience's complaint. The audience speaks to Caliban, not identifying with him, whom it thinks to be the 'unrectoring' agent. But Caliban's

³ Miranda's lyric refrain, "My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely" (Auden 2003, 25-26), suggests the consonance of her desire for Ferdinand with an audience's search for mirror images.

vocalization of the audience, simultaneously uttering a brief for the audience's search for identity, confounds that search by illustrating 'his' indefiniteness. He is himself, and he is also Henry James, in whose voice 'he' also speaks; and those voices are also Shakespeare's. These three – historical authors and fictive inventions – speak, in effect, at once, even as they articulate the audience's clamor for definition. But identities shift and multiply; this trinity expands. Caliban is said to be identical with Eros; Caliban and Ariel, who are opposites, appear to be one and the same. The resulting cacophony of voices underwrites the fusion of separately identifiable selves that Antonio rejects. The cacophony also makes telling text apart from context especially difficult.

Nevertheless, without discounting Antonio's extremism, Auden makes cacophonous confusion end in a final, finer drawing of the line between art and life, especially where that line affects art's mirror function⁴. Caliban-Ariel, who seem to conjoin "stark reality" and "the blessed fictive world", point out to audience members (including aspiring authors) that art may mirror them, but that it also will mirror changes not ministering to happy selfhood (and not ministering either, Auden implies along the way, to happy endings for fraternity, romance, or justice). Audience identity, in other words, will be disrupted, obscured, and humbled rather than justified or exalted in art's reflections of it. Caliban-Ariel concedes an inevitable "gap" (50). "[T]he dedicated dramatist" (50), they explain to the audience, tries to represent and to reveal the audience's (or an audience member's) true self, but in doing so, the dramatist must also render the alienating conditions that obstruct identity. "[W]hat other aim and justification has [the dramatist], what else exactly *is* the artistic gift which he is forbidden to hide, if not to make you unforgettably conscious of the ungarnished offended gap between what you so questionably are and [...] the unqualified No that opposes your every step [...]?" (50). Nor, Caliban-Ariel add, is "an awareness of the gap [...] itself a bridge" (50). In Auden's "Postscript" to his "Commentary", self-divided Ariel sighs, longing for a permanent union with Caliban; but he

⁴ Kirsch notes the "poten[cy]" for Auden of "schematic dualism" (Auden 2003, xiii).

must accept a melancholy “No” that goes along with an inevitable quest for resolved identity: for stable ‘I’-ing, so to speak.

What is melancholy at one moment, however, is inspiring and inspired at another. Auden’s final ‘scene’ of the “Commentary” exhibits Caliban and Ariel’s humbled selves. Standing in front of the curtain, after yet another of their endless performances, they (and their dramatist) admit that artistic enterprise is an ever-inadequate business. At the point of that admission, however, Auden concludes his “Commentary” in a way that resonates with James and H. D.’s visions, and with Santayana’s desire for a poetics that has a philosophical-religious underpinning. There is another context, indeed another world, Caliban and Ariel say at their curtain call because, suddenly, they hear sounds of a transcendent realm they name “the real Word”, or a “Wholly Other Life”, or “[t]he perfected Work which is not ours” (52). Art, as they try anew to grasp it, depends upon its tie to a new trinity (formulated almost at the same time as H. D.’s) of “Word”, “Other Life”, and “perfected Work”, even though the sign of the tie is again a gap, complementary to the one between self-centered audience and resisting mirror. “[O]ur shame, our fear, our incorrigible staginess, all wish and no resolve”, the artist-performers propose, are “all we have; only now” – now that they admit art’s humbling, alongside selfhood’s – “it is not in spite of them but with them that we are blessed by that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf of which our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch – we understand them at last – are feebly figurative signs” (52). To be sure, “[the perfected Work’s] great coherences stand out through [art’s] secular blur [...]; its voice speaks through our muffling banks of artificial flowers” (52-53). “Feebly figurative” is not without communicative power. Still, “the blessed fictive world” is inseparable in Auden from an acceptance of “gulf” and “fissure”. Acceptance of the “gulf” maintains art’s ‘separateness’ (or to echo James and H. D., art’s withdrawal) from the “stark reality” of the audience’s hunger for self-possession; and, at the same time, maintains art’s distance from an unqualified

merger with a doctrinal unworldliness⁵. Even “the real Word” is divided from explicit identification with Platonism or Christianity.

Art’s apartness as I’ve traced it in Auden and the others implies a model for literary criticism: one that searches out, and dwells on, verbal artistry’s resistance to contextualizing attachment, rather than thwarts the resistance. Unfortunately, the hunger for relevance overrides alternatives. For a measure of thwarting’s efficacy, I return to Shakespeare in the Park, and its merger of scholarly emphasis on contexts with entertainment.

The Central Park production’s director, Oskar Eustis, and Shapiro, acting as a production consultant, decided that “*Julius Caesar* is broken backed, the second half [...] a letdown, never quite matching the drama of the buildup to Caesar’s assassination” (Shapiro 2020, xvii). To exploit that “buildup”, Eustis’s Caesar imitated Trump; his Calpurnia imitated Melania Trump. Cassius “wav[ed] a RESIST banner”, and wore a “pink ‘pussyhat’”, emblem of post-election feminist protest marches against Trump (xxii). Even before the rise of the curtain, the exploitation got under way. In an improv prologue, audience members were invited to write condolence messages to Hilary Clinton for losing the election. Thereupon “a group of white men wearing red MAKE ROME GREAT AGAIN baseball caps” (xxi) stalked the stage. But these men were hired extras. Later, to intensify further the play’s contextual relevance, Eustis planted other extras in the audience who enacted Republican response to the assassination onstage with vociferous outbursts and threats of physical violence.

According to Eustis, his idea for the production, conceived a month after the November 2016 election, expressed doubts about Brutus and Cassius: “people who don’t know how to take power”, in contrast with the likes of Caesar-Trump, “who are able to take power [...]. Power becomes an end in itself. And that of course is the destruction of democracy” (xvii). If one suspects Eustis’s idea and his explanation for “the destruction of democracy” to be

⁵ Zukofsky provides us with a variant of Auden’s realm of “the real Word”, which Zukofsky identifies with Shakespeare’s insistent involvement of poetry with sight, love, and mind. For Zukofsky the only adequate context for Shakespeare’s “real Word” is a vast atemporal and transnational constellation of poets, novelists, and philosophers (Zukofsky 1987).

banalities, one might suggest that sutures of the “contrived fissure[e] of mirror and proscenium arch” are bound to produce more of the same. The production yielded sutures aplenty, in which offstage opponents acted out their rigid political selfhoods, to the point of chaos. Right-wing media got illegal hold of video of the assassination scene, broadcast it nationally, and persecuted the Public Theater. At one performance, Republican non-actors burst onto the stage, phone-recording their assault, and bringing the stage business to a temporary stop. Death threats were sent to the director and actors. Subsequent performances required plainclothes police to guard the theater. Is this what Eustis wanted? He is quoted as saying that “democracy depends on the conflict of different points of view” (xxviii). He aimed to stage that conflict. Shapiro comments that “[i]n an age in which so many were quick to dismiss the views on the other side that was a risky assumption” (xxvi); especially, one might add, when the sides were, and remain, inflexibly identifiable. To have focused on the assassination scene at the expense of the play’s latter half was to already establish one point of view about the play to the prejudice of others. Lop-sided partisanship prevailed. Symptomatically, Shapiro notes, conservative critics were so self-centered that they missed an aspect of the production that mirrored their anti-leftism: “the production had unwittingly exposed the threat posed to American democracy by leftist agitators like Cassius” (206). But identity-based incapacity also affected ‘the left’. According to Shapiro, “the Left found themselves ill-prepared to deal with the force of right-wing media and threats of violence” (204) – perhaps, to expand on Shapiro’s remark about Cassius, because left identity and its media-mirrors have continually refused to note their likeness to right-wing media and right-wing threats of violence.

“Eustis ruefully admitted after the run was over” that “his staging [...] played ‘exactly into the great cultural divide we have right now’ [...] between those of us who believe in this democracy, and those of us who believe that this democracy has utterly failed” (219-20). This admission was indeed belated. The context at issue long preceded 2017. The production aimed to sensationalize the contextual divide, not to mitigate it, in the way that equations of “democracy” with “the conflict of different points of view” suggest

mitigation. Eustis's production played to the left part of the divide – for which of us on that side did not wish at one time or another for delivery via assassination from the man “democracy” could not free us from, even though “democracy” had installed him? Yet if the wish had been fulfilled, the chaos thereafter would have been worse than any alternative. And why, if one seeks “different points of view”, should the Public Theater in the context of an American history of presidential assassinations echo a version of Shakespeare's most insane effect on American theater, however ‘provocative’ “the papers” and their media descendants might judge it?

Shapiro calls Shakespeare a serviceable worker of effects, “a canary in the coal mine” “signaling” changing “fundamental[s] in the culture” (203). But perhaps it would be better for Shakespeare, for art, and for literary history and literary criticism not to be prescient historical canaries, and not to want to be. The problem in rigidly divided America – to limit the problem to a national locale – is that there is no alternative space to which Americans can retire from their contextualizing historical and political divisions, and in which space some equivalent of other “Words”, or of a “Wholly Other Life”, or of the “perfected Work” that is not ours might get a hearing and ease conflicts. Shakespeare, art, and literary criticism could provide that opportune alternative locus of reflection. The one division they would honor would be “the gap” that signifies their ‘separateness’ from topical media publicity, their heretical withdrawal from orthodoxies, their subversion of clamorous identities. Such, at least, is the suggestion offered by the four writers I've represented. Although I have made use of an American matter to represent them, their suggestion is offered to critics and readers anywhere, undetermined by context.

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“He Isn’t Exactly My Brother”: Shakespearean Illogic in *The Palm Beach Story*

Lisa Sternlieb

Although Stanley Cavell disparaged *The Palm Beach Story*, this article argues that the film epitomizes a Cavellian comedy of remarriage. More than any of the screwball comedies in Cavell’s classic study, *The Palm Beach Story* borrows its madcap plot twists from Shakespearean comedies. While Preston Sturges pays homage to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Comedy of Errors*, he also exposes the illogic of plots built on interchangeable characters. Both Shakespeare and Sturges rely on impersonation and disguise, but while Shakespeare uses them to unite his men and women in matrimony, Sturges uses them to distinguish between the authentic experience and the performance of love.

Keywords: Preston Sturges, Stanley Cavell, Twins, Cross-dressing, Cuckoldry, Hunting, Aristophanes

Forty years ago, Stanley Cavell made the academic study of screwball comedy respectable. In *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981), Cavell argued that seven movies made between 1934 and 1949 – *It Happened One Night*, *The Awful Truth*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Lady Eve*, and *Adam’s Rib* – represent both a pinnacle of Hollywood filmmaking and a reimagining “of the preoccupations and discoveries of Shakespearean romantic comedy” (Cavell 1981, 1). Cavell asserts that this reimagining takes the form of the comedy of remarriage, which he insists is a peculiarly American genre. These movies offer second chances, and America is the land of

second chances¹. Remarriage is the subject of *The Awful Truth*, for example, in which Cary Grant and Irene Dunne reunite seconds before their divorce is finalized, or *The Philadelphia Story*, in which Katharine Hepburn calls off her wedding to her fiancé only to remarry her ex-husband at the same ceremony. Cavell devoted less than one sentence to his book's most glaring omission: Preston Sturges's *The Palm Beach Story* (1942). The film, Cavell insisted, "multiplies remarriages beyond necessity, or credibility" (Cavell 1981, 225)². Cavell is referring to the movie's final shot in which the film's stars Claudette Colbert and Joel McCrea (twins A and B) are revealed to have identical twins (twins C and D) who are reluctantly enlisted to marry the siblings (Rudy Vallée and Mary Astor) who have earlier set their hearts on twins A and B in a double wedding ceremony. This 'unnecessary' and 'incredible' plot twist clearly borrows from such Shakespearean works as *The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Sturges is Shakespeare's heir. He serves up language – puns, allusions, malapropisms, double entendres – in rapid strokes and extended rallies.

This affinity has not gone unobserved. Some critics have called Sturges the "most 'American'" of all directors (Jaeckle 2015, 1).

¹ In fact, *The Palm Beach Story* offers us second chances to delight in the screwball comedy itself. *It Happened One Night* invented the genre. The film starts off with Colbert leaping off of a yacht in Florida, and the hero and heroine set off by bus and car to New York together. New York is the setting of almost every screwball comedy to follow. *The Palm Beach Story* takes the original screwball heroine (Claudette Colbert) and reverses her journey. She starts off in New York and makes her way by train and finally a yacht to Florida (see footnote 2 below). This in turn inspired the late screwball comedy *Some Like It Hot*. Marilyn Monroe sets off on a train from Chicago to Florida. On the beach she meets Tony Curtis putting on Cary Grant's accent to impersonate Rudy Vallée's John D. Hackensacker. Vallée brought Colbert to Palm Beach aboard his yacht; Curtis borrows a yacht to convince Monroe that he, a broke saxophone player, is, like Hackensacker, the heir to the Shell Oil fortune.

² Stuart Klawans notices Cavell's strange omission, but focusing on Claudette Colbert's career, makes a very different argument. See Klawans 2005.

Others have noted that his brilliant dialogue is the result of his unconventional upbringing:

In recounting the familiar story of Mary Desti dragging the young Preston back and forth from Paris to Chicago and New York, critic Richard Schickel contends that these experiences engendered in Sturges a “partial alienation [that] shaped his sensibility”. This alienation, he argues, is why Sturges was such a talented wordsmith, especially when it came to appreciating American colloquialisms. It also developed in him a sense of skepticism: the ability to observe without judging, to mock without criticizing. (12)³

This wordsmith has been compared to Ben Hecht, Billy Wilder, and Orson Welles, but also Voltaire, Racine, Swift, and Twain (13). I do not hesitate to read his words beside Shakespeare’s.

Nor do I hesitate to observe where Sturges makes his own idiosyncratic, arguably American use of Shakespeare’s plots and comic stratagems. Thus, I read the structure of *The Palm Beach Story* as the screenplay hints that we should, as a tennis racket with tightly woven, beautifully balanced strings surrounded by a frame. The interweaving of the firm, immobile warp and the looser, flexible woof threads creates the tension and release necessary to both tennis and screwball comedy. In Shakespearean comedy, identity, always in flux, could be represented by the woof. But Sturges’s hero, Tom Jeffers, exemplifies the warp. Sturges, I will argue, believes that marital happiness requires a steadfast, unwavering identity. Both Shakespeare and Sturges rely on impersonation and disguise, but while Shakespeare uses them to unite his men and women in matrimony, Sturges uses them to distinguish between the authentic experience and the performance of love. *The Palm Beach Story* intricately engages with the mechanics and actively opposes the logic of Shakespearean comedy, particularly its obsession with transformation and metamorphosis. It is particularly evocative of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. But Sturges, as always, upends our expectations. His madcap movie

³ Jaeckle quotes Schickel 1985, 33.

with lightning-fast dialogue and constant movement celebrates stasis. Tom Jeffers, like such virginal heroines as the Sabrina of *Comus* or the Lizzie of "Goblin Market", is the fairy tale hero who must undergo tests and withstand temptations. All the forces of the film (including his wife) are working mightily to discombobulate him. He retains a core self. He refuses to change⁴.

The Palm Beach Story begins with a frame narrative reminiscent of such comedies as *The Taming of the Shrew*. In the wordless sequence, a maid faints after seeing Claudette Colbert in a bridal gown. When she comes to, she finds another Claudette Colbert (gagged and bound in only a slip and heels) kicking her way out of a locked closet and faints again. These scenes are intercut with clips of one Joel McCrea in a tuxedo hailing a taxi and another Joel McCrea putting on a tuxedo in a different cab. One Joel McCrea and one Claudette Colbert manage to make it to the church in time to be wed. Embroidered words emerge on the screen telling us that "they lived happily ever after": "or did they?"⁵. Five years pass, and in

⁴ In Cavell's readings, love *is* performance. In *It Happened One Night*, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert fall in love by performing the roles of feuding spouses. In *His Girl Friday*, Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant rediscover their love for each other by playing innocent together after hiding a wanted murderer in a desk. In *The Awful Truth*, Irene Dunne wins Cary Grant back from his snobbish fiancé by pretending to be his vulgar sister. Cavell's couples love to reenact childhood together. In *Bringing Up Baby*, Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant slide down hills and wander into water as they go in search of bones and leopards. In *Adam's Rib*, Hepburn and Spencer Tracy delight in showing their guests home movies of themselves behaving like kids. Cavell makes much of the fact that Hepburn and Grant (in *The Philadelphia Story*) grew up together. They need to be reunited to recapture those childhood joys. Yet each of the performers Cavell discusses assumes his or her part *voluntarily*. Joel McCrea's Tom Jeffers is a rare example in screwball comedy of a coerced performer. Before he can utter a word, his wife introduces him to the Hackensackers (Vallée and Astor) as her brother, "Captain McGlue". Being the gentleman he is, Tom goes along with her ruse, but never easily or happily. Tom refuses to improvise. He refuses to retreat into childhood. Despite the fact that the Hackensackers are too self-involved to catch on, Tom remains a husband and a grown-up.

⁵ All the quotations from *The Palm Beach Story* are taken from Sturges 1942.

Act I (“New York”) we meet Colbert (Gerry Jeffers) living in a Park Avenue duplex which is being shown to prospective tenants because she and McCrea (Tom Jeffers) have failed to pay the rent. Hiding in a wrapper in her tub, she meets “the Wienie King”, who decides not to rent her apartment for himself, but to give her \$700 to pay the rent and other bills. That night Colbert tells McCrea that it’s time for them to split up because she’ll never make him a good wife as she can’t cook or sew, and he’ll never be able to save a dime with her around. McCrea wants them to stay together but agrees to spend the night on the couch. Unable to unhook her dress, Gerry sits in his lap while Tom tries to unzip it, and within seconds is kissing him and being carried off to bed by him. The next morning Gerry packs a bag and heads to Penn Station to get a quick divorce in Palm Beach. Running away from Tom, she loses her suitcase, but in Act II (“The Train”) gets a free ticket from a group of drunk hunters, the Ale and Quail Club. We do not appear to have entered Arden or the Athenian forest, but the comic arc is taking us from an economically and morally straightened urban environment to a more anarchic realm where chaos and questionable mores reign supreme. Meanwhile, the Wienie King has moved into Tom and Gerry’s building. He asks Tom why he doesn’t fly down to Palm Beach and meet Gerry when she arrives, then hands him enough cash for the flight. During the night, the Club starts shooting up the train. Gerry takes refuge in the bunk above John D. Hackensacker III, one of the richest men in the world. The next morning she finds that the hunters’ car has been disconnected from the train and that she now has no clothes or purse. Hackensacker takes her to a Jacksonville department store where he buys her an enormous wardrobe. Then, aboard his yacht, they sail into Act III (“Palm Beach”). Waiting for them are both Tom and Hackensacker’s much-married sister, Maud. Determined to snag Hackensacker as her next husband, Gerry introduces Tom as her brother Captain McGlue, and we learn that Maud calls her brother “Snoodles”. We are now in the enchanted realm promised us by Gerry’s meeting Hackensacker. Here, as in *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, partners may be switched and magical interventions may

take place. Gerry plots to have Hackensacker pay Tom for her divorce with the \$99,000 Tom needs to build his "most remarkable invention", an airport strung like a tennis racket to be built in the air over New York City. Maud falls for Captain McGlue, Hackensacker for Gerry. But that night Gerry once again cannot unhook her dress. She reluctantly asks Tom for help and within seconds has collapsed into his arms. The next morning, as they pack to leave, Gerry reveals the truth to Hackensacker and Maud: "He isn't exactly my brother [...]. He's my husband". The heartbroken Hackensacker wonders if Gerry has a sister.

GERRY

Only a twin sister.

HACKENSACKER

A twin sister?

GERRY

Oh, didn't you know about that? That's how we were married in the beginning both being twins.

TOM

Of course, that's another plot entirely.

And within seconds we cut to the final shot of Gerry and Tom serving as witnesses at the wedding of Hackensacker to Gerry's twin and Maud to Tom's twin. The dialogue here, as throughout *The Palm Beach Story*, is hilarious. Why would Vallée and Astor know that Colbert and McCrea met because they're both twins? Seconds earlier they believed them to be siblings. McCrea's "but that's another plot entirely" is doing more than breaking the fourth wall. If we suspected that we are seeing identical twins (and this is certainly not clear) in the opening minutes, we quickly forget about them as we try to keep up with the movie's series of madcap adventures and eccentric characters. But when the identical twins suddenly reappear, we may suspect that the entirely different plot to which Tom refers is that the Claudette Colbert who is gagged and locked in a closet has wanted to marry the Joel McCrea who marries her sister while the Joel McCrea who doesn't make it to the church on time has wanted to marry the Claudette Colbert who

marries his brother. We cannot know for sure if this is what Sturges had in mind, but if we follow the logic of Shakespearean comedy, this plot is neither ‘unnecessary’ nor ‘incredible’ but absolutely conventional. In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia falls in love with Viola; when Viola’s twin Sebastian shows up, Olivia marries him immediately. In *The Comedy of Errors*, when Antipholus’s twin (also named Antipholus) begins to fall in love with his brother’s sister-in-law, she must rebuff him until she realizes that there are two brothers named Antipholus, and she is free to marry the one who isn’t married to her sister.

While we may have forgotten about the twin brothers of *The Palm Beach Story*’s opening scene, the entire third act of the film hinges on the masquerade that Tom is Gerry’s brother.

TOM

Where’d you get the brother idea?

GERRY

Because you had your arms around me.

TOM

Oh, I suppose no one’s ever had his arms around you except your brother, only you haven’t got one. I don’t suppose Captain Hackensacker ever put his arms around you.

GERRY

Of course not.

[...]

Naturally, he will put his arms around me when and if we’re engaged.

This quintessentially screwball dialogue – a woman telling her husband that he needs to pose as her brother so that she can marry one of the world’s richest men who will (as part of her divorce settlement) pay her first husband off with enough money to build his airport – is picked up again later that evening when Tom and Gerry part to sleep in separate bedrooms.

TOM

Won’t you kiss your brother goodnight?

GERRY

I don't know. I never had a brother before.

TOM

You have one now.

GERRY

You fool.

(*They kiss*).

At this moment, Snoodles interrupts their kiss by assembling an eighteen-piece orchestra beneath Gerry's balcony. The naive and inexperienced Snoodles is delighted to see both Tom and Gerry appear on the balcony as he sings "Goodnight, Sweetheart". The song has its intended effect. Gerry falls hopelessly in love – with her husband – as Snoodles serenades her. The scene should evoke for us one of Shakespeare's "remarriage" plots. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio is duped into believing that Hero, standing at her chamber window, is toying with another man. The next day, during their aborted wedding, Claudio accuses Hero of knowing "the heat of a luxurious bed" (IV.i.41)⁶, but her father suggests that it is Claudio himself with whom she has had premarital relations:

CLAUDIO

I know what you would say. If I have known her,
You will say she did embrace me as a husband,
And so extenuate the forehead sin.

No, Leonato,

I never tempted her with word too large,

But as a brother to his sister showed

Bashful sincerity and comely love. (48-54)

"And seemed I ever otherwise to you?" (55), begs Hero. Despite the fact that Shakespeare revisits the scene of the woman falsely accused in *Othello*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*, we should not overlook the oddity of this particular scene – Claudio accuses a wanton harlot of wanting to marry him when he has never behaved as anything but a brother to her. Does this sound like the behavior of fiancés? Is Claudio suggesting that their courtship has never

⁶ All Shakespeare quotations are taken from Shakespeare 2005.

even hinted at sexuality? Or is he saying that there is as much if not more sexual heat between sisters and brothers as there is between fiancés? Why, if she is so oversexed, is Hero interested in marrying a man who treats her as a sister? This is not the first time Shakespeare has hinted at unnaturally close brother/sister attachments. Olivia, for example, refuses Orsino's attentions because she insists on mourning her dead brother for seven years. After Claudio disgraces Hero, a friar (as in *Romeo and Juliet*) convinces Hero to play dead. Meanwhile, Dogberry and his buffoonish band capture Borachio who confesses to Don John's plot against the pure and virtuous Hero. When Claudio learns that he has killed his beloved because of what he took for 'ocular proof', he agrees to marry Hero's cousin, "[a]lmost the copy of" (V.i.281) Hero. At the second wedding, Claudio takes the hand of the masked Hero:

CLAUDIO

[...]

I am your husband if you like of me.

HERO (*unmasking*)

And when I lived I was your other wife;

And when you loved, you were my other husband.

CLAUDIO

Another Hero! (V.iv.59-62)

Again, I find Claudio's response here odd. Instead of exclaiming, "Hero, you're alive!", he appears to believe that Hero is dead and that by some great good fortune her cousin actually is "the copy of" Hero. This is not the same Hero he fell in love with. This is *another Hero* who can substitute for the first. This is why, by the logic of Shakespearean comedy, we should not be surprised that Snoodles moves immediately from desiring Gerry – "I'll never get over it as long as I live" – to pining for her sister. Another Gerry, like another Hero, will do just fine. Snoodles does not question this logic; Sturges, however, does. Over and over in Shakespeare's comedies, doubles and twins are used to elide differences between characters. While the female characters – Rosalind, Portia, Viola –

are memorable, the male characters (as in *The Comedy of Errors*) are often deliberately interchangeable. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lysander and Hermia are in love, but Egeus, Hermia's father, demands that she marry Demetrius, who is loved by Helena. Even Hermia, who runs off with Lysander, cannot explain to her father why she wants him, not Demetrius. When her father begs her to see that "Demetrius is a worthy gentleman" (I.i.52), all she can muster is: "So is Lysander" (53)⁷. Under the spell of a love potion, both Demetrius and Lysander turn against Hermia and fall madly in love with Helena. The play is resolved with Lysander marrying Hermia and Demetrius marrying Helena. Does it matter who marries whom? When Shakespeare uses twins, the audience is in on the joke. We understand that the plot can only be resolved when Viola and Sebastian or the two brothers Antipholus and the two brothers Dromio come face-to-face. Colbert's and McCrea's twins, whom we have likely forgotten, however, are offered up as *dei ex machina* in the film's final moments. This Shakespearean plot forms a frame around the main plot of *The Palm Beach Story*, but it is critical to understanding the marriage of Tom and Gerry. Gerry believes she can run off to Palm Beach and exchange Tom for a richer man. But the frame narrative should remind her that people are not exchangeable. Why is Gerry so anxious to marry Tom and not his twin brother? Why has she (presumably) bound and gagged her sister, and stolen her wedding dress so that she can get to Tom first? And why, after racing to the church, do Tom and Gerry instantly recognize each as the other's true love? If Olivia cannot have Viola, she is content to have his/her twin. No such arrangement works for Tom and Gerry. Rudy Vallée and Mary Astor are perfectly content to trade in their first choices for their second ones, but the twins themselves look shocked and bewildered to be matched up with the multi-millionaires.

Sturges had already made a film about attempting to exchange one human being for another. In *The Lady Eve*, there is only one

⁷ See Emma Smith's chapter on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *This Is Shakespeare* (Smith 2019).

Barbara Stanwyck, but she convinces Henry Fonda that there are actually two of her, one (Jean) a cardsharp, the other (Eve) a member of the British aristocracy. Fonda is in love with Jean but, in a catastrophic move, settles for Eve instead. In the film's final moments, Fonda is reunited with Jean, and the two run ecstatically down flights of stairs to begin married life in her stateroom. In a sense, *The Palm Beach Story* picks up from this moment five years later when Gerry allows Tom to carry her up the stairs to bed even as she repeatedly insists that they don't love each other anymore, that "there's nothing left but admiration and respect": "We're just habits, bad habits", "nothing but a habit, a bad habit". The next morning Gerry, overlooking everything she knew on her wedding day, sets off to trade in Tom for a richer model. And she does this as so many Shakespearean heroines beginning their adventures did before her, by trading in one "habit" for another. When the first of Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroines, Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, decides to pursue Proteus, her maid Lucetta asks:

LUCETTA

But in what *habit* will you go along?

JULIA

Not like a woman, for I would prevent

The loose encounters of lascivious men.

Gentle Lucetta, fit me with such weeds

As may beseem some well-reputed page. (II.vii.39-43, emphasis mine)

And when Portia decides to save Antonio's life by posing as the lawyer Balthazar, she tells Nerissa that: "We'll see our husbands / Before they think of us [...], but in such a *habit* / That they shall think we are accomplishèd / With that we lack" (III.iv.58-62, emphasis mine).

If Gerry has brushed up on her Shakespeare, then she believes that she can change her habits as easily as she changes her clothes. For doesn't Rosalind make Orlando believe that she is Ganymede even when she plays Ganymede playing Rosalind? Doesn't Viola, by putting on her brother's clothes, convince Olivia, who has sworn off all men, to instantly fall in love? Doesn't Portia, by donning male

clothes, win the case against Shylock? Doesn't Margaret, simply by donning Hero's clothes, convince Claudio that his beloved is a whore? In Shakespeare, disguises are donned easily and seamlessly. Almost all costume changes occur off-stage or, as in the case of *Much Ado*, are only reported, not staged. Viola tells us she will appear as a man; she appears as a man. Cross-dressing and changing identity are all too easy. But Gerry's costume changes are always difficult. Twice she needs Tom to unhook dresses she is stuck in. Attempting to keep her from running away from him, Tom manages to spill the contents of Gerry's suitcase on the sidewalk. Awakening on the train with nothing but men's pajamas, Gerry tries on dozens of other passengers' clothes before tying the pajama bottoms around her head and a Pullman blanket around her waist in order to enter the dining car. Marrying Tom in a wedding dress requires her to first gag and lock up her sister. Getting out of her marriage looks easier when Snoodles buys her an entire wardrobe, but the new clothes do not help her fall in love with Hackensacker.

If Gerry has trouble getting out of clothes, Tom is falling out of his. Racing to stop Gerry from leaving him, he tumbles down a flight of stairs and loses his pajama bottoms. Wrapping himself in a blanket, he races down the hall and ends up exposing his 'bottom' to an elevator full of people. This comic moment is not the only hint that Sturges has *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on his mind. Snoodles's yacht is named *The Erl King* – the King of the Fairies. His sister, the Princess Centimillia, is actual royalty, a Titania who falls instantly for Bottom. *The Palm Beach Story* reproduces the dreamlike quality of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Wienie King, Snoodles, Maud, the cabbie, and even the Ale and Quail Club are enchanted figures who continually grant Tom and Gerry's spoken and unspoken wishes. The film takes place over seventy-two hours, and Gerry meets nearly every other character as she wakes up or goes to bed.

Gerry owes her charmed encounter with Hackensacker to the Ale and Quail Club, who, impatient to begin hunting, cannot wait to reach their hunting grounds in Savannah. They begin by

shooting at crackers and proceed to shoot out windows. Realizing that a terrified Gerry has escaped into another car, they gather together a hunting party with seven hounds to pursue her. The metaphor of the hunt is used frequently in the comedies. Attempting to comfort the lovesick Orsino, his servant asks: "Will you go hunt, my lord?" (I.i.16). Orsino responds that the first time he saw Olivia he was "turned into a hart / And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds / E'er since pursue me" (20-22). When Rosalind learns that Orlando has entered the forest of Arden "furnished like a hunter" (III.ii.240), she insists that "[h]e comes to kill my heart" (241). But Orlando has already claimed that Rosalind is herself one of Diana's company: "thrice crownèd queen of night survey / With thy chaste eye, from thy pale sphere above, / Thy huntress' name that my full life doth sway" (2-4). But the language of hunting is particularly pertinent in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Demetrius accuses Helena of stalking him. She rebuts his sadism with masochism.

DEMETRIUS

I love thee not, therefore pursue me not.

Where is Lysander, and fair Hermia?

The one I'll slay, the other slayeth me.

[...]

I'll run from thee, and hide me in the brakes,

And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts. (II.i.188-90, 227-28)

Helena tells him that she is his "spaniel" (203):

HELENA

The more you beat me I will fawn on you.

Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me,

Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,

Unworthy as I am, to follow you.

What worser place can I beg in your love –

And yet a place of high respect with me –

Than to be usèd as you use your dog? (204-10)

When Theseus brings Hippolyta to the forest to hunt stag, they reminisce about earlier hunting trips.

THESEUS

My love shall hear the music of my hounds.

[...]

We will, fair Queen, up to the mountain's top,
And mark the musical confusion
Of hounds and echo in conjunction.

HIPPOLYTA

I was with Hercules and Cadmus once
When in a wood of Crete they bayed the bear
With hounds of Sparta. Never did I hear
Such gallant chiding; for besides the groves,
The skies, the fountains, every region near
Seemed all one mutual cry. I never heard
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.

THESEUS

My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind,

[...]

Slow in pursuit, but matched in mouth like bells
Each under each. A cry more tuneable
Was never holla'd to nor cheered with horn
In Crete, in Sparta, nor in Thessaly.

Judge when you hear. (IV.i.105, 108-18, 122-26)

While Theseus only boasts about the musicality of his dogs, the Ale and Quail Club builds musical sequences around theirs. Once the Club boards the train, the seven dogs accompany the piano playing in the bar. When they serenade Gerry to sleep with "Sweet Adeline", the dogs chime in again, and when they form a posse to find the lost Gerry, the dogs fully participate in a rousing rendition of "A-Hunting We Will Go".

At the time of its release, *The Palm Beach Story* was panned by the *New York Times's* Bosley Crowther. He limited his praise to the Ale and Quail Club. Today an audience will likely be entranced by every scene of the film except for the lengthy Ale and Quail Club sequence. It is not merely that "so musical a discord" can wear on

the nerves but that the black bartender is such a shocking stereotype, who, rather than disobeying the drunken hunters or fleeing the scene, continues to throw up crackers for them to shoot and, like an overgrown infant, pounds on the bar screaming, "I wouldn't do that if I were you, gentlemens". Although completely conventional for its time, the scene is unbearably offensive⁸. But Sturges clearly found the Ale and Quail Club central to the plot, the vision, the language, and the soundtrack of his movie. Rossini's opera *William Tell* involves scenes of hunting and archery, and Sturges begins his film with variations on the "*William Tell Overture*" and weaves elements of the overture throughout the film. Long before we meet the quail hunters, we have heard plenty about birds. The Wienie King is deaf and mistakes the opera singer in Gerry's apartment building for a canary. "I love birds", he tells the building manager. When he finds Gerry standing in the bathtub, he compliments the design (a G clef and a bird) on her wrapper. Once again, he tells her how much he loves birds and that his wife is being "egged on" by the "varmint" of a building manager. Bird song (from Rossini's overture) marks the segue from Tom and Gerry landing in Palm Beach to moving in to Maud and Snoodles's home. When Gerry announces that she is returning to her husband, Maud is thrilled that she and Snoodles and "Mac" "will be as busy as bird dogs" working on his airport. When Tom tries to sneak past his landlord who is demanding his unpaid rent, he asks the doorman to "[t]ake a gander inside". When he catches

⁸ Many well-meaning attempts have been made to explain away the racism of "The Train" section of the film. See, for example, Gabbard 2015. In particular, critics have praised the performance and improvisation of the train porter (Charles R. Moore) who tells Tom that his wife is "the young lady who lose all her clothes". As well-intentioned as these defenses may be, I find them as cringe-worthy as the scenes themselves. How can they justify Sturges's script requiring Moore to pronounce "yacht" as "yatchet"? It is possible to admire *The Palm Beach Story* while lamenting the fact that it does nothing to advance the cause of civil rights. The treatment of the black characters is particularly disappointing because Sturges began filming *The Palm Beach Story* just months after completing *Sullivan's Travels*, which includes an exceptionally moving scene in a black church.

up to Gerry in Penn Station, he cautions her that she's running around "like a chicken with its head cut off", and tells the cop trying to throw him out that he's a "dumb cluck". Although Gerry twice steps on Snoodles's face and twice breaks his glasses, he claims she's "as light as a feather". While Gerry insists that she needs to marry Snoodles so that he can build Tom's airport, Tom snaps that he "wouldn't let him build [him] a chicken coop". The members of the Ale and Quail Club include Hitchcock, McKeewie, and Featherwax. When they're too drunk to count the members of the club, one accuses the conductor of being "cockeyed". But their dogs are just as imbricated in the language of the screenplay. The only hunting dogs allowed to hunt both above and below ground are dachshunds or "wienie" dogs. (Sturges must have been fond of wienie dogs; one figures prominently in his directorial debut, *The Great McGinty*). The cab driver who agrees to drive Gerry to Penn Station for free recommends Palm Beach as the best place for a divorce because "you've got the [dog] track, you've got the ocean, you've got palm trees". And when one conductor sees the Ale and Quail club boarding, he exclaims: "Hot dog!". Maud greets Tom with Bumblepuppy, and Snoodles assures him that his sister's "bark is worse than her bite". Gerry tells her "brother" and her new boyfriend that she feels "like a bone between two dogs". As preposterous as the film's plot appears, its three acts – "New York", "The Train", and "Palm Beach" – are as interwoven as the strings of a tennis racket or as interrelated as the multiple plots of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

If Shakespeare turns Bottom into an ass, Sturges toys with various animal identities for each of his characters. The Wienie King is a dog who loves birds while the hunters and their canine companions doggedly dog Gerry and hate birds. Rudy Vallée is a professional songbird while Mary Astor plays an active hunter. She complains that "there's a law against shooting" the caged bird in her bedroom. She is such a sexual predator that she invites Gerry to go husband hunting with her even though she's still in the process of divorcing her fifth husband. Minutes later she meets Tom and begins cheerfully pursuing him even as her current lover

whom she has named “Toto” follows her everywhere like Dorothy Gale’s loyal black Cairn Terrier. Toto (who enters one scene carrying a tennis racket and balls) even acts as a witness as Maud marries Tom’s twin. Snoodles would like to destroy Gerry’s husband but is intimidated by the mere thought of him: “I suppose he’s large. [...] That’s one of the tragedies of this life, that the men who are most in need of a beating up are always enormous”.

Tom and Gerry are named for the animated Hanna-Barbera cat and mouse. While the cat pursues the mouse with any number of weapons (hammers, firecrackers...), the mouse always outwits him and retaliates in more gruesome ways (decapitation, electrocution...). In the first act of *The Palm Beach Story*, Tom tries to be the dog pursuing his fugitive bird. He then takes wing himself and flies down to meet her train in Palm Beach. On the train Gerry quails in fear in an upper bunk while the dogs on her scent attack Snoodles below her. But once she is on Snoodles’s yacht, she hatches a plan to snare him and his \$99,000 for Tom. Gerry is not the practiced hunter that Maud is and cannot figure out how to pursue Snoodles while she is still jealous of any woman who looks at Tom. Although Tom greets Gerry on the Palm Beach dock by insisting that she’s “making an ass of herself”, he is much more closely linked to Bottom.

When Shakespeare’s Bottom awakes from his dream, he utters these famous lines:

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t’expound this dream. Methought I was – there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had – but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called “Bottom’s Dream”, because it hath no bottom. (IV.i. 202-215)

Critics have argued that Bottom’s nonsensical speech captures perfectly the synesthetic experience of dreaming. In Sturges’s film,

nearly everyone experiences a confusion of senses. The Wienie King is deaf. Snoodles is blind. The hounds can smell some trace of Gerry but have no ability to find her. Maud's sidekick, Toto, may or may not be speaking an actual language: "his tongue [is not able] to conceive". Snoodles believes Gerry will have all the homely virtues of cooking and sewing ("and weav[ing]", she remarks sarcastically), but Tom knows the truth. We can practically taste what he's describing here:

GERRY

I can't sew. I can't cook.

TOM

You certainly can't.

[...]

I remember that pot roast you tried.

After exploring various forms of sensory deprivation, Sturges reunites his married couple by conjuring up a night of acute sensations. Gerry is already resisting the sound of tree toads, the smell of night flowers, and the taste of champagne when the sound of Snoodles's orchestra and the feeling of sitting in Tom's lap overwhelm her.

Like Bottom, Tom has had "a most rare vision", an airport strung like a tennis racket and suspended over a city. One critic compares Bottom's bottomless dream to the scene in *King Lear* in which "Edgar, the good son, conjures up a dizzying vista of bottomlessness in the mind of his blinded father Gloucester" as he pretends to stand at the top of the Dover cliff. In fact, he is standing on the comparatively firm terrain of *Dover Beach* (Rosenbaum 2006, 20). Tom, on the other hand, imagines that he can create the firm(ish) terrain of *Dover Beach* when he has in fact invented Edgar's terrifying vision: "How fearful and dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low" (IV.v.11-12). Like the Wienie King, Bottom loves birds. In fact, some critics have noted that the song he sings to awaken

Titania echoes in context and content the song of Epops, in Aristophanes's *The Birds*⁹:

BOTTOM

[...]

(Sings)

The ousel cock so black of hue,
With orange-tawny bill;
The throstle with his note so true,
The wren with little quill.

TITANIA (*awakening*)

What angel wakes me from my flow'ry bed?

BOTTOM (*sings*)

The finch, the sparrow, and the lark,
The plainsong cuckoo grey,
Whose note full many a man doth mark,
And dares not answer "Nay" –

for indeed, who would set his wit to so foolish a bird? Who would give a bird the lie, though he cry "Cuckoo" never so? (III.i.118-29)

Bottom, once a man, now an ass, evokes Epops, once a man, now a hoopoe. Epops calls out to mountain birds, marsh birds, and sea birds. They come immediately and form a chorus which leads to the establishment of their city, Cloud Cuckoo Land, a city in the sky, formed by birds as a point of communication between men on earth and the gods on Olympus. Although it is Tom who needs funding for his Cloud Cuckoo Land, all of the characters in *The Palm Beach Story* behave as if living in such a fantastical world. Only Maud happily admits to being a cuckoo: "I'm crazy. I'd marry anyone". But it is, of course, Tom who spends most of the film preparing himself to be made a cuckoo, another word for "cuckold".

Lest we forget, cuckoldry is also intimately linked to hunting. For the stag that so many of Shakespeare's hunters stalk has lost its horns and its mate to the superior stag. Snoodles is determined to

⁹ For an overview of the relationship between *The Birds* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, see Showerman 2015.

see Gerry's husband as a monstrous hunting dog, and Gerry is averse to disabusing him of his prejudice:

SNOODLES

Did he beat you?

GERRY

Not often.

SNOODLES

The hound.

GERRY

Oh, a man's a man, I suppose. They're all tarred with the same brush.

Does Snoodles's reference to dogs provoke Gerry's to birds? Does she invite Snoodles to imagine Tom tarred and feathered? Or is this another reminder of the pastoral? Shepherds tarred their flocks with the same brush to distinguish them from other flocks. Gerry, however, renders her husband unrecognizable. In Shakespeare, men continually slander innocent women; here Gerry unfairly smears the innocent Tom. By agreeing that Tom's a "hound", she allows Snoodles to imagine him as an adulterous brute. Of course, Tom is not a hound but a lapdog. He is loyal and affectionate, not hunting for something better. It is Gerry who aspires to be a hound, who longs to sniff out choicer prey.

This particular exchange hints at the sexual violence that is often just beneath the surface of this light comedy. The men in this movie are all tarred with the same brush in that they are always contemplating violence. The hunters can't let go of their guns on a train. The other men are always threatening to use their fists, and even the aged Wienie King threatens Tom with his cane. Gerry's attempts to help Tom in his business ventures are always thwarted because instead of allowing her to flirt (or more) with wealthy investors, Tom always threatens to punch them in the nose.

When Tom sees the ruby-encrusted bracelet Snoodles has bought Gerry, he is ready to punch Snoodles until Snoodles admits that he punched the first man who ever gave Maud a bracelet. How seriously should we take these threats of violence? Tom plays along with Gerry's deceit. He impersonates Gerry's brother; he keeps his

fists away from Snoodles's nose. But gradually, as they banter about why Gerry has given him the name "Captain McGlue":

GERRY

Couldn't you have been a captain in the last war?

TOM

Sure. I was eleven years old at the finish.

This mild-mannered civilian turns into the warrior Othello: "Do you know what it feels like to be strangled with bare hands?"

Whether actual or perceived, cuckoldry in Cavell's movies of remarriage is always consequential. No woman can afford to make light of it, and no man can fail to be hurt by it. In *The Philadelphia Story*, an engagement is broken. In *The Awful Truth*, *The Lady Eve*, and *Adam's Rib*, divorce proceedings are instigated. But when Tom begins to turn into Othello, Gerry barely blinks. "Oh, now wait a minute, darling. I've always been on the level with you", she assures him as she tells him to put a sculpture of Renaissance "[l]ovebirds" on the mantelpiece. As long as they stay there, he'll have proof that he has nothing to worry about. In most screwball comedies, the heroines are as spotless as Desdemona. But Gerry models herself on Emilia:

DESDEMONA

Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

EMILIA

Why, would not you?

DESDEMONA

No, by this heavenly light!

EMILIA

Nor I neither, by this heavenly light. I might do't as well i'th' dark.

DESDEMONA

Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

EMILIA

The world's a huge thing. It is a great price for a small vice.

[...]

[W]ho would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?

(IV.iii.62-68, 74-75)

In *The Palm Beach Story*, the *Wienie King*, the *Princess Centimillia* and the captain of the *Erl King* are all beckoning Tom and Gerry to join their magical monarchy. Tom will have his airport; Gerry will sport the Hope diamond. All that is required is the smallest of vices. But unlike Claudio who can exchange his bride for "another Hero", or Olivia who can wed another Cesario, or Demetrius who can content himself with another Hermia, Gerry knows that there is only one Tom Jeffers. Gerry throws away the chance to make Tom a king and herself a queen not because of sexual morality, but because she loves only one man, and nothing and nobody can take his place.

Poor Emilia with her spirit and humor turns out to be as naïve as Desdemona, for in the multiplicities of Shakespearean experience men are all tarred with the same brush. They all value one virtue in women above any other – purity. Sturges holds no such prejudice. His Maud is as lovable as she is promiscuous, and she and Gerry instantly adore each other. She wants her brother to marry Gerry and has no illusions that anyone would want Snoodles for anything but his cash. When she learns that Gerry is returning to her husband, she is simultaneously incredulous and sympathetic – "Oh, you poor, dumb thing. [...] I bet he's a knockout". In Emilia's formulation, sex is a little thing that helps you gain "all the world". In Maud's, sexual happiness (not sexual fidelity) is the only thing huge enough to make you forsake all the world.

Chastity is what matters in Shakespeare's comedies; but sexual indiscretion is as likely to be rewarded as punished in Sturges's oeuvre. When Trudy Kockenlocker in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* takes the boys out for their last night of fun before being shipped off to the Army, she winds up pregnant and (possibly) married, but to whom? The small town scandal becomes worldwide news when she gives birth to six boys on Christmas. Because of her contribution to the war effort, her promiscuity is metamorphosed into the virgin birth and her long-suffering, celibate boyfriend into Saint Joseph. The only man who's ever actually cuckolded in a Sturges film is, funnily enough, Rudy Vallée. In *Unfaithfully Yours*,

Rex Harrison asks him off-handedly to look after his wife (Linda Darnell) while he's away, and Vallée takes this to mean that he should order a private detective to follow her. The detective catches Darnell leaving the room of Harrison's assistant. Although Harrison and Darnell are clearly madly in love, Harrison spends most of the movie having a psychotic breakdown in which he imagines ways of murdering his wife and her "lover". Throughout the film, Vallée's wife (Darnell's sister) bickers with him about his inattentiveness. The movie's punchline comes at the expense of the stuffy, suspicious Vallée and with the audience's wholehearted approval, for it is Vallée's wife who is cuckolding him with Harrison's assistant. In Sturges's films, the husbands of sexually happy women have nothing to fear or regret.

More than *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, or *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is probably Shakespeare's most metatheatrical play. The play was written to double- or triple-cast Shakespeare's original company, so the actor playing Theseus would also have played Oberon, the actor playing Titania would also have played Hippolyta. The actor playing Bottom would have also played Pyramus and Peaseblossom. As if this weren't enough, Bottom offers to play Thisbe and the lion as well. Sturges's Bottom is averse to assuming various roles yet within a few hours of arriving in Palm Beach is renamed "Captain McGlue", "Mac", and the "human bacterium". Sturges is probably classic Hollywood's most metacinematic director. He upheld Shakespeare's legacy by continually reminding his audience that he was directing actors who were performing roles in a constructed work of cinematic imagination. (See, for example, *Sullivan's Travels*, a movie about the experience of making movies, or *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, in which the tale of Norval and Trudy is being narrated to Brian Donlevy and Akim Tamiroff reprising their roles in *The Great McGinty*). While Sturges is as self-conscious and self-reflective an artist as Shakespeare, he is not simply suggesting that "all the world's a stage". His "men and women" are not "merely players". While all perform, many do so unwillingly.

All of Sturges's movies involve disguise, deceit and impersonation. In *The Lady Eve*, Barbara Stanwyck's Jean Harrington poses as an English aristocrat, the Lady Eve Sidwich. In *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, Eddie Bracken's Norval Jones pretends to be Ignatz Ratzkiwatzki to legitimize his girlfriend's pregnancy. Norval, who repeatedly fails the Army's entrance exam, borrows a doughboy's uniform in which to marry Trudy. In *Sullivan's Travels*, Joel McCrea's John Sullivan dresses as a hobo in order to learn enough about the common people to make *O Brother Where Art Thou?* All three of these characters voluntarily assume disguises and new identities. But unlike the cross-dressing heroines of the comedies, these characters are not enlarged by their performances. Jean believes she will enjoy tricking Charles into marrying her. Instead, she is bereft after marrying and alienating him. Norval manages to stumble through his wedding vows as Ignatz Ratzkiwatzki only to be arrested for signing the marriage registry as Norval Jones. And after John Sullivan escapes from a chain gang, his studio finally agrees to let their director of silly comedies make *O Brother Where Art Thou?* But Sullivan announces that he's unqualified to make such a film because he hasn't "suffered enough" (Sturges 1941). Portia, Rosalind, and Viola use their disguises to reinvent themselves, to liberate themselves, to advance themselves. They are not punished or defeated by their performances. But Sturges's characters are never comfortable in their borrowed robes. Sullivan is dissatisfied with the silly movies he makes until he travels into hell and discovers the value of making people laugh. Jean's elaborate plan to get back at Charles for breaking off their engagement turns ugly and cruel. She begins her impersonation believing she'll talk like a cockeyed duchess for the rest of her life and ends by hating the accent and impersonation she has created. And Norval, envious of the soldiers Trudy parties with, proves himself a better man than the thoughtless soldier who impregnates and abandons Trudy.

Nobody in *The Palm Beach Story* voluntarily plays a part. Instead, different characters attempt to assign other characters alternative identities. They always face pushback. When Tom introduces Gerry

to a New York City cop (“This is my wife, Mrs. Jeffers. Mr. Mulligan”), the policeman barks back: “The name happens to be O’Donnell, if it’s all the same to you”. A member of the Ale and Quail Club addresses a member of the train crew as “officer”. He’s insulted, and responds, “I’m not an officer. I’m the conductor on this train”. When the doorman tells Tom “[y]our wife” paid the rent, the incredulous Tom asks, “My wife?”. “Well, I’m sure it wasn’t mine”, the doorman replies. When Gerry cannot understand why Snoodles is showering her with presents, she asks if he’s a burglar: “Oh, no. That was my grandfather”. When she worries that two men with butterfly nets are about to sneak up behind him and drag him off to a loony bin, he remarks, “You’re thinking of my uncle”.

In order to love Shakespeare’s comedies, we must continually suspend our disbelief so that we can fully appreciate boys dressed as girls dressed as boys or love at first sight or soliloquies that can’t be overheard on stage, but Sturges asks the opposite of us. He asks us to notice that people are always willing to believe anything, always eager to create their own reality, always ready to form opinions of us based on nothing at all. He asks us to notice that most of us are living in Cloud Cuckoo Land, and in Cloud Cuckoo Land people will always see what isn’t there. When Gerry introduces the Hackensackers to her “brother”, first Maud then Snoodles exclaims, “You look exactly alike”. We are constantly performing or being asked to perform to meet others’ uninformed expectations, but what a relief when we can finally be ourselves. More than any other character Sturges created, Tom Jeffers epitomizes the point he reiterates in every one of his films – identity is not something we simply put on and take off. Tom wins Gerry back because, despite his numerous aliases, he remains absolutely himself. When Snoodles offers “Mac” (“You don’t mind if I call you Mac, do you?”) \$99,000 to build his airport, he (Captain McGlue) tells him that Gerry’s husband (the “human bacterium”) is his partner, so he won’t be able to accept the money. Speaking of himself in the third person, he says: “I knew he [Tom] was a failure and a dreamer, I guess, but I didn’t know he was a skunk”. Gerry is enraged: “Don’t

you ever get tired of being *noble*?" (emphasis mine). Apparently, he doesn't.

This essay has focused on moments of impermanence in Shakespeare – when Demetrius and Lysander suddenly fall in love with Helena, when Bottom becomes an ass, when Hero is temporarily dead, when Rosalind, Viola, Portia, and Julia pretend to be men. On Tom and Gerry's enchanted journey, we are warned of life's impermanence. The ancient Wienie King tells Gerry, "Cold are the hands of time that creep along relentlessly destroying slowly but without pity that which yesterday was young. [...] That's hard to say with false teeth". And Maud, encouraging her brother to marry and soon divorce Gerry tells him that "[n]othing is permanent in this world except Roosevelt, dear". One could easily believe that Sturges, with his lightning-fast dialogue, values impermanence, but he values nothing more than joy. When Tom greets his rival the morning after he has won Gerry back – "Hello there, Snoodles. How's every little thing?" – he expresses a confidence and a delight we have seen nowhere else in the film. Tom deserves and has earned this moment because he has never wavered, because his love for Gerry has remained as firm as a tightly strung tennis racket. Because Sturges plays games so well, one would think that his movies celebrate game-playing. They don't. Yes, he admits, the world's a stage and men and women are always performing, but true happiness comes when the curtain comes down, when the final act is over, when the authentic self has the chance to emerge. When Sturges speaks of "nobility", he uses the word as Shakespeare does, as a quality unchanged by time and circumstance. In *The Winter's Tale* (the remarriage play upon which Cavell's thesis rests), the newborn Princess Perdita is ordered murdered by her insanely jealous father. Instead, she is raised by a shepherd. Sixteen years later, Polixenes (in disguise), terrified that his son is falling in love with a shepherdess, visits Perdita. But neither disguise nor upbringing can hide Perdita's unassailable identity: "Nothing she does or seems / But smacks of something greater than herself, / Too *noble* for this place" (IV.iv.157-59, emphasis mine). To make his wife happy, Tom goes along with

Gerry's ruse, but when it requires him to take Snoodles's \$99,000, he cannot help but tell the truth. Why, his angry wife asks him, can't he learn to lie like a politician? Because, he unapologetically tells the woman who loves him, "the way you are is the way you have to be".

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Orson Welles's *Caesars*

Jane Wilkinson

This essay examines Welles's multiple, unstable versions of *Julius Caesar*: a work in progress in which the director-illustrator-actor-designer never ceased returning to and rethinking Shakespeare's play and his own earlier conceptions, adaptations, research and creations, remediating them for new contexts, channels and audiences. Welles's drawings integrate the words of the *Everybody's Shakespeare* adaptations (1934), telling the Caesar story differently and gesturing towards possible future realizations. In New York, in 1937, his Mercury Theatre *Caesar* plays on associations with contemporary events through its casting, set design, music and lighting (inspired by the scenography and 'cathedrals of light' of the Nuremberg rallies). The orchestration of sound effects and voices in phonograph recordings and of music, narrative and acting in radio broadcasts translates the visual and kinetic vocabulary of his previous engagements into a choreography of sound. Juxtaposing the radio actors' voices and the narration of Plutarch by a CBS news reporter brings different styles, tones and temporalities into uneasy contact. Placing Welles's work in the context of earlier U.S. reception of *Julius Caesar*, I examine its dialectical relation with Shakespeare's words and imagery and focus on the metatheatrical – or metacommunicative – aspects of his creations: spectacles of power for American audiences of the 1930s and early 1940s.

Keywords: Orson Welles, *Julius Caesar*, *Everybody's Shakespeare*, Death of a Dictator, *Mercury Theatre on the Air*, Spectacles of power

Writing about the theatre [...] is like writing an obituary. I don't mean that the theatre is dead. It simply doesn't exist except when the curtain is up and the show is on. [...] In between there are nothing but old programs, yellowing reviews, and notes and hopes for new plays.
Orson Welles, "The Self-Conscious Theatre"

1. Introduction

Any study of Orson Welles will necessarily cross the borders of a number of disciplines, requiring multiple methodological tools and theories. This is no less the case with Welles's *Caesars*, whose restricted time scope (1929-44) is compensated by the variety of fields touched on or implicated by his creations: performance, illustration, adaptation and remediation, stage design, music and lighting, education, journalism, lecturing, together with the reception of Shakespeare and of the historical figure of Caesar in American history and politics, schools and theatrical productions. Analysis is complicated by the many conflicting versions of Welles's activities and experiences and the recycling and augmenting of errors and inaccuracies in accounts of his life and work even in some of the most accredited examples of Welles criticism and biography¹.

Information on Welles's early years is scanty and often unreliable, on his later years plentiful and almost equally unreliable, based largely on the myth that Welles himself contributed to creating, feeding the fantasy of interviewers and biographers with constantly differing versions of his story/ies.

Storytelling is also at the centre of his variegated visitations of *Julius Caesar*, their multiple, unstable texts supplemented – both in print and on stage – by other media. Welles's drawings illustrate and integrate the words of the *Everybody's Shakespeare/Mercury Shakespeare* adaptations (1934/1939), telling the Caesar story differently and gesturing towards possible future realizations as they free the readers' imagination from the constraints of print. Lighting, music and sound effects, set design, management of actors' movement and placing, all in constant evolution, intensify

¹ Given the unreliability of many of the studies of Welles's *Caesars*, I give precedence, where possible, to photographs, descriptions by Welles's colleagues and actors, and contemporary accounts – the “yellowing reviews” Welles refers to in his warning about the necrological nature of this kind of endeavour (Welles 1941, 12) – supplemented by the attentive archive research conducted in several doctoral dissertations. Working under the pandemic, the range of material I have been able to consult directly is limited. I am grateful to members of my family (Luisa, Fabio and Sarah) and friends and colleagues (Marta Izzi, Alessandra Grego and Maria DiBattista) for their aid.

and expand the significance of the scripts for his 1937 stage production. The orchestration of voices and sound effects in his phonograph recordings and of music, narrative and acting in some of his radio broadcasts translates the visual and kinetic vocabulary of his printed and theatrical revisitations of the play into a choreography of sound.

Together, Welles's *Caesars* form an unending work in progress in which the director-illustrator-actor-designer never ceased returning to and rethinking Shakespeare's play and his own earlier conceptions, adaptations, research and creations, supplementing them with new ideas, remediating them differently for new contexts, channels and audiences and recycling them in other, non-Shakespearean productions².

Behind all his *Caesars* is his desire "to revitalize the classics" by stimulating his audiences "into wakefulness. An audience stimulated into imaginative awareness [...] becomes the true theatre audience – that mysterious community of spirits that is the most important part of any show", as he announced in an interview shortly after the 1937 Mercury production, later incorporated in a lecture delivered to the Theatre Education League (quoted in Weiss 1994, 196). Gherardo Casale's study of Welles's Shakespeares quotes other passages from the address that are also relevant to the present study³. As well as insisting on the need to stimulate audience awareness, Welles emphasized the importance of maintaining loyalty to Shakespeare's imagery and of establishing an "aesthetic relation" between what is seen on the stage and "the words which are spoken" (Casale 2001, 98). A relation that could work through similarity, but also by way of contrast, offering contrapuntal variations.

2. *The Mercury Theatre Caesar: Set, Lighting and a Red Brick Wall*

I have decided to begin my study of Welles's *Caesars* with the scene that greeted the audience on the evening of 11 November 1937, as

² See, for example, his use of the "Nuremberg light effect" in *Citizen Kane* (Naremore 2004, 144).

³ See also Pierini 2005, 82-101.

they took their seats in the Mercury Theatre in New York. Instead of a curtain, a bare stage in front of a red brick wall. Beneath it, a series of platforms.

The public already knew, at least in part, what kind of production awaited them. A Mercury Theatre manifesto had appeared in September in the *Daily Worker* under the title "Again – A People's Theatre: The Mercury Takes a Bow". The play "might well be subtitled 'Death of a Dictator'. [...]. In our production the stress will be on the social implications inherent in the history of Caesar and on the atmosphere of personal greed, fear and hysteria that surround a dictatorial regime" (Houseman 1937, 7, quoted in Denning 1997, 376)⁴. This was followed by a wider publicity campaign, with a quarter of a million handbills, announcing "JULIUS CAESAR / !! DEATH OF A DICTATOR !! / with an opening date of November 11th", distributed conscientiously all over town by volunteers "in schools, colleges, cafeterias, drugstores and bookshops all over the five boroughs" (Houseman 1972, 294).

But how would the wall impact on the Mercury Theatre production? How does it relate to Welles's previous stage, print and illustrated versions of Shakespeare's play? And to his more general vision of the "aesthetic relation" between performance, stage business and text and his organization of theatrical and artistic space? What spatial strategies – topographic and, especially, symbolic – did it imply? How was it renarrated by critics and reviewers? And what stories did the wall produce as it interrelated with Shakespeare's words and images in Welles's adaptation, and with the lighting, music, sound and movement that activated the theatre space? Or as its bounded 2D space, metonymically reflecting the 3D bounded but potentially limitless frame space of the stage, engaged with the infinite space evoked by the scenography of the Nuremberg Nazi rallies and their enactment of imperium, which the Mercury Theatre staging was in part inspired by? Or with the marble maps of empire attached to the previously

⁴ Press releases issued by the Mercury Theatre pointed more directly to the play's topicality. See note 33 below. See also Yezbick 2004, 250-54, for an overview, with ample quotations, of the Mercury publicity material, press releases and letters prepared by Harry Senber to promote the production (Yezbick 2004, 253).

bare red brick wall of the Roman forum, spectacularly inaugurated by Mussolini in April 1934⁵?

The stage or set design for the 1929 Todd School production of *Julius Caesar*⁶, directed and acted in by fourteen-year-old Welles, seems to have consisted simply of boxes to be shifted around during the performance, its costumes togas made of sheets stripped from the schoolboys' beds (Callow 1995, 54). Instead, Welles's sketches in black and white for *Everybody's Shakespeare* (Hill and Welles 1934 [henceforth *ES*]) suggest a variety of possible sets, props and backcloths for his readers to choose between in their own stagings of the play⁷. Several show some similarity to the set Samuel Leve elaborated for the Mercury from Welles's original project, partly inspired by the platforms in the Nuremberg rallies, and to its final version after overcoming numerous construction hitches recounted by Houseman (Houseman 1972, 296-303). A few hint at the presence of a wall by including doors, windows and shadows. Only four of the wall sketches are clearly depicted as such: the illustration of the "Public place" in Act I, scene i, with

⁵ This is pure conjecture on my part, a spin-off from reflections on Joseph Holland-Caesar's Duce-like appearance and photographs of the performance. Mussolini was a constant presence in American newsreels, newspapers and magazines as is evidenced by the enormous popularity of the 1933 seventy-minute Columbia documentary, *Mussolini Speaks*. See in particular Minervini 2019, for a detailed description and photographs of reports on the documentary in newspapers of the time. See also Maria Wyke's account of how, adding "sound, vision, and action" to newsprint versions of Mussolini's identification with Caesar, Hearst Corporation newsreels enabled American cinema audiences to "witness with their own eyes Mussolini's spectacular performance of his Caesarean rituals surrounded by Rome's ancient monuments and applauded by swarming crowds of supporters" (Wyke 2012, 109-10). The popularity of Mussolini and his Caesarean rhetoric was countered by George Seldes's *Sawdust Caesar: The Untold History of Mussolini and Fascism* (1935), alerting American readers to the danger of gaining their "own homegrown Duce". Seldes's focus on Fascism's invention of history through its creation of "a false epic about a romantic hero", with Mussolini "step[ping] into the role of a monumental Caesar 'as an actor into his makeup'" (quoted in Wyke 2012, 111-12), seems in many ways to anticipate the reflections on Fascist theatricality in Welles's *Caesar*.

⁶ The date attributed to the production varies from 1928 to 1929 to 1930 and with it the age of its director-actor.

⁷ Page references indicated by *MS* relate to the later *Mercury Shakespeare* edition (Welles and Hill 1939). I use *ES* to refer specifically to the original version.

pillared 'walls' created by curtains opening onto a low wall-like structure with arches rearing up behind it (MS 10); the first of five sketches of "Brutus' Orchard", enclosed here by walls containing both a gate and a door and open to the sky (the description of the setting specifies that "the back, usually, is a wall over which, when the sun rises, we can make out the skyline of the city. The gate may be in evidence, and a part of the house" [MS 23]); the wall of Caesar's house, recognizable as such due to a horizontal line marking its separation from the floor, to the presence of an open, fairly elaborate door, and to the towering shadow rearing up against it, behind a frightened human figure (MS 30); finally, the charcoal sketch of a wall with a narrow, horizontal upper window, backing the table at which the Triumvirate are "prick[ing]" their future victims (MS 50). None of these sketches in any way resembles the bare brick wall that framed and reflected the play enacted beneath it at the Mercury Theatre, providing what was perhaps the stage design's most striking element.

"I wanted to present *Julius Caesar* against a texture of brick, not of stone, and I wanted a color of red that had certain vibrations of blue. In front of this red brick wall I wanted levels and places to act: that was my conception of the production". This is how Welles himself explained his choice a year later in his address to the Theatre Education League (quoted in Callow 1995, 325)⁸. His mention of texture, vibrating colour and the "acting" of "levels and places" is indicative of the multisensory, interrelational function of his wall. At the same time, his specification that its redness should possess "vibrations of blue" echoes Antony's description of the conspirators' "purpled hands", still "reek[ing] and smok[ing]" with Caesar's blood (Welles 2001, 136)⁹.

According to Frank Brady, "Welles wanted the bricks of the wall to show, as a modern symbol, an urban milieu of the twentieth century instead of the usual scenery of stones connected with ancient Rome". But his intention was to "give [his] audience" only

⁸ See also Casale 2001, 130-31. For other quotes from the lecture, see Callow 1995, 314-19, and Pierini 2005, 82-101.

⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from *Julius Caesar* come from Richard France's reproduction of Welles's adaptation for the Mercury Theatre (Welles 2001, 108-68).

“a *hint* of a scene”, as he told his stage designer, Samuel Leve, adding: “No more than that. Give them too much and they won’t contribute anything themselves. Give them just a suggestion and you get them working for you. That’s what gives the theatre meaning: when it becomes a social act” (Brady 1989, 121).

John Mason Brown, one of the first reviewers, describes the effect in the *New York Post* (12 November 1937):

[Welles] places it upon a bare stage, the brick walls of which are crimson and naked. A few steps and a platform and an abyss beyond, from which the actors can emerge, are the setting. A few steps – and the miracle of spotlights which stab the darkness with as sinister an effect as the daggers of the assassins which penetrate Caesar’s body. That is all. And it is all that is needed. [...] It is a setting spacious enough for both the winds and victims of demagoguery to sweep across it like a hurricane. (Brown 2000, 221-22)

Similar words return in Sidney B. Whipple’s review published, the same day, in the *New York World-Telegram*. Describing how Welles and the Mercury Theatre team “work with words and lights rather than with costumes and scenery”, he focuses on the interaction between wall and lighting in structuring the action taking place on stage:

No scenic embellishment exists whatsoever, and none is needed. The red brick wall at the rear [...] can be ‘painted’ out at will by the use of lights. Frequently spot lights illuminate the speaker who holds the center of the stage and the little knot of people around him. Actors do not disappear into wings or through doors. They are merely blotted out by darkness. (Whipple 2014a, 443)

But it is Burns Mantle’s comment in the *New York Daily News* (13 November 1937) that shows most clearly how the wall contributed to the achievement of Welles’s desire to stimulate his audience “into imaginative awareness”:

Whether you face a street in Rome or the plains of Phillipi or the Roman Forum or Brutus’ gardens or the marketplace or a general’s tent, you still face no more than a red brick wall that is at the rear of the

Mercury's stage. Now you see it, now you don't, thanks to the darkness and your imagination. But it is always there and it crowds the mind. (Quoted in France 1975, 55)

More interested in the cost of executing Welles's plan than in its creative metaphorical potential, Houseman describes the wall and its colour in less enthusiastic terms:

What could be simpler and more economical than a few platforms and bare brick walls daubed with standard barn-red? Precisely because they *were* bare, it meant that hundreds of gallons of paint must be sloshed and sprayed from ladders and scaffolds over an acreage of more than five thousand square feet, including dressing-room stairs, stage door, steam pipes and fire extinguishers. (Houseman 1972, 297)

Yet the colour of the walls inevitably came to be associated not with barns but blood. Richard France describes the "dried blood" colour of the stage wall as "itself a striking image in the production" (France 1977, 108). For the audience listening to Shakespeare's words and watching the actions of the players, it must – at least in retrospect – have suggested a materialization of the blood vocabulary and imagery of Shakespeare's text. In one of the later performances, the materialization became all too real. "Sloshing", the word used by Houseman to describe how the wall was painted, returns in France's version of one of the most widely repeated anecdotes regarding the play, when Welles inadvertently stabbed the actor playing the part of Caesar and the stage floor was invaded by blood: "One night he severed an artery, and in the blackout Joseph Holland had to be carried off stage and rushed to hospital. When the lights came up again for the Poet scene, Norman Lloyd found himself *sloshing* around in blood" (France 1975, 61, emphasis mine).

Surprisingly, France's playscript eliminates one of the most famous of the bloody passages in Shakespeare's text – the gesture, invoked by Brutus, to "[s]toop, Romans, stoop, / And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood / Up to the elbows, and besmear our swords", waving their "red weapons" over their "heads" as they "cry, 'Peace, freedom and liberty!'" – although the rest of Brutus' and Cassius' words on the endless re-enactments of their deed in

centuries to come remain¹⁰. The passage was however present in the 1934 *Everybody's Shakespeare* text (MS 37) and in the 1939 Mercury Text Recording that accompanied the new edition.

The elimination of the invitation to perform a blood bathing ceremony robbed the conspirators of an act that would have fulfilled a ritual function, confirming the ennobling, sacrificial nature Brutus sought to attribute to the killing of Caesar. Why then should these particular lines have been removed from the version to be performed on stage? Both Caesar's account of Calpurnia's dream, predicting a similar scene, followed by Decius' interpretation, and Antony's suggestion "the commons" too would "kiss dead Caesar's wounds / And dip their napkins in his sacred blood" were they to hear the contents of Caesar's will, are quoted in full (MS 32 and 45; Welles 2001, 129-30 and 144). The elimination could perhaps be due to the differing nature of the three occurrences. Calpurnia's dream and Antony's suggestion are descriptions or even scripts of ritual actions to be performed in a hypothetical future; the theatrical gesture proposed by Brutus consists instead of directions for a performance to take place in the present. The elimination of the lines deprives him of the theatrical power role as director, stage manager or playwright assumed by Antony¹¹ and before him Caesar, both in the opening scene of the play when Welles's Caesar (not Shakespeare's Casca) orders silence on stage and later in his narration of a dream that Calpurnia herself did not describe. When, on the contrary, the reference is to the playing of the act in a potentially eternal future – "How many ages hence" – Welles has no hesitation in attributing to Brutus the lines Shakespeare had given to Cassius (as, too, had Welles, three years earlier, in MS 37), suggesting a possible identification of Brutus –

¹⁰ A textual surgery that is the opposite of that performed by the Italian censor in 1935 (Bigliuzzi 2019, 32 and 173).

¹¹ Alessandro Serpieri's comments on Shakespeare's theatricalization of Antony's rhetoric and on Antony's ability both as actor and as stage director in organizing his own performance and that of his audience, arranging them "in a circle around [Caesar's] body" and turning them "into actors of *his* scene", are illuminating also for Welles's representations of the forum scene both in his drawings and in the Mercury Theatre performance (Serpieri 2010, 230-31).

and of Welles himself as actor and director, but also as the author of the adapted script – with Shakespeare.

Returning to the blood imagery present in Welles's playscript, Decius' reference to Caesar's "statue spouting blood in many pipes" (Welles 2001, 130) must have assumed added relevance on a stage where audiences were faced not only by blood-coloured bricks, but by "clearly visible" steam pipes (France 1977, 108), which had also been painted red. Other visions of blood that add to and are in turn enhanced by the wall's evocative power include Antony's later attribution of movement and even anthropomorphic agency and emotion to Caesar's blood as it followed Brutus' "cursed steel [...] / [...], / As rushing out of doors, to be resolved / If Brutus so unkindly knocked, or no". Or, again, to Pompey's statue, "[w]hich all the while ran blood" as Caesar fell below it (MS 46, Welles 2001, 148), an image Welles had already foregrounded impressively in black and white in one of his finest *Everybody's Shakespeare* illustrations¹².

In at least one case Shakespeare's blood imagery is actually expanded in Welles's script. In the scene where Caesar's bloody, wounded body is exhibited to his audience by Antony, the single reference to blood by the citizens in Shakespeare's text is multiplied. Although the playscript eliminates the First Citizen's "O most bloody sight!" exclamation, the word "bloody" is uttered not once but seven times. Foregrounded by the removal of the rest of the phrase, it reverberates in a multiple echo, voiced not by a single actor but by four of the ten actors who make up the crowd of Antony's listeners (Welles 2001, 149).

The redness of the wall – and its association with blood – was supplemented by coloured lighting on at least two occasions: "[T]he murders of Caesar and Cinna the Poet, played out in red,

¹² I discuss this image in my analysis of the *ES/MS* illustrations in the next section of this study. Both Hill's introduction to the *ES* play and the final recording of Welles's 1938 radio rehearsal include Plutarch's description of Pompey's statue "wetted with [Caesar's] blood". Hill's quotation also includes Plutarch's comment: "So that Pompey himself seemed to have presided, as it were, over the revenge done upon his adversary, who lay here at his feet, and breathed out his soul through his multitude of wounds, for they say he received three and twenty" (MS 6).

intense lights, were terrible, bloody moments, suggesting the unleashing of perverse human pleasures in the act of killing" (Postlewait 1999, 120). Norman Lloyd, who played the part of Cinna the Poet, adds further details on the staging of his scene: "the lighting was fantastic – blood red – the set was red too. [...] Orson's direction: the last thing I scream is THE POET. Rush down the ramp – I just disappeared – just this hand, bathed in red light" (quoted in Callow 1995, 335). The blackout and silence with which the scene closed – before Cinna's last words – must have made both the poet's cry and the presence of his hand (the only remaining trace of his disappearing body) all the more striking, incorporating and replacing the suddenly invisible redness of the wall: "Blackout. Silence. Then, a last frenzied cry – 'BUT I'M CINNA THE POET!' [...] followed by the peal of a Hammond organ struck full volume on all the bass keys and pedals for what seems like minutes (but is actually forty-five seconds)" (France 1977, 116).

While Cinna's hand, raised in his last visible gesture, recalls that of Caesar as he dies, his "one hand stretched out to [Brutus] in appeal" in the *ES* stage direction (Courtney 2006, 205), the red lighting produces a new, live version of Shakespeare's images of blood-drenched hands, no longer narrated as part of a potential future ritual but brought on stage in an unholy re-enactment of Caesar's assassination. In inviting his audience to "kiss dead Caesar's wounds / And dip their napkins in his sacred blood", while he sought to give voice to the wounded "ruby lips" (Welles 2001, 138), Antony had laid the foundations for the blood-splattering flood of slaughter that would ensue, engulfing Cinna as the first, pathetic victim of a potentially unending cycle of bloodshed.

According to Brady, the poems Cinna tried to give his assailants were "written on pink paper, a gentler contrast to the blood red violence of the wall" (Brady 1989, 125). This adds a further dimension to Welles's use of varied tonalities of redness, foregrounding the pathos of the poet's gesture in trying to demonstrate his identity and innocence by giving copies of his poems to his assailants. Instead of protection, they serve only to shift the justification for his lynching from involvement in Caesar's assassination to literary inadequacy: "Tear him for his bad verses"

(Welles 2001, 154). "To Normal Lloyd, who played Cinna, his character 'symbolized what was happening in the world, if your name was Greenburg – and even if you weren't Jewish'" (France 2001b, 105-6). But the treatment of the street poet could also be seen as a symbol of the dangers facing artists and intellectuals in a totalitarian regime. For Daniel Francis Yezbick, Cinna symbolizes "the plight of intelligent individuals trapped between the governing elite and the roiling masses". In 1937, "in a culture obsessed with issues of social commitment and the collective potential of 'the people', Cinna's disappearance into the throng represented the death knell of democratic freedom" (Yezbick 2004, 291).

In his discussion of the scene in his second review for the *New York World-Telegram*, Whipple adds a monstrous, cannibalistic twist to the body metaphors that were widely adopted in comments on the production. "In the half-light of the stage the slender figure of the poet is picked out against the red background of the brick wall" while the mob itself, coming more and more densely together, is transformed into the mouth of a "human juggernaut": "Around him is a small ring of light, and in the shadows an ever-tightening, pincer-like mass movement. Then in one awful moment of madness the jaws of the mob come together on him and he is swallowed up and rushed into black oblivion" (Whipple 2014b, 445)¹³.

The corporeal images associating the set with Caesar's bleeding corpse are also applied to Welles's interventions on the *textual* body of Shakespeare's play, expressed through anthropomorphic metaphors. While John Anderson announced in the *New York Journal and American* that Welles's "ruthlessly reassembled version" of the play had "gone to the *heart* of it and *kept it beating* with the ever-gathering momentum of his scheme" (quoted in Weiss 1994, 209, emphasis mine), Brown's review in the *New York Post* went further, translating Welles's textual interventions into a vocabulary

¹³ Whipple's refiguring of the scene appears in a second discussion of the play, in which he includes the community of his readers in a shared experience of viewing and reviewing: "and *your* mind's eye reviews, again and again, those scenes which have so captured *your* imagination", a confirmation of the effectiveness of Welles's mind-awakening aim (Whipple 2014b, 444, emphasis mine).

of bodily violence, more akin to butchery than surgery despite their positive results:

Mr. Welles has not hesitated to take liberties with the script. [...] He has not stabbed it through the heart, he has only chopped away at its body. You may miss a few fingers, even an arm and leg, in the *Julius Caesar* you thought you knew. But the heart of the drama beats more vigorously in this production than it has in years. (Quoted in O'Connor 1980, 346)

John O'Connor glosses Brown's image with details of the surgical operation – "The arm, leg, and fingers Welles chopped off were the ghost, Octavius, the personal rivalries, and most of the last two acts" (346) – but fails to note its echo of the passage in *Julius Caesar* where Brutus rejects Cassius' proposal to kill not only Caesar but Antony:

Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius,
To cut the head off and then hack the limbs;
For Antony is but a limb of Caesar.
Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius.
[...]
Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods,
Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.
And for Marc Antony, think not of him;
For he can do no more than Caesar's arm
When Caesar's head is off.
(Welles 2001, 125-26)

In Anderson's review, the shouting of the crowds morphs into the shouting of the play itself, crossing the centuries to make itself heard in the turbulent world of the 1930s. In the "sharp design" of his production, Welles had "found the tip-toe melodrama of conspiracy, moved it to its deadly work, and in the racing mobs [...] howling for their dead tyrant, lifted an Elizabethan voice into the modern world of dictators to make a lusty shout of protest" (quoted in Weiss 1994, 209). For Brooks Atkinson, on the contrary, "[w]ith nothing but men and lights for materials", Welles had created "scenes that are almost tongue-tied with stealth and terror, crowd

scenes that overflow with savagery, columns of soldiers marching through the dim light in the distance" (Atkinson 1937a, quoted in Weiss 1994, 210) – an alternation between muteness and shouting that reflects the use both of silence and intensity of sound in Blitzstein's musical score and the orchestration of whispering and shouting in the voices of the crowd.

Before returning to the Mercury stage production to examine the opening scene and discuss how the visual impact of the red stage wall was integrated by the orchestration of light and shade and the visual and kinetic management of the actors, it is necessary to go back in time to some of Welles's earlier engagements with the play, most particularly his stage directions, drawings and essay on staging in *Everybody's Shakespeare*, co-authored with his former schoolmaster, Roger Hill.

3. Julius Caesar in *Black and White: The Multiple Caesars of Everybody's Shakespeare*

Welles's engagements with Shakespeare were also engagements with the recipients of his creations. What kind or rather kinds of Shakespeare and of Caesar (text and character) would his theatre, reading and listening publics be acquainted with? How was he to mediate with their knowledge and expectations? How did his work fit into the tradition of Shakespeare reception in America and elsewhere?

3.1. American Reception of Julius Caesar

An indication of Welles's perception of the problem comes from his work on *Everybody's Shakespeare*, a publication intended for use in schools which included *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* as well as *Julius Caesar*. A folder of "Julius Caesar Research" is preserved in the Welles Mss. collection at the Lilly Library of Indiana University, containing Welles's notes on the play and the history of its performance, including a reproduction of the programme of Edwin Booth and Lawrence Barrett's 1871

production¹⁴. Although the folder is located in a box of documents relating to the Mercury Theatre production of 1937, some of the material referred to in Welles's notes may have been accumulated years before. His essay "On Staging Shakespeare and On Shakespeare's Stage" in *Everybody's Shakespeare* (1934) includes a brief but colourful history of Shakespeare performance, illustrated by drawings of playhouses, costumes and different forms of staging. The book itself is connected explicitly not with Shakespeare scholarship, but with the "vast tradition of stage business":

This book is a popular presentation of Shakespeare from the players' and the producer's viewpoint. We have adapted it from the prompt-books of the great actors and from other sources, and arranged it into a sort of simplified composite of that whole unpublished literature. Those zero hours of Shakespeare's history on the stage when the plays were "reformed", and "made fit", [...] have not concerned us. Our business has been with the more respectful actors' versions and our reverence for the original has helped us in again adapting them, this time to star Shakespeare. (Welles 1939a, 28)

¹⁴ Box 5, folder 34. "The Mercury's research files and press releases are filled with voluminous timelines and preliminary historical summaries of *Julius Caesar's* exploitation on stage and in school. Welles and his collaborators were not only immersed in Julius Caesar's American history, it seems that they wanted the general public to become more aware of it as well" (Yezbick 2004, 250). For quotations (in Italian translation) from Welles's notes on the stage history and criticism of *Julius Caesar*, see Casale 2001, 126-30, 135. The presence of the Booth and Barrett production programme in the Research file is particularly interesting in this context. John Wilkes Booth, who had appeared as Antony together with his brothers Edwin Booth as Brutus and Junius Brutus Booth Jr. as Cassius in 1864, a few months before his assassination of Abraham Lincoln, is famed for shouting "*Sic semper tyrannis*. The South is avenged" after shooting the President in a Washington theatre, and for numbers of references to *Julius Caesar* in letters and diary entries written after the assassination. See, for example, his complaint at being pursued "[f]or doing what Brutus was honored for. What made [William] Tell a hero? And yet I, for striking down a greater tyrant than they ever knew, am looked upon as a common cutthroat. [...] I struck for my country and that alone". For further details and quotations, see in particular Teague 2006, 72-73.

Finally, a collage of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century production posters (including a presentation of William Macready's *Julius Caesar*) forms the back cover of the volume. One of the intentions behind both Roger Hill and Welles's work on *Everybody's Shakespeare* and all of Welles's *Caesars* was to react against the elaborate, 'historical' sets and costumes of most previous performances.

The authors of *Everybody's Shakespeare* could count on their school public's acquaintance less with the plays themselves than with set pieces, which, from the time of William Enfield's elocutionary textbook, *The Speaker* (1776), reprinted in America in 1798, continued to be included in other texts throughout most of the nineteenth century. The most frequently quoted speeches and scenes from *Julius Caesar* were: "'The Speech of Brutus on the Death of Caesar', 'Antony's Soliloquy over Caesar's Body', 'Antony's Funeral Oration over Caesar's Body', 'The Quarrel of Brutus and Cassius', as well as a piece titled simply 'Brutus and Cassius', which includes most of Act I, scene ii, where Cassius performs the bulk of his rhetorical seduction of Brutus". The latter, Schupak adds, "includes [...] Cassius' speech, 'I had as lief not be, as live to be / In awe of such a thing as I myself', recounting Caesar's human flaws, as well as Cassius' oration, 'Why man he doth bestride the narrow world / like a Colossus'" (Schupak 2017, 164). Of the speeches, "Antony's Funeral Oration" was undoubtedly the most popular, often the only passage from the play to be included, in a carefully edited version.

A double tradition of American *Caesars* existed in the field of readers. On the one hand, "the extracts used in textbooks constructed the play as far more strongly republican than Shakespeare's full-length drama" (Schupak 2017, 162), a tendency also to be found in the prose version Harrison S. Morris included in his sequel to the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* (1893-94). Although "Morris makes no explicit reference to the American Revolution or the War of Independence", Maria Wyke observes,

it is notable that the title character is introduced as a man who would be king, and as a danger to the liberties of Rome [...]. Cassius and Brutus are figured as honourable patriots, sad at heart, who cannot

countenance the dictator's ambition. [...]. The tragedy's original staging of ethical unease about conspiracy and assassination vanishes, and the American prose synopsis replaces it with a heroic camaraderie that better matches the idealized national history of colonial revolution. (Wyke 2012, 49)

On the other, in one of the most widely diffused and appreciated collections of readers, the McGuffey series, a more conservative interpretation dominates. Due partly to their costliness, they had considerable cultural impact and "were passed down in families, becoming a 'book of reference' and assuming significant cultural status" (Schupak 2017, 167).

In McGuffey's *Eclectic Fourth Reader* (1837), "Antony's Oration over Caesar's Dead Body", the only passage from the play to be included¹⁵ comes immediately after "The Fall of Babylon" (Revelation 18 and 19:1-8). As Philip Christensen notes, "there is little doubt that the editors intend its readers to link the two selections. From the editors' perspective, all pagan achievement, even that of great Caesar, is bound ultimately to fail". At the same time, Antony's words, "almost moving stones to rise and mutiny, link mighty Caesar's fall to the betrayal of the Son of Man". Among its annotations to the speech, the *Sixth Reader* (1879) includes a tribute to "the most remarkable genius of the ancient world" placing Caesar "among the precursors of the young America's great patriot heroes": "Under his rule Rome was probably at her best, and his murder at once produced a state of anarchy". Throughout the McGuffey readers, "heroic deeds, performed by men, are identified with the stability of the commonwealth; villainy with anarchy and a consequent tyranny" (Christensen 2009, 108).

3.2. Preparing the "Shakespeare book"

The *Everybody's Shakespeare* project began in 1932, when Hill suggested they should "[w]rite a Shakespeare book. Tell other teachers some of the tricks we used at Todd to make the Elizabethan popular in the classroom as well as on the stage" (quoted in

¹⁵ Both in this edition and its sequels, with the exception of the 1844 edition, which also contained the "Quarrel of Brutus and Cassius" (Christensen 2009, 109).

Courtney 2006, 197). The idea was to capitalize on Todd's theatrical successes, providing Shakespeare adaptations for schools, partly as an outlet for Welles's creativity. The book was published two years later by the Todd School printing press¹⁶. Welles began by working on sketches, after which Hill charged him with writing stage directions and one of the introductory essays. In one of his letters, written in 1933 after leaving for Morocco to work on the project, Welles refers specifically to *Julius Caesar* and the problems raised by inventing appropriate stage directions for the play:

The mere presence of Shakespeare's scrip (sic) worries me. What right have I to give credulous and believing innocents an inflection for his mighty lines? Who am I to say that this one is "tender" and this one is said "angrily" and this "with a smile?" There are as many interpretations for characters in CAESAR as there are in God's spacious firmament. What nerve I have to pick out one of them and cram it down any child's throat, coloring, perhaps permanently, his whole conception of the play. (Quoted in Courtney 2006, 198)

Welles extends his idea of multiple possible interpretations of *Caesar* characters to those of other Shakespeare plays in his essay on staging, viewing them as a source for creativity. After opening with a celebrated appreciation of Shakespeare's poetical and emotional genius – "Shakespeare said everything. Brain to belly; every mood and minute of a man's season. His language is starlight and fireflies and the sun and the moon. He wrote it with tears and

¹⁶ "Intended for the textbook market and sold in bookstores in Chicago or directly from the Todd Press, *Everybody's Shakespeare* went through several editions quickly. First published in 1934 by the Todd School's own press (known primarily for printing Todd School promotional materials and Roger Hill's book on basketball), editing and arranging credits went to 'Roger Hill and Orson Welles'. The Todd Press reprinted the books in 1938; this time Orson Welles's name came first, capitalizing on the successes of Harlem's WPA productions of *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. The texts were published in 1939 by Harper with some minor changes, as *The Mercury Shakespeare*, and were released at the same time as the Mercury Text Recordings. *Macbeth*, published in 1941, was the only new play to be added to *The Mercury Shakespeare*" (Courtney 2006, 197). The later *Mercury Shakespeare* edition is viewable at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/miun.afw2961.0001.001>.

blood and beer, and his words march like heart-beats" (Welles 1939a, 22) – he provides a brief account of the Elizabethan stage and of the history of Shakespeare performances, going on to describe how the multiple possible interpretations of Shakespeare's characters can be translated into drawings, scene designs and stage directions:

In illustrating I have drawn a variety of character interpretations but not nearly enough. There are, for instance, a thousand Shylocks: grim patriarchs, loving fathers, cunning orientals, and even comics with big noses¹⁷. And this goes for Malvolio and Marc Antony, Brutus and Sir Toby Belch, Viola and the two Portias, and all the rest of the characters in these plays down to Lucius and Launcelot Gobbo. You can draw them, and what's more important, play them, exactly as you wish. [...]. But it's up to you. This is equally true of the scene designs. [...]

About the stage directions: Shakespeare went to the rehearsals of his plays so he didn't write stage directions. Anyway playwrights didn't write comprehensive ones until long after his time. Pick up any edition of Shakespeare and you'll find stage directions economically confined to *Enter So-and-So*, *Exit So-and-So*, and an occasional *Dies*. (Welles 1939a, 27-28)

3.3. Multiple Caesars in Welles's Drawings and Stage Directions

Welles's drawings add further stories to those emerging from the adaptation, expressed through the size, posture and placing of the protagonists and the use of line or shadow, with varying intensity of contrast. The deliberately unfinished, provisional appearance of the drawings dynamizes the scenes with their suggestion of movement. My analysis is based on the text of the *Mercury Shakespeare*, the 1939 version of *Everybody's Shakespeare*, in which Welles's drawings and stage directions underwent a number of

¹⁷ Illustrated on the same page by a magnificent sketch of a procession of "a thousand shylocks" (27), variegated in costume and appearance, getting smaller and smaller as they circle away into the distance. Also viewable at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/g/genpub/afw2961.0001.001/32>.

changes, both in length and placing¹⁸. This is unfortunately the only edition available on line. Where possible, I integrate my study with descriptions and stage directions from the earlier version quoted in Callow 1995, 184, and Courtney 2006, 205.

The Tragedy of Julius Caesar opens in *MS* with a sketch of an imposing, laurel-wreathed Caesar, imperiously dominating the cast list that follows. Callow quotes from a lengthy *ES* stage direction describing the character as “richly robed; a majestic figure, kingly and dignified”. Welles’s illustration shows little similarity however to “[h]is handsome, almost feminine face [which] is oldish and cut with wrinkles, but the eyes are clear and steady and the mouth is firm” (*ES*, quoted in Callow 1995, 184). In the later version the description is eliminated. All that remains is a heavily weighted definition of the character in the *MS* cast list: “Julius Caesar, *dictator of Rome*”.

Welles’s illustrations and stage directions for the assassination scene are closely related to its rendering in the 1937 Mercury Theatre production. In the *MS* text, a tableau of the assassination anticipates in a static, visual version the sequence of sound, movement and fury narrated two pages later in the stage direction (*MS* 34 and 36), brought to life immediately afterwards by the impressive, almost abstract image of Casca’s violent attack on Caesar from behind, placed in the left margin at the bottom of the page (*MS* 36). Its “simple lines”, as Angela Courtney observes, “convey the speed and surprise with which the murder began” (Courtney 2006, 206). Welles’s *ES* stage direction, quoted by Courtney, shows the sequence followed in acting out the murder (parts omitted in the *MS* version are in italics¹⁹):

While in Shakespeare’s text, the directions for one of the most famous stage murders in theatre history are simply, “They stab Caesar”, Welles

¹⁸ Published in 1939 by Harper & Brothers and accompanied by a phonographic recording. Text and images of the whole book, including *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* as well as *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, are available at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-id?c=genpub;idno=AFW2961.0001.001>.

¹⁹ In the shorter *MS* version, the punctuation is corrected and the *ES* use of block capitals for names removed.

takes on the difficult task of adding intricate fight choreography for students of Shakespeare [...]. Welles reveals his composition for the readers: Casca first raises a sword from behind Caesar, followed by: “*Shrieking, the people draw back in fear. CASCA brings down the sword fiercely and swiftly stabbing the unsuspecting Caesar in the back. Caesar wheels about and Decius stabs him. A few of the braver citizens start up the steps in defense but by this time all the conspirators have brought out swords. They menace the others with them and most of the people fly out of the room. CAESAR, roaring furiously, throws himself at CASSIUS. Who triumphantly runs him through. One by one the conspirators all thrust at him. Caesar, scarcely able to move, staggers down the steps and drags himself painfully by superhuman effort up to BRUTUS, one hand stretched out to him in appeal. Averting his face, BRUTUS stabs him. Dazed, shocked, CAESAR stares at his friend*”. (Courtney 2006, 205)

Several of the aspects of Welles’s images and writing noted by Courtney are central also in his work for the Mercury Theatre: in particular “his attention to the logistics of creating a complex and multicharacter scene” (Courtney 2006, 206). France’s description of the 1937 staging of the assassination scene, probably based on Welles’s *Julius Caesar* Research notes²⁰, shows how the initial outline developed in performance:

The conspirators are positioned in a diagonal line across the stage. Caesar, rolling from one to another in a kind of broken-field run, is, in turn, stabbed by each of them. Finally, he reaches downstage. There is only one person left to run to – Brutus, standing like a column against the proscenium wall. His knees buckling, Caesar turns to him as his final haven of safety. Without a word Brutus’ hand comes out of his overcoat pocket, and he stands there clutching a knife while Caesar hangs on to his lapels. The enormous figure of Brutus gives no ground to the cringing Caesar, whose face registers the question – will he save me? Caesar’s own answer, barely audible, is one of absolute resignation: ‘Et tu Brute? Then fall Caesar’. The knife goes in and Caesar slumps to the ground. It was more climactic than the most piercing scream, for when Caesar finally spoke it was simply to verbalize the statement that the entire scene had already made. (France 1977, 110-11)

²⁰ See Casale 2001, 134-35 and 171, note 60.

Antony's arrival shortly after the assassination is signalled by two sketches (MS 38). The first is dominated by a pillar whose disorderly Corinthian capital seems to reflect the unruliness of a group of black figures, surrounding others clad in white, that move away below it, their arms raised, whether threateningly or in salutation is hard to ascertain. The second, at the bottom of the page, shows Antony as a small figure kneeling behind Caesar's corpse. Stretched out horizontally under its mantle, the large, black shape of Caesar's body is only recognizable as such in its tiny hands protruding as if in an embrace. Four white clad conspirators, daggers still in hand, stand watching them at a distance, looking down on what could also be a pool of blood – the "bleeding piece of earth" (MS 40) Antony will soon address himself to²¹. In MS 40, the scene ends with his prophetic soliloquy, uttered when he is alone with Caesar's body, promising "[w]oe to the hand that shed this costly blood!" and to the whole of the country. Underneath the "CURTAIN" that follows his last line ("Cry 'Havoc' – and let slip the dogs of war!") is a final sketch, showing an upright, powerful and determined figure, fists clenched, no longer "meek and gentle", but ready to avenge the man lying beneath him. In the Mercury production, Antony's prophecy of Caesar's spirit crying "Havoc" was underlined by the beginning of one of the most violent parts of Blitzstein's musical accompaniment: "After the murder, beginning with Antony's line, 'Cry "Havoc", and let slip the dogs of war', music is played fortissimo by cymbal, thunder drums, and organ" (Burton 1956, 345).

Welles's illustrations of the Forum scene represent a novelty in America. Although Antony's funeral orations were widely represented in American readers and textbooks, they appeared in isolation, unaccompanied by the reactions of the crowd. Here, on the contrary, the crowd plays a central part both in the text and in

²¹ Interestingly, the representation of Caesar's body shows some similarity to the figure filmed in the 1908 Vitagraph silent film, *Julius Caesar*, directed by James Stuart Blackton, William V. Ranous. Some of the props in Welles's drawings also resemble those presented in the film: the tripod burner in Caesar's house and beside one of the Antony images in the Forum scene is almost identical to one that is visible in the early part of the Vitagraph assassination scene.

the drawings. Readers of the *ES* play could see themselves reflected in the heads of the anonymous listener-viewers, placed below the elevated figure of the speaker. Welles's illustrations of actors and audiences in stages and performances of the past in his essay on staging are regenerated and actualized in his sketches of the funeral orations, both in the posture he attributes to the actors and, especially, in his portrayal of actor-audience relations. Seen in this context, the drawings become plays within the play, mirroring some of the metatheatrical elements of Shakespeare's text and anticipating similar elements in Welles's own staging of the play in November 1937.

The Forum scene illustrations open with the representation of an empty stage set labelled "permanent stage for *Julius Caesar*", based on platforms, steps leading up at the sides to a rostrum or "raised pulpit" (MS 41)²². The next illustration (MS 42) shows a peopled tableau, with Brutus standing on top of a flight of steps, his arms slightly open at his side (a typical Wellesian speaker pose), his listeners standing below. At the bottom of the page the figure of Brutus returns in a close-up of the upper part of his body, surrounded by a narrow black shadow. Although there is no visual representation of his listeners within the sketch itself, the image is placed beside the citizens' celebrations of him as the new Caesar, suggesting a dialogue between drawing and text, between the figure speaking in the drawing and the audience listening and responding to him in the text.

Comparison with the drawings of Antony that follow reveals an evident contrast between the static, relatively isolated figure of Brutus and the dynamic, constantly moving figure of Antony, relating directly to an audience that also moves and changes its attitudes and postures. The first image of Antony to appear at the funeral appears on the page facing the sketches of Brutus (MS 43). Placed alongside part of his "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech, it shows him standing in a Christ- or even Madonna-like pose, his arms extended outwards in an eloquent, ostensive gesture, above the heads of an attentive crowd of listeners. In the

²² This has been seen as an anticipation of the Mercury Theatre set's link to the scenography of the Nazi party rallies in Nuremberg.

next group of illustrations (MS 44 and 45, 46 and 47), the interaction between the speaker and his listeners begins to acquire more details. Flanking Antony's words of mourning and his pause as he waits for his heart "in the coffin there with Caesar" to return to him, the image in the upper margin of MS 44 shows a sideview of the speaker, his hand resting on the pulpit, while the heads of the public below him exchange comments. At the bottom of the page is a line drawing showing the composition of the scene and the location of the characters, a variation of the MS 42 group tableau, but with Antony occupying a more elevated position than that previously occupied by Brutus. On the facing page (MS 45) are two close-up representations of details of speaker and listeners, with, at the bottom of the right hand margin, Antony standing beside a small, cross-legged, smoking ritual burner, holding out Caesar's will in one hand while he indicates it to the crowd with the other. A more orderly, institutional version of the pillar from MS 38, where it appeared in front of the crowd, returns on the upper left margin of MS 46 to frame a sideview of Antony as he harangues the attentive crowd, telling the story of Caesar's assassination through the cuts and blood stains of his mantle and of his fall "[e]ven at the base of Pompey's statua, / Which all the while ran blood". A black ribbon-like line reflects his words, suggesting a down-flow of liquid from behind the left side of the column, echoed in the even clearer representation of streaming ribbons of blood in the sketch that follows at the bottom of the page, one of the most complex and effective of Welles's drawings.

Here the liquid pours down from the frontal right side of the black, fractured shape of the statue onto what might be Caesar's body, covered by its black mantle. Facing both is an upsurge of black, chaotic movement. Placed alongside Antony's litotic plea to his "sweet friends" not to let him "stir you up / to such a *sudden flood of mutiny*" (MS 46, emphasis mine), the sketch provides a visual rendering both of Antony's words, the persuasive, performative power of his rhetoric, and a materialization of Calpurnia's dream recounted by Caesar, in which not Pompey's but "my" (Caesar's) statue, "like a fountain with an hundred spouts, / Did run pure blood" (MS 32).

The “sudden flood” stirred up by Antony, dramatizing as pure, inhuman frenzy the citizens’ reactions to the bloody sight revealed on lifting the covering from Caesar’s body, contains the only representation of a statue among the *MS* drawings. Since it is presented in the same position as the column in the previous illustration, it is worth considering its possible symbolic connection – by way both of similarity and contrast – to the latter. Several other *Caesar* illustrations include a pillar, functioning metonymically both as an allusion to the reproductions of monumental architectural forms in the supposedly realistic historical theatrical sceneries that dominated nineteenth- and early twentieth-century stagings of the play and as a representation of Roman power and solidity. Pillars and statues are a “metaphor for identity”, as Ralph Berry observes. “[T]he statue is the characteristic expressive form of Rome. It is hard, marble, an unrelenting assertion of self that one has to accept or overturn. [...] Caesar dies at the foot of Pompey’s statue, not a shallow irony of personality but an antithesis of stage expression: the statue and the man, the marble and the flesh” (Berry 2016, 78).

Not only has he fallen at the foot of the statue of the enemy he had displaced in life, but also of a statue he had appropriated and discursively constructed as a symbol of his own constancy and power and then, in his description of Calpurnia’s dream, as the site of his future reversal. Whether or not Welles was aware of the impressive three-metre height of Pompey’s statue (later to be removed by Caesar’s successor), it seems significant that his drawing should represent it not only as streaming blood but as a damaged structure that is not much higher than the uprising crowd. Moreover, since Caesar had eliminated any mention of Pompey’s name in his narration of the dream, its broken appearance could be interpreted as a reflection of the breaking of his own “true-fixed and resting quality” (*MS* 36), a shadow projected by his fallen body. Certainly, the sketch that follows on the facing page presents a far more powerful, unfractured image of human energy in the depiction of Antony’s shadow appearing alongside his next reference to mutiny.

Here, torches illuminate Antony’s body, his arms stretched out above him, projecting a giant moving shadow on the wall behind

him that multiplies his size and power²³. The image flanks and contradicts his litotically metarhetorical self-presentation – “I am no orator, as Brutus is” (MS 47) – as one unable “[t]o stir men’s blood” (Welles 2001, 150). Able only to bid the “poor, poor, dumb mouths” of “Caesar’s wounds” to speak in his place, he resorts to a complicated rhetorical cross-casting aimed at producing in a hypothetical future the performance that is already taking place:

but were I Brutus,
And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony
Would ruffle up your spirits and put a tongue
In every wound of Caesar that should move
The stones of Rome to rise and – *mutiny!* (MS 47)

Through his projection of the small-scale, self-negating, white-clad figure into a towering black shadow with moving, triple heads and bat-like flapping wings as arms, Welles provides a visual rewriting of Antony’s oratory. By translating the ‘figures’ of his speech and gestures into a pictorial hyperbole in motion, he shows the working of a rhetoric able to animate riotous upheaval not only in the crowd of human listeners, but even in the stones of Rome²⁴.

Returning to more normal size in the final image on the page as Antony announces the contents of Caesar’s will, it is now the crowd that seems to be growing as it agitates below him, preparing to leave on its mission of revenge. The chaos of the unindividuated, frenzied mob we saw in the image facing it on the previous page is replaced here by clearly distinguishable individual figures as they announce their plan to “burn [Caesar’s] body in the holy place / And with the brands fire the traitors’ houses!” (MS 47). In the last images of the scene (MS 48), the depiction quieters down, showing purpose rather than mischief as the mob departs, following the course indicated by Antony’s arm. A further toning down of the

²³ This is not the only *ES* sketch based on the projection of a huge shadow (see in particular Cassius and Cinna plotting to win Brutus to their cause [MS 22] and Caesar’s fearful night-gowned figure heading the scene set in Caesar’s house in II.ii [MS 30]), but it is certainly the most significant.

²⁴ For an illuminating discussion of Antony’s rhetorical and gestural moves in his orchestration of the Forum, see Serpieri 1988, 102-5.

drama is even more evident in the final image, with Antony standing, alone, on an oval three-tiered platform, before his servant brings him the news of Octavius's arrival and the flight of Brutus and Cassius.

It may be worth comparing the images of Antony to contemporary descriptions of the staging of his oration in the 1937 theatre production. Different reviewers concentrate on different moments. Mantle's account of the lighting used for the speakers during the funeral orations closely resembles Welles's image and suggests how the same effect may have been used for both the orations: "And then to the market place where, in the most effective scene of the evening, a kind of scaffold has been built from which Brutus and Antony speak their orations over the corpse of Caesar in a modern casket. With a light in front that throws their shadows huge upon the back wall" (quoted in France 1975, 61). Other descriptions include an anonymous review in *Time* magazine (22 November 1937):

Lighting sets the mood and changes the scene. Notable effects: the giant backwall shadow of Antony, speaking over Caesar's body; a cross-hatching of light and shadow high up in the loft, unintentionally giving the impression of crossed fasces: the climax, patterned after LIFE's pictures of last summer's Nazi Congress at Nürnberg, vertical shafts of light stabbing up through the darkness as background for the eulogy to the noblest Roman of them all. (*Time* 1937)

A photograph confirms the reviewers' accounts. Alfredo Valente's portrayal of George Coulouris as Marc Antony, published in 1938 in *The Stage*, brings both speaker and public into focus. A flood light located presumably at the centre forefront of the stage illuminates Antony, in military uniform, and the hats and upper bodies of some of the members of the crowd looking up at him from below the rostrum. A giant shadow replicates the form of the rostrum and the body of the speaker, his arms raised skywards in a halo of light. Wyke's comment on the representation of the funeral orations on stage and in Valente's photograph (Wyke 2012, 118, Fig. 21) draws attention to their metatheatrical component:

A ten-foot-high pulpit covered in black velour had been wheeled up the back ramp in the dark. From it, first Brutus and then Antony orated directly outward above the crowds who had assembled below them and around Caesar's open coffin. Disconcertingly, therefore, they were also speaking directly to the theater audience. (Wyke 2012, 117)

4. Caesar on Stage: "Death of a Dictator" at the Mercury Theatre

4.1. A Work in Progress: Preparation and Rehearsals

When Welles returned from his ten-day retreat in New Hampshire, he brought with him a completely reedited text of *Julius Caesar*, including music and light cues, and a suitcase full of notes, sketches and a Plasticine model of his production. We had four weeks in which to adapt them to the Mercury stage. (Houseman 1972, 296)

Throughout the weeks and days that followed, Welles made continual changes in the script, set, lighting and other stage business. "A new ending was tried out every night [...] right up to the opening. As a result there was never an opportunity to rehearse the play from start to finish" (France 1977, 120). Callow describes how he "struggled for weeks with scenes which resisted his best efforts; this process continued up to the very opening". The lynching of Cinna the Poet posed a particularly arduous problem: how to stage a musical but also "choreographic conception [...] to show a mob destroying an innocent man" (Callow 1995, 328). The "choreographic conception" regarded not only movement and sound, but also the interrelationship of lighting and movement, leading again to endless experimentation in rehearsal:

Every rehearsal was a technical rehearsal. Once the lights started to appear, Welles would move actors into their most effective groupings; he and Jeannie Rosenthal would spend hours moving the actors or the lights to achieve the images they were striving for. They were in a state of constant experiment, Welles improvising as more and more lamps appeared, Rosenthal trying to make possible what he wanted. [...] "The idea, the actor and a pool of light to focus interest on the performing area were used to convey the essence of meaning as never before. These pools of light" wrote Jean Rosenthal, "alone could create theatricality. Varied as directed, downward or angled from back to front, left or

right, high or low each position produced its own plasticity and pattern". (330-31)

France gives a useful account of how Welles's adaptations impacted on the concept of the play and the presentation of its characters as he "shaped both the play and its characters into a story of action". This he achieved not only by way of cutting but by a "practice of 'borrowing'", giving one character's lines to someone else, or transposing blocks of dialogue from one point or scene to another (France 1977, 107). Stark Young adds further details on his editing technique in his *New Republic* review (1 December 1937): "longer scenes, especially the celebrated forum scene with Antony's funeral oration and the incitement of the mob, are broken up into parts, interrupted, varied, to escape the formality and design on which they are constructed (by Shakespeare)" (quoted in France 1975, 62). Welles's compression of the early scenes between Cassius and Brutus, his shifting to "after the formulation of the conspiracy" of Antony's reassurance that Caesar has no need to fear Cassius, and his treatment of the scene with Calpurnia and Decius in Caesar's home, contribute to "develop[ing] the sense that the very people Caesar took to be his allies were the ones who were actually trying to kill him. Thereafter", France concludes, "every moment was charged with that special irony, so that by the time Caesar confronts Brutus the tension had risen to an electrifying peak" (France 1975, 60).

Frank Brady describes the visual effect of Welles's interventions on one of the scripts: "So many deletions, additions, cross-outs, doodles, red, blue, and black pencil marks, scribbles and lines eventually permeated Welles's working script that the dog-eared pages seemed to take on a life of their own" (Brady 1989, 122)²⁵. His metaphor of the autonomous life of the text as a body recalls some of the contemporary press comments on Welles's cuts and transplants, seen almost as surgical operations on the limbs and organs of Shakespeare's play, a point I discuss earlier in relation to

²⁵ See also France 2001a, 5, for a detailed description of how Welles worked on his compilation of 3 *Henry VI* and *Richard III* for a 1930 Todd School production (*Winter of Our Discontent*), presented as "the paradigm for all of his future adaptations of Shakespeare, whether for radio, film, or the stage".

the blood and body imagery associated with the production. But even such tiny details as the use of single words show the state of flux in which the texts existed.

The manipulations Welles performed directly on the text of *Julius Caesar* were supplemented by the impact of his theatrical interventions and “stage business”. On stage, the playscript is reinvigorated. Different aspects of Shakespeare’s characters and their relationships are brought to the fore and recontextualized, while his imagery is drawn into transmedial patterns and clusters.

4.2. *From Bare Stage to Sound and Light: The Opening Scene*

The opening of the performance was signalled by a sudden blackout, accompanied by sound. Brady provides a detailed account of how “moments before the play began [...] Welles gave the order to extinguish the red lights of the EXIT signs. [...] ‘[...] I want *complete darkness*. [...]’” (Brady 1989, 123)²⁶. After this,

the fixture lamps at the sides and back of the theater were slowly dimmed to blackness and everything was plunged into a frightening, dark void, a Stygian hue that all at once created the mood of death and fear and bewilderment. It seemed longer in time than it actually was for most of the audience, sitting there like silent and obedient souls in a darkened tunnel, unable to see even their hands before their faces. Finally, a lone, ghostly ancient voice coming from somewhere in the darkness cried out: “*Caesar!*”

As the lights then came up, one could easily imagine the shock and drama and poetry of hearing that scream. That one word was among the most memorable moments ever experienced in a Broadway production of a Shakespearean play. (123)

²⁶ Yezbick notes that Welles began not only *Caesar*, but other dramas, like *Faustus*, “in totally overwhelming darkness. [...] Throughout his various media projects, Welles used silence and blackness as startling devices that would differentiate the disturbing start of his texts from the more sedate beginnings of others” (Yezbick 2004, 289). Later, discussing the CBS March 1938 recording, he describes how, using “a sonic version of his pitch-black opening, Welles commences the production in total silence without any introductions, musical curtains, or credits” (296).

What seems to have struck Brady most was the sensory experience of disembodiment the frightened members of the audience were forced to undergo. Suddenly deprived of sight and thus of spatial and temporal coordinates, unable to anchor their identity on bodily awareness, their sense of disorientation was uncannily amplified and echoed in the field of sound by the “ghostly”, unidentifiable and unlocatable voice arriving from the dark²⁷.

Only later does Brady mention the “Fascist March” overture, composed by Marc Blitzstein to accompany Caesar’s entry into the Forum for the Lupercal celebrations, which must have played an important part in the shock effect of the opening. Houseman describes how its “blaring brass and deep, massive, rhythmic beat [...] instantly evoked the pounding march of Hitler’s storm troopers that we were hearing with increasing frequency over the radio and in the newsreels”. Even more disturbing “was the ominous rumble of the electric organ on certain base stops which set the whole theatre trembling” (Houseman 1972, 307). Blitzstein himself refers to the march in “Music for the Theatre”, an article published three months after the performance:

Music isn’t always background. Sometimes it comes down front for a close-up and takes over and gets written into the plot. The Fascist March which opens [...] *Julius Caesar* is a case in point. Less an overture than an initial statement of theme. I had to cut it off abruptly at Caesar’s first words “Bid every noise be still!” and one thinks immediately back to it as the theatrical pivot up to that point. (Blitzstein 1938, quoted in France 1975, 58)

From the start, the score created a “mood of unrest” (Burton 1956, 345):

²⁷ In retrospect, the anonymous soothsayer’s “ghostly” cry could be seen as a substitute for the physical presence of Caesar’s ghost later in the play, eliminated in the stage performance, although initially intended to be represented: “As his early script shows, Welles originally planned the death of Cinna and the arrival of Caesar’s ghost as intermittent narrative segments where characters’ voices dictate the flow of the action” (Yezbick 2004, 284).

Blitzstein begins the score for *Julius Caesar* with a tympani roll and nine measures of music which changes tempo four times from 4/4 to 2/4 to 5/4 and back to 4/4. Horn and trumpet play four measures written in parallel fourths and with a heavy pulsating accent. When the organ enters, [...] the introductory fragment ends with an eighth note and a *tension of expectancy*. (239, emphasis mine)

Blitzstein's biographer describes "the overture" as "evocative of the sort of marches popular in fascist Italy and Germany, but distorted through bitonal harmonies and robotic rhythms" (Pollack 2012, 213). Although it was performed in "Allegro Maestoso", the Mercury march was in fact very different from the more obviously allegro sound of contemporary Italian and German march music. Accompanied from the start by the ominous sound of marching feet, the effect it had on the audience is synthesized in more general terms by Atkinson in one of his reviews for *The New York Times*: "The grim march of military feet through the ominous shadows of the stage is the doom song heard around the world today" (quoted in Houseman 1972, 317).

While Brady emphasizes the uncannily disturbing sound of the soothsayer's "Caesar!", "the ominous disembodied cry" John Anderson was most struck by in his *New York Journal and American* review was the warning to "[b]eware the Ides of March" (quoted in Sawyer 2019, 173). Among the issues raised by the opening is Welles's characterization of Caesar, for the disembodied cry was ominously disorienting also for Caesar. Able only to "hear a tongue shriller than all the music", unable to identify him – "What man is that?" – all Caesar can do is give directions for him to be called from the throng and set before him, so that he can "see his face" (Welles 2001, 109)²⁸. Only then, after a lengthy pause to study the man's appearance, can he reassert his authority and dismiss him as a dreamer. Yet, at the same time, controverting his initial disorientation, Caesar's first words in Welles's playscript show him

²⁸ A need that is echoed in the exchange between Cassius and Brutus that follows shortly afterwards in the playtext – "Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?", "No Cassius; for the eye sees not itself / But by reflection, by some other things" – leading to Cassius' taking on the part of Brutus' "glass" in order to "discover to yourself / That of yourself which you yet know not of" (Welles 2001, 111-12).

in the role of leader, both in the state of Rome and in the microcosmic state of the Mercury Theatre.

Already, the very start of the production shows the mixture of strength and weakness in the figure of Caesar that was already present in Welles's earlier adaptation of *Julius Caesar*. Comparison of the ambiguously gendered description of the leader in the *ES* stage direction, quoted earlier, with his monolithic presentation in the *MS* cast list as "Julius Caesar, *dictator of Rome*" highlights the contradictions in Welles's presentation. Caesar's vulnerability is focused on in the depiction of a frightened, back-slanted night-gowned figure heading the scene set in Caesar's home (*MS* 30), one of the few images of Caesar to appear in *Everybody's Shakespeare*. In France's playscript, his self-presentations as a figure of power are outweighed and undermined by passages relating to his weakness. His fear when swimming or his swooning – authored, admittedly, by his adversaries – is amplified by the paradox of his presentation of himself as a fearless, inflexible leader, "constant as the Northern Star" (Welles 2001, 134), almost immediately forced to give way under the stabs of his assailants, 'rolling' from one to another. The diagonal line produced by the positioning of the conspirators is replicated in Caesar's fall from the verticality of power to the horizontality of death, transforming the classic closure and completeness of his body into a bleeding, grotesquely 'open' tragic corpse²⁹. France's description of the scene adds a further detail to the picture in his presentation of Brutus "standing like a column against the proscenium wall" (France 1977, 111), as if to show the new model of constancy the murder was intended to produce. His posture and placing anticipate Brutus' attempt to present himself as the defender of the good of Rome in the Forum scene and his assumption of the role of intransigent moralist during his quarrel with Cassius at Philippi.

²⁹ Gail Kern Paster's use of Bakhtin's distinction between "classic" and "grotesque" bodies in her study of blood as a gendered metaphor in *Julius Caesar* is at least partly applicable to Welles's *Caesars* (Paster 1989, 285-86, 291, 294 and 298).

In performance, Joseph Holland's appearance, gestures and costume underline the power of Caesar. For France, citing Whipple's review in *The New York Sun*³⁰:

The production opened with Caesar, dressed in a green uniform, scowling behind the mask-like face of a modern dictator, his first gesture the fascist salute which the others returned. From the outset, therefore, it was clear that this Caesar was meant to be more of a symbol than a man. There was in Joseph Holland's performance "the reckless, swaggering self-confidence of dictatorship, the brutality of speech, the thunderous stride of importance". His costume was the type of uniform affected by a Hitler or Mussolini, but it was Holland's uncanny resemblance to Il Duce, both in manner and appearance, which defined him so exactly. His was a Caesar who could be found scowling at you in the weekly newsreels. (France 1975, 58)

Other descriptions suggest a more subtle performance. According to Esther Weiss "Joseph Holland played the title role with a concentrated economy of movement calculated to convey the greatest possible degree of inner strength", while Holland himself, speaking of his part in a *New York Herald Tribune* interview (19 December 1937), describes Caesar as "such a great man that he needs no wild gestures. He knows that the slightest motion of his finger is quite sufficient to make things happen" (quoted in Weiss 1994, 201-2).

Caesar's call for silence is the cue for changes not only in the sound but also the lighting of the play, with the piercing of the blackout by a forceful shaft of light reminiscent of the light effects of the Nazi rallies at Nuremberg that had been widely visualized and reported on in popular magazines and newsreels all over America³¹. Wyke summarizes the scene that greeted the audience after the end of the blackout, the previously empty stage suddenly filled with actors hailing their leader:

³⁰ Whipple's reviews were also published in the *New York World-Telegram* (the newspapers merged into one in 1950).

³¹ According to one of Welles's actor friends, Hiram (Chubby) Sherman, the "seed" of the Mercury lighting was planted by "Orson seeing pictures of a rally in Nuremberg in some illustrated magazine" (quoted in France 1975, 58).

[T]he utter darkness and the marching throb of an overture were abruptly interrupted by a voice crying “Caesar”, a shaft of light, and the sudden presence on the New York stage of the Roman dictator dressed in military attire, head arrogantly thrown back, surrounded by uniformed subordinates, saluting an admiring crowd of civilians. Poaching Casca’s line from *Julius Caesar* 1.2.14, this Caesar shouts “Bid every noise be still!” only to hear from offstage the soothsayer’s sinister warning. He disappears back into the dark accompanied by Fascist salutes and cries of “Hail, Caesar!” from the crowd on stage. (Wyke 2012, 116)

Borrowing – or “poaching” – the command from the words of another character, Welles’s decision to attribute the injunction not to Casca, as in Shakespeare’s text (and in the *Everybody’s Shakespeare* adaptation), but to Caesar himself, confirms his intention to use the opening line to establish from the start the theatrical element in Caesar’s casting as a man of power. Issuing what amounts to a stage direction for the management of the Lupercal celebrations, but also, implicitly, for the performance of Welles’s *Caesar*, it appears as the first of the many metatheatrical elements of a production centred round the histrionic aspects of dictatorship. These were of course already present both in Shakespeare’s play and its sources, and also, notoriously, in the management and exhibition of power in the Fascist and Nazi regimes³². There is no evidence that Welles was aware of recent Italian productions of the play, including the 1935 production at the Basilica of Maxentius, but comparison of his *Caesars* with those examined by Silvia Bigliuzzi in her analysis of Fascism’s refashioning of *Julius Caesar* for purposes of propaganda reveals similarities and differences that deserve further study (Bigliuzzi 2019).

³² For Fascist showmanship and the sacralisation of power, see Emilio Gentile on the theatricalization of politics under Fascism, “in the creation of a Fascist liturgy for the masses, in the theatre of political rites at meetings, celebrations and festivals” and in the “*sacralisation of politics*” as “an essential ingredient of the political theatricality of Fascism, whether in the form of performances of political theatre or mass spectacles”, aimed at “moulding the masses” and turning Italians into “actor-spectators in a succession of ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ mass spectacles” (Gentile 1996, 73-74 and 80). See also Minervini 2019, Wyke 2012 and Seldes 1935, on the fortune of Mussolini in America, mentioned in note 5.

A few years later, Welles himself described the spectacular nature of fascism, highlighting the importance to it of showmanship and defining its essence as “the celebration of power for its own sake” (quoted in Denning 1997, 376) in “The Nature of the Enemy”, a lecture he delivered on 22 January 1945:

Showmanship is fundamental to the fascist strategy, and the chief fascist argument is the parade. Inspiration for the showmanship of fascism comes from the military, the old dumb-show of monarchy and mostly from the theater. In Germany, the decor, the spectacular use of great masses of people – the central myth itself was borrowed from grand opera. In Italy, the public show, the lavish props, the picturesque processions were taken from the movies. (Quoted in Denning 1997, 380)

The rhetoric of fascism is a rhetoric of identification, intended to weaken and if possible eliminate the public’s ability to criticize and rationalize the object of its gaze. Welles’s consideration, in the same lecture, that “Fascism [...] sells itself by making its appeal to *the emotions* rather than to *reason*, to *the senses* rather than to *the mind*” (quoted in Denning 1997, 365, emphasis mine), seems almost to be a comment on the different kinds of rhetoric marshalled in the Forum by Antony and Brutus, actualizing Shakespeare’s lines in a contemporary context.

The shock effect produced by the opening blackout, pierced through by the equally shocking sound of the soothsayer’s cry and by the Nuremberg shafts of light, which revealed the presence of a Mussolini-like Caesar, returns in the impact of physical violence in later scenes. Underlined and intensified by lighting, blackouts, movements, words and silence, it shows how Welles used theatre to study and expose the spellbinding dangers both of politics and of theatrical art itself. The shafts of light are examples of Welles’s theatrical weaponry: “swords to cut through the wads and wads of cotton” that “wrapped” contemporary “audiences” (quoted in Weiss 1994, 196). His task was to stimulate and if necessary shock his spectators “into wakefulness”: an “imaginative awareness” that would enable them to go beyond even the over facile reduction of the play into a dramatization merely of what was happening in Europe. Although his article on “Theatre and the People’s Front”

for the *Daily Worker* (15 April 1938) contained a bracketed definition of “such things as reported in this evening’s newspapers” as “Hitler’s invasion of Austria”, this was apparently an editorial insertion (Sawyer 2019, 173-74):

When our art has some temporary connection, some valid and live relationship with such things as reported in this evening’s newspapers (Hitler’s invasion of Austria), then it is worth making plays and writing songs for them and acting in these plays and designing productions for them. The minute we lose sight of this, we are necromancers, spellbinders: and, as spellbinders always find out, the amount of magic we can dispense in a single town is always limited and we discover ourselves beating it across the county line before the moon is full again. (Denning 1997, 362)

On the topicality of the *Caesar* costumes, “Mr. Welles does not dress his conspirators and his Storm Troopers in Black Shirts or in Brown”, Brown observes in his *New York Post* review. “He does not have to. The antique Rome, which we had thought was securely Roman in Shakespeare’s tragedy, he shows us to be a dateless state of mind” (Brown 2000, 221). The “military uniforms” of Welles’s power figures, including most of the conspirators, “suggested but did not exactly reproduce the current fashion of the Fascist ruling class; our crowd wore the dark, nondescript street clothes of the big-city proletariat” (Houseman 1972, 298-99), while Brutus was distinguished from both by his blue serge suit. Welles described the crowd as “the hoodlum element you find in any big city after a war, a mob that is without the stuff that makes them intelligently alive, a lynching mob, the kind of mob that gives you a Hitler or a Mussolini” (quoted in Wyke 2012, 124). But both the conspirators and the crowd, all too readily swayed by populist leaders, also recalled more specifically local figures:

According to the trade journal *Variety* (17 November 1937), the conspirators were portrayed as modern racketeers and affected “the turned-up collar” and “hand-in-the-pocket-on-the-trigger” look. They met as if they were in an alley beside the Mercury Theater and looked like a strike committee from a taxi-drivers’ union, according to the *New York Daily News* (13 November 1937). And, in the words of a reporter

from the *Washington Times*, with their pulled-down hats and assorted overcoats, the rabble appeared more like “‘Little Caesar’s’ henchmen than Romans”. Racketeers, labor unionists, and gangsters on the prowl in America’s city streets – these analogies demonstrate that Welles’s *Julius Caesar* also addressed contemporary anxieties about the rise of Fascism within (as well as outside) the United States of America. (117-19)³³

In many ways, Welles’s *Caesar* could be seen as a rethinking, via Shakespeare, of Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935), which had been adapted and performed on stage in 1936 (122-23)³⁴. The intention of both works was to wake the American public to the danger of dictatorial tendencies taking hold in America³⁵, an aim similar to that expressed by George Seldes in the foreword to his *Sawdust Caesar*. By revealing Fascism’s “suppressed history and the mind and actions of its spiritual father”, Seldes wanted to urge his readers to “compare the origins of Fascism in Italy with the present situation in our own country, the Duce to our own demagogues, the hidden forces which subsidized the Italian movement to those just emerging in the United States” (Seldes 1935, xiii).

³³ See also Denning 1997, 376-77, for examples of how “[t]he tale of the ‘great dictator’ haunted the Popular Front imagination” with “narratives” that “drew not only on the fascist dictators Hitler, Franco, and Mussolini, but on the flamboyance and popular notoriety of the ‘robber barons’ like J. P. Morgan, the Du Pont’s Liberty League, and William Randolph Hearst; the fear and loathing of radio demagogues like Father Charles Coughlin and Huey Long; and the fascination with the giant protagonists of the Soviet Revolution and its aftermath”.

³⁴ Wyke quotes from Welles’s reference to the figure addressed in Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*, Senator Huey Long, in one of his publicity releases: “Our Julius Caesar gives a picture of the same kind of hysteria that exists in certain dictator-ruled countries of today. We see the bitter resentment of free-born men against the imposition of a dictatorship. We see a political assassination, such as that of Huey Long. We see the hope on the part of Brutus for a more democratic government vanish with the rise of a demagogue (Antony) who succeeds the dictator. Our moral, if you will, is that not assassination, but education of the masses, permanently removes dictatorships” (Wyke 2012, 123).

³⁵ Yezbick quotes Senber’s *Julius Caesar* publicity, which, with an evident reference to Lewis, “reminds us that in a land where the masses are war-weary, confused, and economic conditions are undergoing periodical crises, [...] that which happened in Rome in the Second Century and in the Rome of the Twentieth Century, can happen here” (Yezbick 2004, 253).

5. *Spectacles of Sound*

Like the text, scenic elements and other features of the Mercury Theatre staging, its soundscape also underwent changes in rehearsal. Not only Blitzstein's score, but the orchestration of the actors' voices and of their feet walking, marching or stamping, or of the sound of thunder, whether real or metaphorical, were subjected to constant, even drastic revision:

Between the personal scenes, which [Welles] continued to rehearse long after they seemed to be ready, the crowd scenes which he drilled and repeated endlessly, the setting of lights and the balancing of Marc's musical background, he was spending between sixteen and twenty hours a day in the theatre [...]. These technical elements of the production took up hours of our time, but it was on the human performances that Welles concentrated his main effort during that last week, dividing his time between the crowd scenes and the personal confrontations – particularly the relationship of Brutus and Cassius, which, in his version, formed the emotional spine of the tragedy. (Houseman 1972, 306-7)

Houseman goes on to give a detailed account of how Welles went about organizing the “fluctuating mass reactions of pity, indignation and unbridled fury with a crowd of two dozen boys in secondhand overcoats and dark felt hats” (actors, extras, stage hands and stage managers), “orchestrating their individual and collective reactions” (308). He supplements his information by quoting the recollections of an unnamed participant:

[Welles] recorded the speeches of Antony and Brutus on disks and had us speak back specific lines in reaction to the main speeches. It wasn't just a matter of babbling words. We had definite lines to say and definite moments at which to speak. When Antony spoke the first words of the eulogy over Caesar's body, one of us said “Aw, shut up!” and others of the mob came in quickly with “Let him talk!” and so on. It was by no means a matter of walking on and off the stage and making noises. (308)

The “ad libs”, Houseman adds, were later “replaced by appropriate exclamations collected from other Elizabethan plays, notably *Coriolanus*” (309). For a slightly different version by another of the crowd scene actors, see Hiram Sherman’s statement in a personal interview with France: “We spent endless hours doing nothing but ad-libs for the funeral scene. We all had to write out specific lines. You’d say three, four, nine words of your speech; then somebody’d stop you. And it worked, too, much better than in the twosome scenes” (France 1975, 61-62). The final orchestration interwove the actors’ voices with other sounds: “[Crowd] reactions during their climactic scenes were not merely verbal: Orson kept them in continuous, fluid movement which, on our hollow, unpadded platforms, gave out a constantly changing and highly dramatic sound which he exploited to the full” (Houseman 1972, 309).

The scene of *Cinna the Poet* posed even greater problems. After being abandoned several times,

[Welles] turned it over to Marc Blitzstein, who rehearsed it for several days with a metronome: the rising menace was to be achieved through a crescendo in volume and an accelerating tempo with each move and speech related to a percussive beat. That didn’t work either. Lloyd, as the dreamy, oblivious victim was unable or unwilling to adjust his highly personal style of playing to these arbitrarily imposed, external rhythms³⁶. [...]. For our first three dress rehearsals it was missing from the show [...].

[...]

[T]he absence of the *Cinna* scene left a gaping hole in the structure of the play. [...]

[...]

Orson gave the company forty-five minutes for supper. Then he called them back and rehearsed the crowd scenes until morning, repeating the mob’s violently changing reactions to Brutus and Antony and going on from there, time after time, into the deceptively quiet opening of the *Cinna* scene [...].

[...]

They did it a dozen times till Lloyd and the exhausted mob were on the edge of madness. Orson used some of Blitzstein’s rhythmic patterns,

³⁶ In an interview with Simon Callow, Norman Lloyd described them as “this goddam chanting and boom boom boom” (Callow 1995, 328).

some of his own original staging and some of the things Norman Lloyd had patiently and obstinately worked out for himself. [...] [A]t two in the morning, on their seventh try, the scene began to work, getting tauter and more dangerous as the night wore on. (Houseman 1972, 310-12)

“Suddenly”, at the matinee preview, “everything was right: individual performances, transitions, silences, progressions and climaxes – they all seemed to come together in a devastating whole” (313).

Other work on the soundscape of the play included an unsuccessful attempt to insert a sequence of “big-city montage” of sound through a recording of police sirens and air-raid warnings against a background of traffic noises (310-11). After this failure, the production returned to Blitzstein’s music, the thunder drum and the pounding feet of the forty cast-members to accompany the variegated pitch and tone of the actors’ voices.

In his analysis of the Cinna scene, Yezbick describes the effect created by the combination of total darkness, silence and an apparently disembodied shout in words that recall the shock of *Caesar’s* opening scene:

Welles’ Mercury show emphasizes the tragedy by describing the scene purely through sound. After Cinna is taken, Welles’ blackout becomes a politicized transition - another narrative focal point that makes audiences more fully aware of Cinna’s annihilation. The aural and visual fields of meaning are wiped blank, placing the spectator in a confused state of inductive inquiry. Optically and sonically, we wonder and we search for new signs and contexts. Perceptually, we have become Cinna, and Welles has inflicted on us what the mob has done to the poet. Our unanticipated sensory blindness adds to the horror of our previous empathetic alignment with Cinna, we are even more like him; aesthetically and politically neutralized by total darkness. Wellesian darkness becomes an allegorical erasure of commercially driven, democratically comforting entertainment: a critical rupture in the pleasure and convenience of American culture [...]

When Cinna screams his last line, we are trapped in a close-up oral representation of a murder perpetrated by nameless crowds. [...] Cinna’s dying scream becomes a distressing sound spike that assaults our already floundering sensory orientation. The added 45 seconds of

Hammond organ punctuates Cinna's painful death with the conventional transitional cue of a radio drama. At first the organ's sonic field answers the human scream, but chronologically the "music" continues for almost a minute, drowning our last suggestion of Cinna's humanity in a monophonic blast of dreary sound. The prolonged bass note works as a counterpoint to Cinna's high-pitched yell, but its duration eventually obliterates any index of human life and forces us to sit, cognitively paralyzed for a second time. Sonically, the organ kills off Cinna and leaves us stranded between scenes, suggesting another uncomfortable experience of the theatrical mechanisms of control. (Yezbick 2004, 291-92).

The effect of the Mercury Theatre soundscape and the interest shown in it by contemporary press reviews led to a major shift in theatrical criticism. As Robert Sawyer observes in a recent analysis of the reception of Shakespeare in America and Britain between the two world wars: "While earlier dramatic reviewers covered the three basic elements of acting, staging, and costumes, the fourth element of sound now demanded critical attention as well" (Sawyer 2019, 173).

6. *Acts IV and V: Endings in Progress*

"A new ending was tried out every night for *Julius Caesar* – right up to the opening" (France 1977, 120). France notes that the major alterations and abbreviations in the Mercury Theatre playscript concern Acts IV and V:

After the Cinna the Poet scene [...], Welles turned his hand to a more radical alteration of the text. He elected to show the aftermath of the assassination solely from the conspirators' vantage. He has Cassius and Brutus quarrelling about their plans, but upon learning of their enemies' advance, agreeing to meet at Phillipi. Act 4 is thus compressed greatly – but not nearly so much as act 5, which consists of a single page in Welles's version. Brutus receives news of Antony's victory (actually, Pindar's faulty report in act 5, scene 3), gazes down on upon Cassius' body (slain by enemies in Welles's text), and mourns his death. The lights dim momentarily for his own suicide, and rise again for Antony to speak his brief regrets over him, the noblest Roman, as the play ends. (108)

6.1. *How to End: Roger Hill's Suggestions*

This, however, was only one of the possible endings envisaged by Welles for the performance on stage. The question of how to end a production of *Julius Caesar* had already been raised by Roger Hill in his introduction to *Everybody's Shakespeare* adaptation of the play³⁷. As against the tendency to see Brutus as the true protagonist of the play, Hill points out that “Caesar’s spirit, ranging for revenge” dominates “up to the final moment” (MS 9). An initial indication of how the play might end appears in his observation that “O Julius Caesar thou art mighty yet’ is almost the last line in the play” (MS 9), a suggestion taken up by Welles in one of his radio rehearsals, which ends with Brutus standing over Cassius’ body and reflecting on Caesar’s power. In his “Staging” section, Hill discusses an even more drastic abbreviation, ending the play in Act III, scene ii:

If you stage *Caesar*, a shortened version may very well end with the stirring climax on page 48 [MS 48]; Antony’s triumph and his gloating in the line:

“Mischief, thou art afoot. Take thou what course thou wilt”.

To all intents and purposes Antony is now the victor and the story is ended. In stopping here you will be avoiding the difficulties and the pitfalls of the last act with its battle scenes and suicides. On the other hand you will be throwing away the tremendous possibilities of the celebrated “Tent Scene”. (MS 9)³⁸

Hill fails to mention the scenes of Cinna’s lynching or of the Triumvirate’s “pricking” of their adversaries among those that would be sacrificed by his proposal for an ending. But while Welles eventually kept the Cinna scene in his production, and never

³⁷ Callow erroneously attributes the introduction to the play to Welles instead of Hill.

³⁸ A version similar to that of the anonymous author of a reportage in *Life* magazine, discussed in the next section of this essay. The last photograph of the reportage shows Antony exhibiting Caesar’s wounds, with a caption that summarizes the rest of the play in a single sentence: “He arouses the mob to fury, destroys the ‘liberals’, paves the way for a new Caesar to march triumphantly into the city with fascist banners and floodlights”.

showed any inclination to “thro[w] away the tremendous possibilities of the celebrated ‘Tent scene’”, the pricking scene was to be one of his major and perhaps most questionable cuts.

6.2. Defocusing Antony as Master Orator and Politician

Present in *Everybody's Shakespeare* (MS 50-51) and in an early, discarded version of the Mercury Theatre script, the scene of the Triumvirate's proscriptions disappears from the final version on stage and is relegated to Plutarch's narrative in the radio versions for the *Mercury Theatre on the Air*. The result is a shift of focus *away* from Antony and the consequences of his rhetoric. In his review of the theatrical production in *The New Republic* (1 December 1937), Young describes how, after the “gripping sarcasm and horror” of Cinna the Poet's lynching, “[w]e jump then to the quarrel scene of Brutus and Cassius. For the rest of the play is Brutus’ – Brutus realizing his disaster, Brutus in a brief scene with his page, Brutus running on his sword, and over Brutus’ body Antony’s epilogue of praise” (quoted in France 2001b, 105).

This becomes even clearer in the versions for radio, where, like the proscriptions, the scene of Cinna the Poet is no longer enacted. While we hear directly from the actors the build-up of emotion in their reactions to Antony's oration in the Forum scene, the violence that then ensues is entrusted to the voice of H. V. Kaltenborn, reading the words of Plutarch. The only remaining trace of Cinna's fate is in Plutarch's generical allusion to “others [who] ran up and down the streets, to find out the men who had killed Caesar and tear them to pieces”³⁹.

Yezbick describes an early, discarded version of the staging, the “Mock-up script”, in which the two scenes are brought together, showing at one and the same time two aspects of Antony as the new wielder of power. On one side of the stage is Cinna's lynching: the result of Antony's oratory and its *emotional impact* on the crowd. On the other is the pricking scene, showing Antony himself taking on the role of a *rational, unemotional* dictator, chillingly indifferent to

³⁹ All quotations from radio rehearsals and the 1938 phonographic recording are from my transcriptions.

the suffering of others. Beside the mob's rowdily physical, immediately lethal violence is the equally lethal violence-at-a-distance of the Triumvirate's leisurely speech acts:

Welles first conceived of Cinna the Poet's murder as a kaleidoscopic sequence of cross-cut scenes that depict several actions occurring simultaneously. As the Roman mob begins to interrogate Cinna, Welles also begins Marc Antony and Octavius' name-pricking discussion on another part of the stage. As Cinna's predicament becomes dire, Antony and Octavius inject their leisurely discussion of their political purge over the mob's growing resentment of the poet. When Cinna finally cries out "I AM NOT CINNA THE CONSPIRATOR!" the crowd carries him off in plain sight and the two Roman generals remain oblivious to the chaos that their revolution has created. (Yezbick 2004, 283-84)

The simultaneous staging of the scenes would have acted as an estranging device, a study, rather than a spectacle, of the variegated tools of power. Instead, the final stage version captivated the audience, inducing them to identify with the victim of the mob by working on their emotions: "The Mercury audience made Cinna's experience their own, representing as it did their worst fears for themselves and for those dearest to them" (France 2001b, 106). The difference could hardly be more complete.

The synchronous version would undoubtedly have been difficult to stage in the small space of the Mercury Theatre, as also in terms of sound and lighting management. It would however have added considerably both to the characterization of Antony and to the complexity of Welles's study of the power theme. The elimination not only of this version but of the whole of the pricking scene in the version performed on stage produces a downscaling of Antony's mastery in the arts of oratory and politics, confirming Young's conclusion that "the rest of the play is Brutus".

In France's playscript, the so-called "quarrel scene" between Brutus and Cassius in Brutus' tent in Philippi is separated from Cinna's lynching only by a continuation of the blackout, accompanied by the deafening sound of "[a] Hammond organ [...] struck full volume on all its base keys for forty-five seconds" (Welles 2001, 168, note 101) and a brief, dimly lit vision of a column

of soldiers, to cover the two years' distance between the violence of the mob and the lengthy confrontation between the former friends:

(The lights dim. There is a series of drum and organ roars. On the third, a column of helmeted soldiers can be seen in the half-light [...]. The beating of a snare drum is heard. It grows in intensity, accompanied by the plaintive sound of a bugle and a french horn. The lights come up to reveal Brutus in uniform. Trebonius enters stage right as the music fades out). (Welles 2001, 155)

6.3. *Brutus and Cassius, Brutus vs. Cassius*

With the elimination of the pricking scene, the spotlight shifts directly onto Brutus and his relationship with Cassius, which Houseman had already indicated as “the emotional spine of the tragedy”. During the last week of rehearsals, he recalls, Welles “divid[ed] his time between the crowd scenes and the personal confrontations – particularly the relationship of Brutus and Cassius” (Houseman 1972, 307).

The figure of Cassius had interested Welles from the start. The first existing photograph of his *Julius Caesars* shows him in an early scene of the production he directed for his school, in which he chose the role of Cassius, although he also stood in for the boy who was playing the part of Antony. Heavily made up for the part, he stands behind one of the stage setting boxes, leaning over a skinny, meditative Brutus⁴⁰. Although in the Mercury Theatre production in 1937 he chose the part of Brutus and continued to cast himself as Brutus in the 1938 radio and phonographic recordings, in the recording marketed together with the *Mercury Shakespeare* re-edition of the *ES* play in 1939, he took on the roles of Cassius, Antony and the narrator (reading his own abbreviated stage directions from the *MS* printed text). And despite his acting the part of Brutus in the extracts inserted at the end of two CBS variety show performances in the early 1940s, Cassius remained a central concern.

In his thesis on Orson Welles and the remediation of American Shakespeare, Yezbick speaks of Welles's “empathy” for Brutus and

⁴⁰ Labelled “*Julius Caesar* (1928). Brutus and Cassius (Welles)”. Available in the Holloway Pages (<https://www.hollowaypages.com/welles.htm>).

Cassius, describing how his initial focus on Brutus shifted in the course of his reworking of the play for radio and phonographic recordings. In his comment on the March 1938 recording, he shows how vigorous textual pruning and slight modifications in the tone of Gabel's acting produced a very different Cassius from that of the Mercury Theatre performance:

Played with quiet almost shrinking reserve, Martin Gabel's vocalic Cassius might be the most disarming and likeable in Shakespearean history. Instead of the conniving, practiced soldier who loathes the aging Caesar and deceives Brutus with false petitions, Gabel's character more closely resembles Norman Lloyd's doomed liberal poet. Throughout the phonograph production, Cassius does more good than harm. He never lies to Brutus, never plots with Cinna to circulate false rumors, and seems genuinely sympathetic when he describes rescuing Caesar from "the waves of Tiber". After Caesar's murder, Gabel's Cassius never questions Antony's request to give his eulogy. Even in the famous tent scene with Brutus, Cassius takes on a less arrogant, more confused and conciliatory role. [...] In most scenes, Gabel's vocalic Cassius appears to be exactly what he seems to Brutus – a concerned citizen whose sense of civic responsibility forces him into a rash and tragic act. [...] In the Columbia recording, Cassius never mentions his disgust at Caesar's "girlish" behavior in Spain, nor does he rail that the "age is shamed" and that "Rome has lost the breed of noble bloods". Instead, Cassius merely insinuates that Caesar's power and age are limiting his authority and effectiveness as a leader. This Cassius is more a genuine reformer than an egotistical schemer. (Yezbick 2004, 301-2)

Welles's interest in the tent scene and the Cassius-Brutus relationship does not seem to have been shared by contemporary reviewers of the Mercury Theatre production. Quoting Mantle's review in the *New York Daily News*, Weiss points out that after the emotional climax of the Cinna the Poet scene,

some degree of anti-climax was inevitable. The Quarrel scene between Brutus and Cassius, which had long been viewed as the high point of tension in the play, became in Welles' production the beginning of the *dénouement*. Burns Mantle complained that Welles and Gabel played

the scene "as citizen soldiers met in a field and a little fearful of awakening nearby sleepers". (Weiss 1994, 207-8)

The reviewers also paid limited attention to the follow-up to the quarrel scene: the fate of Cassius and the scene between Brutus and his page. The early mock-up script version placed the two scenes alongside, with the revelation of Cassius' corpse made during a second example of synchronous staging showing Brutus admiring Lucius' song (Yezbick 2004, 303). As, previously, in the simultaneous presentation of Cinna's lynching and the Triumvirate's "pricking" of its adversaries – the implications differ considerably from those of the presentation of the scenes in sequence in the final staging.

In the version produced on stage, the brief interval of Lucius' song is followed by a blackout and a crescendo of bugle, snare drum and French horn music, after which: "*the lights come up to reveal the body of Cassius surrounded by his men. Brutus enters, sword in hand, and stands over Cassius. The snare drum continues to be heard underneath the following scene*" (Welles 2001, 164). Not only is the whole of the scene of Cassius' suicide eliminated, but his death receives little attention.

What effect would have been produced by the synchronous staging of the brutal evidence of Cassius' corpse alongside the poetic beauty of Lucius' song?

Before considering the implications of staging Lucius' song alongside the discovery of Cassius' corpse, it is worth focusing on the scene as it actually appeared in performance. Young's dismissal of the scene of Lucius' song as "Brutus in a brief scene with his page" – the only mention of the episode I have found among the reviews – is a curiously succinct, neutral mention of what one imagines must have been a very moving moment. The scene is portrayed in at least two production photographs, which show some similarity to the rendering of the scene in the twelve-minute 1908 silent film of *Julius Caesar* referred to earlier⁴¹. By showing

⁴¹ See note 21 above. The photographs show Welles reclining against a step, with Anderson on the step above him playing what the actor called his "lutelele". Not only the posture and instrument but even the face and backward tilt of the head

Brutus reading and listening to music, it adds further dimensions to Welles's vision of his character, as well as offering a moment of relief after the lynching of Cinna and the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius: "a lovely lyric interlude – a last moment of peace before the final, inevitable catastrophe" (Houseman 1972, 345). A relief created both by Blitzstein's music, the tender image of the boy, and the words of the "Orpheus song" Welles borrowed from *Henry VIII*, a hymn to the pacifying, restorative power of music, offering consolation for grief of heart. Burton describes its contrast to the music of the rest of the play:

A vigorous, driving rhythmic figure [...] dominates many of the cues for *Julius Caesar*. For some of the scenes in Caesar's chamber, the music is quieter and is played in a slow *lento* tempo. After the murder, beginning with Antony's line, "Cry 'Havoc', and let slip the dogs of war", music is played fortissimo by cymbal, thunder drums, and organ. Later in the play, in response to the script's request for property music, Blitzstein has written a pleasant song to be played by ukulele on stage. (Burton 1956, 345)⁴²

Arthur Anderson, who played the part of Lucius, returns to the scene in his memoir, offering a personal angle:

My most memorable lines were the lyrics of a song which Lucius sings to Brutus in his tent the night before the Battle of Philippi. Shakespeare's direction reads only, "Music and a song". It was Orson's idea to borrow the lyrics from *Henry VIII* [...]:
 "Orpheus with his lute, made trees and the mountain tops that freeze
 Bow their heads while he did sing, da dum dee dee dum..."
 Shakespeare, of course, never wrote "Da dum dee dee dum". That was supplied by Marc Blitzstein, who wrote the melody and all the incidental music for *Caesar* [...].

of the film's Lucius suggest it may be among the sources for Welles's rendering. In the film, Lucius is seated on a step below his master, who is reading at a table, and the scene lasts only a few seconds (9:14-30), before the arrival of Caesar's ghost. Despite the time gap separating the productions, Welles may well have seen the film at Todd School or later, while conducting his research for the Mercury Theatre.

⁴² Burton reproduces the score of the composition as "Marc Blitzstein, manuscript score for 'Julius Caesar', cue 10" (Burton 1956, 346, Fig. 45).

I accompanied myself on a ukulele. It had a semi-circular mask attached, making it look like a lute. I called it my "lutelele". It was a Martin concert uke, with fuller tone than the ones young men used to serenade their girlfriends in the '20s. And since the song was a ballad it was played legato, not "plinkety-plink". (Anderson 2010, 35-36)

Viewed as a musical interlude, isolated from the events that follow, it suggests a mood in keeping with the peaceful settlement of the rupture between Brutus and Cassius in the quarrel scene, sealed by their final exchange: Cassius, "O my dear brother! / This was an ill beginning of the night! / Never come such division 'tween our souls; / Let it not, Brutus"; Brutus, "Everything is well", followed by their reciprocal "good nights" (Welles 2001, 163). Yet it also in some ways undermines the settlement, drawing attention to subtle indications of a lasting opposition between the two. The playscript preserves the hierarchical marking of their words on separating, with Cassius moving from "O my dear brother" to his subsequent "Good night, my lord" (163), as if to underline a flaw in their assertions of fraternity⁴³.

From the start of the play, Brutus, "the bourgeois intellectual"⁴⁴, has been presented in opposition to his more intransigently revolutionary partner, defined by Caesar as one who "loves no plays" and "hears no music" in opposition to Antony (Welles 2001, 117). Placed alongside Cassius' dead body in a theatrical diptych, the focus would be on Brutus' unawareness of Cassius' fate, distanced not only physically but by his absorption in the song, as if to confirm Cassius' accusations of his lack of true affection in the

⁴³ The playscript version is similar to that of *Everybody's Shakespeare*, the March 1938 recording and the 1944 broadcast, with Charles Laughton in the part of Cassius, which ends with the original exchange. In two of the three radio rehearsals the characters' "good nights" contain no reference to either brotherhood or lordship.

⁴⁴ Defined as such by Welles himself in an interview: to Welles, Brutus is "the classical picture of the eternal, impotent, ineffectual, fumbling liberal; the reformer who wants to do something about things but doesn't know how and gets it in the neck in the end. [...] He's Shakespeare's favorite hero – the fellow who thinks the times are out of joint but who is really out of joint with his time. He's the bourgeois intellectual who, under a modern dictatorship, is the first to be put up against the wall and shot" (Welles 1937, quoted in Weiss 1994, 189).

quarrel scene. Against the 'lento' of this moment of leisure is the speed with which the events are taking place. A mere blackout and crescendo of bugle, snare drum and French horn in place of the delicate sound of Lucius' lute are sufficient for the final, inevitable unfolding of the action that follows⁴⁵, ending with the "new dictator praising Brutus' martyrdom", as Young concludes in his retelling of the story (quoted in France 2001a, 19).

7. *Photographic Insights*

How did the Mercury Theatre *Caesar* appear to the *eyes* of its spectators? Despite the poor quality of some of the reproductions, and the fact that nearly all are in black and white, often with patently erroneous captions or labels or none at all and almost always without any indication of the name of the photographer, the few available photographs contain invaluable documentation of costume details and facial expressions and of the positioning of the actors in group scenes and tableaux⁴⁶.

7.1. *A Photostory Reportage*

When the photographs appear together, in sequence, they provide their own retelling of the Caesar story. Welles's designing or blocking of positioning and movement for performance on stage is replaced by a photographic 'blocking' of chosen figures and episodes, re-adapting the scenic text to the motionless and

⁴⁵ According to Yezbick, the mock-up script also included a staging of Caesar's ghost, eliminated from both the Mercury Theatre playscript and all the radio rehearsals. "Welles originally planned the death of Cinna and the arrival of Caesar's ghost as intermittent narrative segments where characters' voices dictate the flow of the action" (Yezbick 2004, 284).

⁴⁶ Even when the scene is incomplete, since the central focus of the shot limits the number of actors included, this too adds to our knowledge of our play. The absence of Orson Welles as Brutus from an early scene of Caesar saluted by the crowd, for example, draws attention to the lateral position he often assumed, a means of distancing that replicates the distancing created by his non-military costume.

soundless context of photography and print, in what could be seen as a static version of a “dumb show” or silent film⁴⁷.

A particularly valuable example of a photographic story is contained in an anonymous reportage in *Life* (22 November 1937), titled “NEW YORK SEES A MODERN ‘JULIUS CAESAR’”, which summarizes the play in a few introductory lines and five photographs, each with a highly relevant caption. Since there are no references to the article in any of the studies I have managed to examine, it is worth quoting in full⁴⁸. Three of the photographs (1, 2 and 5) seem to be unavailable elsewhere⁴⁹ and even the two that can be found in other sources are framed differently and present a fuller picture. Unlike most of the other photographs of the Mercury production they give an impression of ‘snapshot’, un-posed immediacy.

The first, placed immediately below the title, bears the caption “CAESAR RESEMBLES MUSSOLINI, GIVES THE FASCIST SALUTE”. The play is then presented in a few introductory lines before proceeding to the photostory proper:

⁴⁷ A reference to “dumb shows” appears intriguingly in Antony’s first reference to the “poor dumb mouths” of Caesar’s wounds: “(Which, like *dumb shows*, do ope their ruby lips / To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue)” (Welles 2001, 138, emphasis mine). This is probably a typo, since all the other occurrences of the passage, from *ES* to the CBS broadcasts, have Shakespeare’s “dumb mouths”. For a reference to “the old dumb-show of monarchy” as one of the sources of Fascist showmanship, see Welles’s 1945 lecture on “The Nature of the Enemy” referred to above.

⁴⁸ The whole of the 22 November 1937 issue of *Life* is available in Google Books (<https://books.google.it/books?id=kz8EAAAAMBAl>). Dennis Kennedy quotes two lines from the introduction without mentioning the source, except as “one New York newspaper” (Kennedy 2001, 151). He also fails to mention the presence of any photographs in the *Life* reportage.

⁴⁹ With a curious exception. The filming of Antony’s raising the mantle from Caesar’s body during his funeral oration in the documentary bonus *Caesar* included in the video of Richard Linklater’s *Me & Orson Welles* seems almost to bring the photograph to life (Linklater 2009). Although the plotline and characterization are largely fictional and even the acting differs greatly from Welles’s 1937 production (Harris 2015), the documentary provides a useful supplement to the material available on Welles’s original staging.

Shakespeare in modern dress has long been familiar to U. S. audiences. Now to New York comes a production of *Julius Caesar* in which the Roman conqueror looks like Mussolini, wears fascist garb, gives a fascist salute. Pitted against him is a liberal Brutus who would preserve democracy by slaying his country's dictator. Brutus' tragedy – the tragedy of liberals in fascist lands – is that he is outwitted by Archdemagog Antony and loses his life.

The fascist *Julius Caesar* was conceived by young Orson Welles, who both directs it and plays Brutus. Only 22, he already has to his credit a spectacular Haitian *Macbeth*⁵⁰ and a Freudian *Dr. Faustus*, [and] is pledged to more classical dramas seen with fresh young eyes. (*Life* 1937, 84)

After this, the rest of the story is told by the photographic images and their captions. The photographs on the first page of the article are however separated from the last three by a full-page promotion for Hires R-J root beer: "It tastes Great when the Hour is Late!" (85) with two pretty young women delightedly toasting each other in their bedroom before consuming their beer. To complete the picture, it should be mentioned that the whole of the reportage occupies only the right side of each of its two pages: on the left are eye-catching advertisements for male surgery and antidotes to slow digestion and a free crystal buffet tray offer for purchasers of Samson trimatic toasters and electric coffee percolators; contextual details that give a sense of the wide-ranging publics targeted by Welles's productions⁵¹, and anticipate features of Welles's variety show performances of the quarrel scene on radio in the early 1940s.

The second photograph presents Calpurnia in a pose and costume worthy of *Vogue*: "Caesar's wife, in a pleated chartreuse boudoir gown, pleads with her husband not to go to the Roman Capitol, since the night is full of evil portents. But the dictator only juts his determined jaw, insisting that 'Caesar shall go forth'" (84). After the promotional interruption, the story moves rapidly to its conclusion. The third photograph shows "Conspirators against

⁵⁰ On Welles's "Voodoo" *Macbeth*, see Casale 2001, Wilkinson 2004 and Mason 2020.

⁵¹ Surrounded by pages and pages of other advertisements, the *Caesar* reportage is located between an article on women's hat fashion and an obituary for Ramsay MacDonald.

Caesar are honourable Brutus (*left*), who loves democracy, and Cassius of the 'lean and hungry look'. While the cheering populace tempts the dictator with a crown, Cassius cries: 'I was born free as Caesar; so were you'. The fourth provides a close-up of the assassination: "'Et tu, Brute', gasps Caesar, as Brutus stabs him to death. Now the conspirators proclaim: 'Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!' But to Caesar's slippery Henchman Antony they give permission to make a funeral oration in the market place". Finally, in the fifth photograph, "To 'friends, Romans, countrymen', Antony shows the dagger holes in slain Caesar's mantle. He arouses the mob to fury, destroys the 'liberals', paves the way for a new Caesar to march triumphantly into the city with fascist banners and floodlights" (86).

The last of *Life's* photographs is unique in its presentation not only of Antony raising the mantle to show the dagger holes in both Caesar's vesture and his body, after a dramatic pause, but of the presence of the coffin on stage. Here we actually see him, for the first time, after he has descended from the pulpit and placed himself on the same level and in proximity to his listeners in order to 'produce' the spectacle of Caesar's wounds and involve them in his performance. The angle of his head and positioning of his body reveal a gesture similar to that of a conjuror.

7.2. Revisualizing Antony

Other photographs representing Antony addressing the crowd show Coulouris in the pulpit, towering over his listeners, one or both arms raised above him, dramatically foregrounded and magnified by Rosenthal's lighting. The speeches in the Forum scene, as Houseman recalls, were delivered from "a ten-foot rostrum covered with black velour that was wheeled up the ramp in the dark (under cover of the electric organ and the thunder drum)". Here, "first Brutus, then Antony, seemed to float in space above the mass of the crowd, gathered around Caesar's open coffin between the speakers and the audience" (Houseman 1972, 309, emphasis mine). The coffin is also specifically mentioned in Mantle's description of the scene: "a kind of scaffold has been built from which Brutus and Antony speak their orations over the corpse

of Caesar *in a modern casket*. With a light in front that throws their shadows huge upon the back wall" (quoted in France 1975, 61, emphasis mine). One of the most impressive documents of Antony speaking from the rostrum is Alfredo Valente's photograph, first published in 1938 in *The Stage*, discussed earlier in relation to Welles's *Everybody's Shakespeare* illustrations of Antony as orator.

France reproduces a very different image of Antony's funeral oration. Labelled "George Coulouris as Mark Antony delivering his 'Friends, Romans, countrymen' address over Caesar's body" (France 1975, 62)⁵², it shows a scene illuminated by seven shafts of "Nuremberg" lights and framed on either side by helmeted soldiers bearing banners, with no indication whatsoever not only of the presence of a coffin⁵³, but, more importantly, of the crowd of listeners to whom Antony's oration was addressed. In all its details, the photograph corresponds not to the staging of Antony's funeral orations, but to Welles's stage direction for the final scene, with Antony standing over Brutus' body: "*(The lights and music wash out, leaving the stage in darkness. Then, shafts of light shoot up from the floor to reveal Marc Antony standing over the body of Brutus. He is accompanied by storm troupers carrying huge black banners)*" (Welles 2001, 165)⁵⁴. It also recalls the drawing that closes the last page of Welles's 1934 *Caesar in Everybody's Shakespeare* (MS 63), with Antony and Octavius standing on the top of a hill overlooking Brutus' body, flanked on either side by a composition of vertical lines, probably representing the soldiers' spears and lances, replaced on stage by the verticality of the troupers' banners.

⁵² See also France 1977, 113, where again the photograph is presented as a funeral oration illustration. It is not however included in France's 1990 edition of the W.P.A. and Mercury Theatre playscripts. In "Orson Welles's Shakespeare", the same photograph is labelled "Marc Anthony (George Coulouris) standing over the body of Caesar (Joseph Holland)". (<https://www.hollowaypages.com/welles.htm>).

⁵³ It is worth comparing France's photograph with another coffinless photograph, almost certainly referring to the later 1938 National Theatre production, where however Antony is surrounded by a crowd of people, probably including Tom Powers as Brutus. See "The death of Caesar" in Fassler 2019.

⁵⁴ In the *Me & Orson Welles Caesar* documentary, the scene is reproduced as Antony's eulogy for Brutus.

Although Octavius is notoriously absent from the Mercury Theatre finale, his elimination was apparently a last minute decision. Norman Lloyd attributes the idea to John Mason Brown, the *New York Post* theatre critic, who had attended a matinee preview on the day of the performance:

After the show, he went backstage (unusual behaviour for a critic) and expressed himself enraptured. [...]. Even more unusually for a critic, he made a suggestion: that the show should end with Antony's elegy for Brutus. He had clearly grasped the idea that Brutus was the central character. Exhilarated by his enthusiasm, they agreed; Octavius' final entrance was cut. (Quoted in Callow 1995, 336)⁵⁵

Another revelatory photograph of Coulouris's Antony shows what could be the very last image of the production, once again an image of an Antony who has 'descended', although this time not from the pulpit of the Forum, since the scene is set on the plains of Philippi, but from one of the platforms representing the hill sketched in Welles's drawing. Published in the same issue of *The Stage* (June 1938) as Valente's photograph of his funeral oration, it shows a close-up of a less institutional, more humane Coulouris-Antony kneeling over Welles-Brutus' stretched out body "at the conclusion of the Mercury Theatre's Broadway production of *Caesar*" (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caesar-Coulouris-Welles.jpg>). While his hand rests on Brutus' body, Antony's face is turned anxiously upwards, looking to the left, as if in response to a sudden, preoccupying sound or thought. Again, an image that tells or 'hints' at a story, with a flashback to one of Welles's earlier visual narratives beginning with his sketch of Antony kneeling over the body of Caesar in *Everybody's Shakespeare* (MS 38) and followed, two pages later, by a very different figure, once again erect and purposeful after his prophecy of blood and destruction, standing over "the ruins of the noblest man / That ever lived in the tide of times" (MS 40).

⁵⁵ See also Yezbick 2004, 284, who writes of a "series of segmented vignettes with Brutus dying on stage, Antony and Octavius arriving before his body" in the earlier mock-up script version.

Did the Mercury stage ending follow a similar sequence to that of the *ES/MS* illustrations? If so, Antony's descending to the level of Brutus would have shown a private, emotional moment, followed by a return to the vertical, standing position in order to utter a eulogy in which his description of Brutus is disturbingly similar to his previous definitions of Caesar. Or is Antony once again playing rhetorically on the emotions of his listeners, whether on stage or in the audience, before reverting to his vertical position as the new but even more dictatorial Caesar? In the midst of the crowd's enthusiastic response to his appeal to their emotions, while he paused to await the return of his heart "in the coffin there with Caesar", a single critical voice had already intimated a possibility of this kind: "I fear there will be a worse come in his place" (Welles 2001, 142).

If, as the caption suggests, Antony's official speech was not preceded but followed by a fracture in the verticality of power as Coulouris moves down to bend over and touch his adversary's dead body, Welles would have used the inverted order of the scenes to create a theatrical chiasmus. Rather than a definitive conclusion, the photograph appears to picture the interruption of a narrative destined 'to be continued' in an infinite rehearsal. A repetition, in Antony's mind, of the play that has just ended, with yet another complicated change of roles, of assertions of nobility countered by the evidence of weakness in the strongest of characters. Despite the elimination of the character from Welles's ending, Serpieri's comment on the implications of Octavian's interruption of Antony's eulogy in the original play applies equally to the photograph of Antony and its relevance to the ending of Welles's *Caesar*. Like Shakespeare, Welles too has used the characters of Brutus and Antony "to construct a political and psychological tragedy, not an ideological play supporting one or the other side. The two rivals are nothing more than pawns in a game neither can fully control: the game of History, which puts them on the stage in their turn, and then goes on to the next act" (Serpieri 2010, 236).

The photograph, in black and white, is unable to show the presence behind it of the ominously permanent red brick wall. Mantle's comment, quoted towards the beginning of this essay,

encourages us to remember that even when invisible, the wall “is always there”, a haunting backdrop to the endless repetition of spectacles of power. The implications of its violent redness are projected onto the figures that come and go beneath it, transforming their narratives and enactments of the words and stories of the past into rehearsals for potential futures. “Now you see it, now you don’t, thanks to the darkness and your imagination. But it is always there and it crowds the mind” (France 1975, 55).

7.3. Envisioning Women in Welles's Caesars

Another of the ‘stories’ told by the *Caesar* photographs regards the presence of Shakespeare’s female characters in Welles’s adaptations. Although all the photographs of Calpurnia (Evelyn Allen) and Portia (Muriel Brassler and later Alice Frost) show them pleading submissively with their husbands⁵⁶, censoring any suggestion of female subjectivity and agency, they suggest a quantitatively greater female presence than was the case in any of Welles’s productions, except his *ES Caesar*.

Albeit with some omissions (including the whole of II.iv), both Calpurnia and, especially, Portia are accorded relatively ample space in the *ES* text (*MS* 12-13, 27-28, 30-32 and 56) and are also, significantly, represented in Welles’s drawings. While Calpurnia’s head is only portrayed together with Caesar’s (*MS* 31), Portia is presented on her own, proudly erect in a side view of her splendidly dressed full body (*MS* 27), complaining of Brutus’ behaviour before she claims her right to know his secrets, revealing her voluntary wounding of herself to prove her constancy (*MS* 28). The elimination of II.iv in all of Welles’s *Caesars* means a drastic

⁵⁶ For photographs of Calpurnia (Evelyn Allen) pleading with Caesar, see the *Life* photostory discussed above, and a second photograph showing the actors in a slightly different pose in a Lucas-Pritchard photograph in *The Cornell Daily Sun* (30 November 1937): <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caesar-Allen-Holland.jpg>. For photographs of Portia and Brutus, see <http://www.hollowaypages.com/welles.htm>, with Muriel Brassler as Portia in the Mercury Theatre production, and for the 1938 Mercury Theatre production, with Alice Frost, in a coloured photograph by Herbert Kehl in “The Man from Mercury”, *Coronet*, June 1938, see <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caesar-Mercury-3.jpg>.

reduction of Portia's presence in the play. The reduction is however counterbalanced by the cancelling, with the scene, of Shakespeare's image of a Portia giving way to her emotions, contradicting her previous demonstration of strength of will:

O constancy, be strong upon my side;
 Set a huge mountain 'tween my heart and tongue!
 I have a man's mind, but a woman's might.
 How hard it is for women to keep counsel!
 [...]
 Ay me, how weak a thing
 The heart of woman is!
 (Shakespeare 1988, II.iv.6-9, 39-40).

The removal of the scene leaves the *ES* readers with the image of a woman whose "might" – magnificently portrayed in Welles's drawing – is equal to or more "noble" than that of her husband who had appealed to the gods to "render" him "worthy of this noble wife!" (*MS* 28).

The presence of both women decreases in the Mercury playscript. Caesar's attempt to use the Lupercalia to cure Calpurnia's barrenness disappears, as too does Portia's story of her voluntary wounding and Brutus' admiring recognition of her nobility. A further reduction of Portia's importance is introduced in the account of her death, not, or not explicitly, as a suicide caused by her "swallow[ing] fire", as in Welles's *ES Caesar* (*MS* 56), but merely as a consequence of her falling "distract" (Welles 2001, 160).

The narrowing of the space accorded Calpurnia and Portia continues in the radio versions. Paradoxically, in all three of the *Columbia Mercury Theatre on the Air* rehearsals the *voices* of both women are reduced to silence.

In her discussion of Calpurnia's dream and Portia's wound in relation to the characterization of Caesar and Brutus, Cynthia Marshall notes how in Shakespeare's reworking of his Plutarchan source the dream reveals aspects both of "Caesar's problematic identity" and of the subjectivity of Calpurnia as dreamer:

In an unusual reversal of an established gender dynamic, Calphurnia functions as the subject to whose knowledge the audience receives (mediated) access, while Caesar is the object of scrutiny.

That she is denied even the articulation of her dream, which is narrated by the appropriating Caesar, demonstrates an effacement of her linguistic presence; Calphurnia is largely without the power of words in the play. But her relative muteness also confers on Calphurnia the paradoxical freedom of one unconfined by limiting verbal structures. [...] [T]he dream employs a sensory form of knowledge, a literal envisioning of Caesar's fate. [...].

[It] discovers an image that condenses two opposite conceptions of Caesar, monumental and vulnerable. (Marshall 1994, 483-84)

In Welles's radio version, the effacement of Calpurnia's linguistic presence goes further, eliminating any indication of weakness on the part of Caesar. The account of Calpurnia's dream and her pleading with Caesar to remain at home is relegated to H. V. Kaltenborn's reading of an abbreviated and edited version of a Plutarchan narrative where she is mentioned, without a name, simply as Caesar's wife. In a version that differs radically from that of Hill in *MS* 5-6⁵⁷, the focus is entirely on "Caesar's wife's" defects; not only has Caesar's sharing of her concerns disappeared, but he is now represented (in a Wellesian addition) as "laughing at her fears":

[...] he perceived his wife fast asleep, but heard her utter in her dream some *indistinct words* and *inarticulate groans*. She *fancied* at that time she was weeping over Caesar, and holding him butchered in her arms. When it was day, she begged Caesar not to leave the house, but to

⁵⁷ In addition to including Calpurnia's name in his quotation of the same Plutarchan passage, Hill's text continues as follows (with occasional omissions and an interpolation): "When it was day, she begged of Caesar, if it were possible, not to stir out, but to adjourn the senate to another time. He said it was better to suffer death once than always to live in fear of it. Nor was he himself without some suspicion and fears; for he never before discovered any womanish superstition in Calpurnia, whom he now saw in such great alarm, for upon the report which the priests made to him that they had killed several sacrifices, and still found them inauspicious, he resolved to send Antony to dismiss the senate" (*MS* 5). The passage concludes with the account of Decius' scoffing dismissal of both the diviners and the dream, ending not with a response from Caesar, but by Decius' taking "Caesar by the hand, and conduct[ing] him forth" (*MS* 6).

adjourn the senate to another time. Caesar *laughed at her fears* and when the time was come he started for the Capitol. (transcription and emphasis mine)

Portia too is downgraded both in the rehearsals for the 1938 radio broadcast and in the earlier phonograph recording. Not only is her account of her self-inflicted wounding eliminated, but also the whole of her scene with Brutus. Her first appearance in the radio rehearsals is in Plutarch's mention of Brutus bidding her farewell before leaving the city, after which her only return is in Brutus' brief account of her death to Cassius in the quarrel scene. In the March 1938 recording all that remains of either woman is the account of Portia's death, abbreviated as in the Mercury Theatre production.

In the 1944 extract of the tent scene in the *Orson Welles Almanac* broadcast, Portia disappears completely. Even her death is blotted out, leaving Brutus and Cassius to quarrel and make peace in a world so exclusively male as to admit no female presence even in the memory of the speakers.

8. *Radio and Record Versions*

"There was nothing in the production the ear could not see". (*Cleveland Plain Review*, quoted in Welles 1938e)

The radio versions of Welles's *Caesar* are inevitably lacking in much of what made the Mercury performance so striking. Even the music, without its dialectical interaction with the lighting and the actors' movements, appearance and voices, seems to have lost some of its vigour. Other aspects are enhanced; new ones come to the fore.

On stage, gestures, costumes, lighting and the physical appearance of Joseph Holland as Caesar played on allusions to Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. On air, the main vector of topicality was the name and voice of the narrator, the well-known radio news commentator, H. V. Kaltenborn, famed for his reports on events in Europe, charged here with reading passages drawn from Plutarch's *Lives*. The contrast between lighting and blackouts

is replaced by moments of silence. Voices are carefully pitched so as to give the impression of space, depth, proximity and distance⁵⁸, and of the movement of the actors as they enter the main stage area or retreat into the wings, or of groups of people coming together or breaking away. Several of the sound effects had already been used in the stage performance, especially but not only for scenes enacted in half-light or during a blackout, adding extra, carefully orchestrated dimensions to the performance⁵⁹. Here they played an essential part.

The script underwent radical changes, expanded or abbreviated to adapt it to the new channel, but also to Plutarch's versions of some of the scenes, which replaced or interacted contrapuntally with the Shakespeare-Wellesian original. The high point of the Mercury production, the lynching of Cinna the Poet, disappeared, replaced not by Shakespeare's detailed Plutarchan source quoted by Hill (*MS* 7), but by another Plutarchan passage referring generically to mob violence. Yet in many ways it was the scene – even more than the opening scene and possibly even than Antony's funeral orations – that had shown the most remarkable use of sound on stage, and thus would seem to be particularly suitable for the new medium.

8.1. *Telling, Acting and the Role of the Narrator*

Comparison of the opening of the radio rehearsals with the accounts of the powerful shock effect of the opening scene on stage

⁵⁸ An echo, in sound, of Welles's visual structuring of the Mercury Theatre stage space to give it "an appearance of enormous depth and a great variety of playing areas" through "a series of huge, subtly graded platforms that covered the entire stage floor. First came the main downstage playing area – fourteen feet deep including the apron – which rose in a gentle rake to meet a set of shallow steps running the full width of the stage. These led to an eight-foot plateau, the mid-stage playing area, then rose again through another set of steps to a final narrow crest, six and a half feet above stage level, before falling back down in a steep, fanning ramp that ended close to the rear wall of the theatre" (Houseman 1972, 296-97).

⁵⁹ See, for example, Atkinson's review in *The New York Times* quoted earlier, and especially his comment in a later review that "[t]he Mercury Theatre which John Houseman and Orson Welles have founded with *Julius Caesar* has taken the town by the ears" (Houseman 1972, 318).

shows immediately the extent of the transformation. In place of the bare stage is a multiple introductory message: the *Mercury Theatre on the Air* theme tune from Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 1, followed by a blurb about the series, including press reviews, by CBS announcer Dan Seymour, an "Orson Welles himself to tell you about it" introduction, and a brief, final presentation listing actors and credits by Seymour. The Mercury Theatre opening blackout and Fascist March are replaced by the leisurely, elderly voice of the narrator, H.V. Kaltenborn, reading extracts from Plutarch's *Lives* to contextualize and tell the story about to be enacted. His only accompaniment is the sound of marching feet, while the music of the Fascist March begins *after* the interruption of the narrative by the soothsayer's warning to "[b]eware the Ides of March!"

The presence of a narrator in broadcasts of radio plays was quite common at the time, but Welles had his own view of the function of narrators in "radio drama", which he saw as being "more akin to a novel than a play. He insisted that [radio drama] is as dependent on storytelling as it is on performance and therefore requires a narrator to help guide the listener through the experience" (Heyer 2005, 47).

Normally, Welles favoured the use of an internal narrator, in order to create a "first person singular" sense of intimacy⁶⁰. Often he himself assumed this role, as in his 1939 Mercury Text Recording of *Julius Caesar*, in which he read his *ES* stage directions as well as playing the parts of Cassius and Antony. For the broadcast, however, he needed a voice from outside in order to create a contrast between the status and sound of the narrator and those of the Mercury Theatre actors. This had the added advantage of allowing him to reproduce 'on air' the dialectical relationship between the onstage world of the play and its external social and political contexts, suggested in the 1937 theatrical performance by lighting, costume, gesture and physiognomy.

The choice of Kaltenborn for the *Mercury Theatre on the Air Caesar* enabled Welles to make full use of the narrator's voice both to underline the difference between telling and acting a story and to expand the time scheme into different pasts and presents. It was

⁶⁰ The revealingly characteristic title of his previous CBS series.

also an estranging device, suggesting the need to interrogate the reliability of what is shown or told, since the narrator and the actors often present conflicting versions of the same event. Plutarch's rethinking of earlier Roman history from the prospect of his own times and Shakespeare's both of Plutarch's and other versions from the prospect of the Elizabethan world are now brought into direct contact in a single text and made to interact with the worlds inhabited by Welles, his actors, music score arranger and performer, technicians and listeners. Different temporalities and discourses come into contact and self-reflexively interact 'on air'.

Instead of working his sources into a seamless presentation, Welles foregrounds their occasional contradictions in a writerly and theatrical act that self-reflexively voices the tension between each of its components. Just as the Mercury staging left the bricks of the wall, its steam pipes, fire extinguisher and even a New York City fireman visible to the audience (France 1977, 108), so Welles maintains the gaps and clashes between the text presented by his narrator and the script his actors' voices bring to life, interrupting and even contradicting the Plutarchan outline with Shakespeare's-Welles's and their own actorial reworkings. In the *Everybody's Shakespeare* version of the play, the discrepancy between parts of Plutarch's texts and the variations introduced by Shakespeare was also present, but at a distance. Plutarch was quoted at length in Roger Hill's introduction to show Shakespeare's use of his main source; although the passages were carefully labelled with Act and scene numbers to facilitate reference and comparison to the play that followed, their different editorial status made them independent of each other. Juxtaposed in the single text of the broadcast, albeit differentiated by the voice and tone of the narrator from the text given voice to by the actors, the effect is radically different.

Caesar's assassination is presented almost entirely through Kaltenborn-Plutarch's description. Of the three different versions of rehearsals for the broadcast that have so far been found, two are damaged, with the recording interrupted towards the end of the Plutarchan narrative at the words "*Brutus also gave him a stab in the groin. Some say that he fought and resisted all the rest*". It only resumes, after a pause, with Coulouris-Antony's words to Brutus and

Cassius beginning “Live a thousand years”⁶¹. The third, shorter recording, of the so-called “lost”, but carefully edited and probably final rehearsal before going on air, contains a greatly abbreviated version of Plutarch’s description of the scene, completing it however with further details (parts omitted are barred in order to show the stages of Welles’s adaptation of the text; other changes in square brackets):

When Caesar entered [the Capitol], the senators stood up, to show their respect for him. Of the conspirators, some came about his chair and stood behind it, and others stood in front of him and talked to him. Then Tillius, laying hold of Caesar’s robe with both his hands, pulled it down from his neck, which was the signal for the assault. Casca [that stood behind him] gave him the first [wound] in the neck. It was not mortal [...and] Caesar turned, and put his hand upon the dagger and kept hold of it. [...] [The conspirators] closed around him with their naked knives in their hands. Which way so ever he turned he was met with blows and saw their blades levelled at his face and eyes [...]. For it had been agreed that they should each of them make a thrust at him, and flesh themselves with his blood; for which reason Brutus also gave him one stab in the groin. Some say that he fought and resisted all the rest, shifting his body to avoid the blows and calling out for help. But when he saw Brutus’ knife drawn, he covered his face with his cloak and submitted, letting himself fall at the foot of the pedestal on which Pompey’s statue stood, which was wetted with his blood. (Welles 1938c)⁶²

The passage is followed by the continuation of the scene, performed by the voices of Holland, Welles, Gabel and others in the parts of Caesar, Brutus, Cassius, Decius and Cinna: “*Et tu, Brutè? – Then fall, Caesar. / Liberty! / Freedom! / Tyranny is dead! / Run hence, proclaim, cry it about the streets*” etc.

⁶¹ My transcription (as in all quotations from Welles’s radio and phonographic versions of *Julius Caesar*).

⁶² The quotation allows a comparison between the Plutarchan narrations of the assassination reproduced in the radio rehearsals. The entire passage, with minor variations, is present in Hill’s *ES* introduction, which however ends as follows: “So that Pompey himself seemed to have presided, as it were, over the revenge done upon his adversary, who lay here at his feet, and breathed out his soul through his multitude of wounds, for they say he received three and twenty” (*MS* 6). A consideration omitted in all three radio rehearsals.

For Antony's funeral orations the procedure adopted is the opposite. Plutarch's summary account of the contents of Antony's speech provides a mere outline for the scene that follows⁶³:

When Brutus was gone, the body of Caesar was brought out into the forum, all mangled with wounds. And Anthony made a funeral oration to the people in praise of Caesar. And finding them moved by his speech, he unfolded the bloody garment of Caesar, and showed them in how many places it was pierced and the number of his wounds. He also told them at this time of Caesar's will, in which it was found that he had left a considerable legacy of money to each one of the Roman citizens.

The actors' voices that take over from Kaltenborn reproduce Shakespeare's own 'act' of performatively reworking his source on multiple levels. The gaps in Plutarch's summary are filled in with Welles's adaptation both of the words of Shakespeare and of his own previous adaptations in the *ES/MS* and Mercury Theatre versions. In both examples, the effect of the juxtaposition of Plutarch and Shakespeare, telling and acting, in the performance for radio differs greatly from that of Hill and Welles's *Everybody's Shakespeare*, due above all to the distance between the respective passages (*MS* 6 and 36 for the assassination; *MS* 7 and 43-48 for Antony's funeral oration), quite apart from the abbreviations, omissions and occasionally additions to Plutarch's texts.

Even more interesting is the relation between the Plutarchan narrative and the performance of Cassius' suicide. (The latter, as we have already seen, was eliminated from the Mercury Theatre performance). The narrative ends with Cassius' head "*found severed from his body*" with beside it "*the same knife with which he had stabbed Caesar in the senate house*", followed, in all except the "lost" rehearsal, by a considerably abbreviated enactment of the

⁶³ The only indication of the source is Welles's general reference to "Plutarch's *Lives*" in his introductory presentation. Neither here, nor in Roger Hill's *ES* compilation of extracts, is there any reference to the different *Lives* the texts are drawn from. A "Welles's Workshop", similar to Serpieri, Elam and Corti's *Nel laboratorio di Shakespeare. Dalle fonti ai drammi* (1988), with parallel tabulation and comment of Plutarch's texts, Shakespeare's play and Welles's adaptations would be invaluable.

Shakespearean original, framed, before and after, by plaintive notes of music:

PINDARUS

Oh Cassius Brutus gave the word too early,
Who, having some advantage on Octavius,
Took it too eagerly. His soldiers fell to spoil,
Whilst we by Antony are all enclosed. [...]

CASSIUS

This day I breathèd first. Time is come round,
And where I did begin, there shall I end;
My life is run his compass. [...] Come hither, sirrah.
[...]

And with this good sword,
That ran through Caesar's bowels, search this bosom.
Stand not to answer. Here, take thou the hilt,
And, when my face is covered, as 'tis now,
Guide thou the sword. [*pause, followed by "Aaah" as if in a sighing intake of breath*]
Caesar, thou art revenged
Even with the sword that killed thee.

While the inclusion of Cassius' suicide already introduces a very different conception of the play from that of the stage performance in the Mercury Theatre, the Indiana University rehearsal recording goes further, with an even more drastic transformation. In this version, after the next Plutarchan narrative, come a few brief lines that shift the focus of the conclusion from Brutus, or Brutus nobilitated by his own death and by Antony's eulogy, to Cassius, "the last of all the Romans" (words eliminated in the Mercury Theatre performance), with Brutus' "fare thee well" becoming the last words of the play:

Some time later, Brutus, returning from the pursuit, wondered that he could not see Cassius' tent afar off, standing high as it was wont and appearing above the rest of the camp. Then, for the first time, he suspected the defeat of Cassius and made haste to him. He heard nothing of his death until he came to the camp.

BRUTUS

Where, where, Messala, doth his body lie?

MESSALA

Lo, yonder.

He is slain.

BRUTUS

The last of all the Romans, fare thee well. (Welles 1938d)

As if in a final curtain, immediately afterwards comes the *Mercury Theatre on the Air* "extro" text, followed by the Beethovenian theme tune that opened and closed all the programme's performances:

Tonight Orson Welles and the original Mercury Theatre cast have produced Caesar; the hit of last year's theatrical season on Broadway, as the first of a new series of weekly hours which the Columbia broadcasting system will present during the coming months. In response to the tremendous enthusiasm evoked by these programmes from all parts of the country, CBS has made the *Mercury Theatre on the Air* a regular feature of its Sunday night schedule. The drama was adapted from the play of Shakespeare and the narration was taken from Plutarch's Lives. Orson Welles directed the entire production. H. V. Kaltenborn was the narrator. And the cast included... later. The original music was composed for the Mercury Theatre by Marc Blitzstein. Davidson Taylor supervised the production for CBS. Dan Seymour speaking. (Welles 1938d)

In the third, "lost", rehearsal, the focus shifts once again, probably definitively, back to Brutus. Cassius' suicide is left entirely to the words of Kaltenborn-Plutarch in a slightly shorter version⁶⁴:

In the beginning the tide of battle was with Brutus. The right wing, which he commanded, drove back their opponents with great slaughter. Then they fell upon that part of Octavius' army which was exposed and separated and pursued them towards the sea. During this time however, Cassius, with the main body of the army, was retreating before the attack of Antony, expecting Brutus to come to his aid and acting by delay and expectation, rather than boldness and with a clear purpose, But soon Cassius saw his whole army begin to give way. He did as much as ever he could to hinder their flight and bring them back and snatching a flag out of the hand of one that fled, he stuck it at his feet and begged them to stand by him and fight. When he found that he could not even keep his own personal guard together, Cassius retired to an

⁶⁴ I have barred the parts omitted, to enable comparison with the other rehearsals.

empty tent, taking along with him only Pindarus, one of his freemen, and pulling his cloak over his head, he made his neck bare and held it forth to Pindarus, commanding him to strike. Cassius' head was found severed from his body and beside it was found the same knife with which he had stabbed Caesar. Some time later, Brutus, returning from the pursuit, wondered that he could not see Cassius' tent standing far off, standing high as it was wont and appearing above the rest of the camp. Then, for the first time, he suspected the defeat of Cassius and made haste to him. He heard nothing of his death until he came to the camp. (Welles 1938c)

Brutus' exchanges with Messala, Cinna⁶⁵, Volumnius and Strato, his last words and the enactment of his suicide are repristinated, not in the much abbreviated, semi-concealed version performed on stage (Welles 2001, 164-65), but in a slightly reduced version of MS 60-63. The CBS rehearsal ends, once again, with Antony's eulogy over the body of "the noblest Roman of them all", before whom "Nature might stand up, / And say to all the world, this was a man".

8.2. *Recontextualizing the Quarrel Scene*

Among the "tremendous possibilities of the celebrated 'Tent Scene'" Hill speaks of in his introduction to the *Everybody's Shakespeare* version of *Julius Caesar*, he could hardly have foreseen the way it would be used by Welles on 19 December 1940, in his guest appearance opposite John Barrymore in the CBS *Rudy Vallee Sealtest Show*, or in his own *Orson Welles Almanac* variety show in 1944, with Charles Laughton⁶⁶. Although both programmes show a fairly similar structure, there is a considerable difference in quality.

⁶⁵ The words Shakespeare attributed to Clitus are given to Cinna in Welles's versions.

For the *Rudy Vallee Sealtest Show* appearance (briefly mentioned in Callow 1995, 561), see Andereg 1999, 9-11, and Lanier 2002, 204. The quarrel scene in the *Radio Almanac* broadcast is available at https://archive.org/details/Orson_Welles_Shakespeare_Collection/440315_Scene_from_Julius_Caesar.mp3. It should of course be considered in relation to the rest of the programme (<https://ia800206.us.archive.org/16/items/owota2/owota197.mp3>). For a discussion and quotations, see Heyer 2005, 182.

The *Orson Welles Almanac* broadcast contains little of interest apart from Laughton and Welles's rendering of the quarrel scene, preceded by a fine performance by a New Orleans jazz band. Both the personalized presentation of the scene – “This being the Ides of March, your *Radio Almanac* brings you a scene from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, with Charles Laughton as Cassius and your obedient servant as Brutus. This is the famous quarrel scene”⁶⁷ – and the narrative that provides its context recall features of Welles's *Mercury Theatre on the Air* broadcast rehearsals, but with none of their complexity. Most of the programme is taken up by lengthy adverts for Mobil gas, jokes about hiccup cures and tax returns, a skit on “The Private Life of Charles Laughton” and a focus on the weight problems of both actors and their need to reduce their “too solid flesh”.

In the earlier Sealtest show, also ostensibly a biography of Welles's actor-partner, the confrontation between Welles and Barrymore provides interesting variations on Welles's earlier engagements with the scene. His elimination of Portia and her death even from the memory of his characters emphasizes the theme of male friendship in an exclusively homosocial world. But the new version also offers the possibility of seeing the interaction between Welles as Brutus and Barrymore as Cassius as a relationship not just between two different Shakespearean characters, but between different styles of acting, different generations and different performance genres and media, extending Welles's metatheatrical discourse to the world of radio. In his essay on Shakespeare and American radio, Douglas Lanier interprets the performance as a self-reflexively transmedial restaging (Lanier 2002, 204)⁶⁸.

Some of the significance of the performance is to be attributed to the figure of John Barrymore, not only a celebrated

⁶⁷ My transcription.

⁶⁸ Unfortunately, no recording of the show is available. See Andereg 1999, 9-11, and Lanier 2002, 204, for comments. While Andereg devotes more space to the vaudeville aspects of the show, “structured as a duel between egos [...] with Rudy Vallee as referee”, giving detailed descriptions of the protagonists' repartees (Andereg 1999, 10), Lanier concentrates on the actors' performance of the tent scene.

Shakespearean actor, famous in particular for his interpretation of Hamlet, but also a member of an acting family closely associated with the popularity of Shakespeare in America and a much loved friend. As well as “provid[ing] a direct link to nineteenth-century theatrical traditions through his uncle John Drew and his father Maurice Barrymore”, Anderegg points out that he “had done for American Shakespeare in the 1920s what Welles did in the 1930s; turned him into a box office success and made him a cultural commodity of some note” (Anderegg 1999, 9-10). “People I Miss”, the fourth episode of the *Orson Welles’ Sketchbook* television series for the BBC (14 May 1955), is devoted to Barrymore and Houdini, illustrated by anecdotes and drawings of Barrymore as Hamlet following a presentation of Houdini, “[t]he master magician [...], the greatest showman of our time. [...]. Here’s John Barrymore. Who was certainly as famous as Houdini. Houdini could get out of anything, and Jack Barrymore could get into anything. He’s also one of the greatest actors I ever saw in my life”⁶⁹.

At the time of the Rudy Vallee broadcast, Barrymore was “a longtime alcoholic near the end of his life [...] and well past the end of his career as one of the great stars of American theater and film” (Anderegg 1999, 9). His presence facing Welles drew some of its significance precisely from his deteriorated state and status. Playing on their common “status as Shakespearean actors and, simultaneously, as egotistical ‘hams’”, with Barrymore “cruelly” ribbed for “his ‘advanced’ age”, Welles for his exhibitionism and cheap sensationalism, the pairing of twenty-five-year-old Welles and fifty-eight-year-old Barrymore, the “near has-been”, brought new and poignant relevance to the scene (9-10). Lanier cites specifically Barrymore-Cassius’ impotent declaration “that he is ‘older in practice, abler than yourself / To make conditions’ and his laments that he is ‘awearry of the world: [...] braved by his brother, / Checked like a bondman, all his faults observed / Set in a notebook, learned, and conned by rote, / To cast into my teeth’”.

⁶⁹ All six episodes of the *Orson Welles’ Sketchbook* are available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1Yv09tr1LM0pq8znhhtVgbk/orson-welles-sketch-book>. For a transcript of episode 4 (14 May 1955), see <http://www.wellesnet.com/sketchbook4.htm>.

Beyond the biographical parallels between the deep but troubled relationship of the Shakespearean characters and Barrymore and Welles's long and lasting friendship, it is the casting of "Barrymore the Shakespearean as the representative of an outmoded medium, the classical stage" that makes the performance most significant. As Lanier concludes: "The 'conflict' and 'reconciliation' between competing Shakespeareans Welles and Barrymore, in other words, transforms Shakespeare's scene into an allegory of the relationship between stage and broadcast Shakespeare" (Lanier 2002, 204).

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The Guise of Friendship: Orson Welles and the Soliloquy on Film*

Jeewon Yoo

This essay discusses how Orson Welles uses the soliloquy to explore modes of social isolation in Shakespeare's plays. In Welles's Shakespeare films, the soliloquizer does not withdraw from the scene of social interaction. Other characters can, and often do, overhear the speech, though they do not respond to it. The Wellesian soliloquy is neither a monologue nor a conversation, and its performers run the risk of being ignored even when they wish to be heard. Through readings of Welles's *Othello* and *Chimes at Midnight*, the essay shows how Welles uses the filmed soliloquy to represent the sovereign and the black man as socially isolated figures. The essay also examines how Welles translates the language of the soliloquy into a film's visual style. Like a soliloquy, the expressionist distortions of the film world reflect the interiority of the characters, but these shifts in scale, color, and time go unacknowledged by other characters in the film and are only noticed by the viewer. This soliloquized style, the essay goes on to suggest, is a general feature of Welles's films, which offers the viewer a temporary intimacy with the film world.

Keywords: Soliloquy, Social isolation, Sovereignty, Blackness

Rarely would Orson Welles begin at the beginning. By the time the viewer enters the world of his films, its central figures are already on their way out. A maudlin Falstaff (Orson Welles) opens *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). This Falstaff is old, seeking warmth by the hearth, and he smiles with borrowed mirth as his worn face reflects

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the light of the fire¹. From here the film looks back on the times when he and Hal were still together at the Boar's Head Tavern, and coronation day seemed further away than death. The film is extravagant, and even when we witness war, we are given no impression of the end. But in the final shot of the film, Falstaff is wheeled out of the tavern in a comically large coffin and pushed towards the foggy bend in the road. As the gulf widens between us and Falstaff, we are bereft of a character we believed would never leave us. This final scene is a common motif in Welles's films, the sudden disavowal. A wired fence shuts out the viewer at the end of *Citizen Kane* (1941), and Tanya (Marlene Dietrich) closes *Touch of Evil* (1958) with affected nonchalance: "He was some kind of a man. What does it matter what you say about people?" (Welles 1958). In *Chimes at Midnight*, it is Hal (Keith Baxter) who declares, "I know thee not, old man" (Welles 1965), and gives this motif a reflexive turn. Before he takes leave of the viewers at the end of the film, Welles shows himself abandoned by a friend, and he seems to have found in this story of betrayal the license to expose himself to the intimacy that his films had previously expressed with pretense. As Pauline Kael wrote in her review of *Chimes at Midnight*, "[Welles's voice] was just an instrument that he played, and it seemed to be the key to something shallow and unfelt even in his best performances, and most fraudulent when he tried to make it tender". But as Falstaff, "[Welles's] emotions don't seem fake anymore; he's grown into them, too" (Kael 1967).

Playing Falstaff, Welles makes his body do a lot of work. The portly knight takes on a double duty as his body stands in contrast to both the skinny Henry IV (John Gielgud) and the nimble Hal who circles around Welles's bumbling frame. As Henry IV, John

¹ This film is a mix of five plays, the *Henriad* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and had been for Welles a lifelong project. In 1939, Welles had prepared for the stage a version of the script known as *Five Kings*, which had a limited run with mostly negative reviews, but even before then, when he was still a student at the Todd School for Boys, Welles starred in a play that he wrote and directed, a rearrangement of the first tetralogy that he called *The Winter of Our Discontent*. Welles, of course, played Richard III. See Callow 1996, 423-25, 67-68.

Gielgud stands in for a Shakespeare refined and elevated like the films of Laurence Olivier. The poetry of the words will not be missed. While playing Falstaff, Orson Welles puts body before mind and throws out his words like the everyday repartee of a man whose wits hope to outpace his debts. It is easy to miss what Falstaff is saying, but no matter. Words, as the knight tells us, are but made of air. For the most part, the film maintains a parity between the rowdy and refined Shakespeares. Early on, when Hal and Poin circle Falstaff, enclosing him in his own lies, it is difficult to catch what the three of them are saying. But the details of Falstaff's compounding lies are trivial in comparison to the taunting faces and jeering tones that paint the scene for the viewer. At the Battle of Shrewsbury, Falstaff brings the tavern to the open field, and his mute, toddling body is a counterpoint to the clamor of armed men and horses. The battle is an aesthetic competition between the serious and the comic registers of Shakespeare, and by casting his lot with Falstaff, Welles consigns his Shakespeare to defeat. In *Chimes at Midnight*, Welles sides with the banished.

The coronation scene begins with Falstaff's eager face floating behind the wall of people lining the royal hall. The knight bursts through the crowd and shouts at Hal with the irreverence of a heckler, and the new king turns to face the knight. Crowned, caped, scepter and orb in hand, Hal is a figure of majesty. The low-angle shot emphasizes his grandeur, and the sequence that follows alternates between low and high-angle shots that reflects the rift opening up between the two men. For the first time, Falstaff does not seem larger than life. The sound comes a steady stream from Hal, and Falstaff, silenced, no longer projects his size through the volume of his voice. As Hal's words flow through the scene, Falstaff chuckles and moves towards him, gesturing towards a conversation, but the new king does not permit him to speak. Falstaff does not get in a word and falls to his knees, a banished man. The sound suggests that Gielgud's Shakespeare has prevailed. But the faces tell another story. The shot-reverse shots that magnify Hal but shrink Falstaff carry out a dialogue of faces. A look of awe and abandon sweeps over the knight's face while the new king speaks, and before Hal turns his back to his boyhood friend, we see a small quiver on his chin, one mirrored by Falstaff's

trembling beard. No such look ever flitted across the grave face of Henry IV. When he was Bolingbroke, the late king was a popular man, but in *Chimes at Midnight*, he is without a friend to betray. As king, Henry IV was alone, and Hal is on his way to that solitary seat. The quiver on the to-be king's chin is the last twitch of a dying boyhood and a bleating farewell to friendship.

In an interview with Kenneth Tynan, Welles said of *Chimes at Midnight* that “[t]he main change is no excuse for the betrayal of a friendship. It’s the liberation of that story that justifies my surgical approach to the text” (Welles 2002, 133). It is a peculiar interview. Welles, as usual, is putting on a persona, and Tynan plays along. Elaborating on the film’s theme, Welles says that “[i]t laments the death of chivalry and the rejection of merry England. Even in Shakespeare’s day, the old England of the greenwood and Maytime was already a myth, but a very real one” (132-33). Tynan follows up on some other real myths, asking Welles to “check on a few of the popular rumors” about himself – a tendency to “go over the budget” (“False”), “power[s] of clairvoyance” (“sometimes”), and “too much energy” spent on “talk”:

PLAYBOY [Kenneth Tynan]: *A third charge often leveled against you is that you dissipate too much energy in talk. The English critic Cyril Connolly once said that conversation, for an artist, was “a ceremony of self-wastage”. Does that phrase give you a pang?*

ORSON WELLES: No, but it reminds me of Thornton Wilder and his theory of “capsule conversations”. He used to say to me: “You must stop wasting your energy, Orson. You must do what I do – have capsule conversations”. Just as a comic can do three minutes of his mother-in-law, Thornton could do three minutes on Gertrude Stein or Lope de Vega. That’s how he saved his energy. But I don’t believe that you have more energy if you save it. It isn’t a priceless juice that has to be kept in a secret bottle. We’re social animals, and good conversation – not just parroting slogans and vogue words – is an essential part of good living. It doesn’t behoove any artist to regard what he has to offer as something so valuable that not a second of it should be frittered away in talking to his chums. (133-34)

For Welles, there is no economy to a person’s energy. A person who refrains from talk to guard that energy like a precious resource

harbors a contempt for others in line with imperial ambitions. Civil war and usurpation are second to Hal's privation of friendship: "The rejection of Falstaff by the prince means the rejection of that England by a new kind of England that Shakespeare deplored – an England that ended up as the British Empire" (133). Renouncing Falstaff, Henry leads the English to Agincourt, but it may also be Vietnam that is on Welles's mind: "America doesn't have a history of losing wars and it has only a few bad wars on its conscience; this is one of them" (139)². Whenever Tynan asks him about America, Welles hangs on to an America soon to be lost to imperial ambitions. Of contemporary American directors, Welles says Stanley Kubrick and Richard Lester interest him, but his favorites are "John Ford, John Ford and John Ford" (135). The studio system was a source of great creative agon, and Welles felt that he should have arrived at Hollywood earlier, not later (136). Had he entered politics, Welles would have run as the junior senator from Wisconsin, against "a fellow called Joe McCarthy" (138). And New York is not what it used to be – neither its people nor its theater scene. Back then, "[w]e were still within speaking distance of the age when [New York] was called the melting pot [...], and there was a genuine internationalism that did not come from the mass media" (138). The nostalgia is palpable, and the myth of "merry England" seems to stand in for the America of his youth, back when people "were within speaking distance" of a cosmopolitan past.

In *Chimes at Midnight*, Falstaff represents not only a side of the Anglo-American rivalry but the very conditions of this interaction. For Welles, the loss of Falstaff is a loss of dialogue as, without him, Hal will no longer be on familiar terms with anyone else; he will be alone. As Laurie Shannon has shown, early modern theories of friendship and monarchy introduced a double break between the sovereign and his friends:

Friendship theory and its faith in decorous parity, along with monarchy theory's interpellating exaltation of the sovereign and demand for the subordination of his private self, converged precisely

² On the strain of anti-war *Henry V* productions in America, see Loehlin 1997, 151-70.

to one effect: affectively speaking, they rendered the proper sovereign *solitary*. (Shannon 2002, 155)

In *Henry V*, Shakespeare stages this loneliness through a device unusual in his plays, a sustained Chorus that provides a rapid and panoptic survey of the war's background. Acknowledging the technical difficulties of staging a military campaign, the Chorus asks the audience "to admit th'excuse / Of time, of numbers, and due course of things, / Which cannot in their huge and proper life / Be here presented" (Shakespeare 1982, V.Chorus.3-6). The audience is to "a thousand parts divide one man, / And make imaginary puissance" (Prologue.24-25) though on stage only "a crookèd figure may / Attest in little place a million" (15-16). At once the medium of this spectral multitude and the exception to its unreality, the Chorus figures dramatically the corporation sole, which, Ernst Kantorowicz says, "was at once immortal species and mortal individuation, collective *corpus politicum* and individual *corpus naturale*" (Kantorowicz 2016, 394). The ontological difference between staged and unstaged bodies prevents interaction between the multitude and the characters on stage, least of all Henry V. The limits of dramatic representation correspond to those of the king who cannot come in touch with his own subjects, and the absence of "huge and proper life" we feel in *Henry V* seems to be the hole left by a character who could touch the royal body without waging war.

In lieu of interpersonal relationships, Shakespeare supplies Henry with various substitutes. In the beginning of Act V, the Chorus describes the multitude that comes out to greet Henry upon his return from France:

CHORUS

Behold, the English beach
 Pales-in the flood, with men, maids, wives, and boys,
 Whose shouts and claps out-voice the deep mouthed sea,
 Which like a mighty whiffler fore the King
 Seems to prepare his way.
 (Shakespeare 1982, V.Chorus.9-13)

Boundaries collapse in this scene of celebration as people are liquidated into a flood, and the sea is personified as “a mighty whiffler”. However, as harmonious and jubilant as this scene may be, it is not staged, and the unreality of this scene limns the king’s body with a longing for physical union, which the final act of the play supplies through Catherine. The bilingual courtship is a romantic resolution to military hostilities, but the conversation remains awkward. The final act does not lift the strain placed on Henry’s language. In general, Henry has difficulty talking to other characters, a difficulty Anne Barton attributes to the linguistic predicaments of having to represent both the king’s two bodies³. The military campaign, Barton suggests, resolves this tension, for “[t]he war in France provides Henry with ‘friends’ of a rhetorical and special kind” (Barton 1975, 105). During the campaign, Henry assumes the “we” not as an impersonal formality but as a concrete reference to him and his army, and

[a]s the peril of the situation in France grows, so does Henry’s sense of fellowship. It is almost as though he extracts from danger a kind of substitute for the genuinely personal relationships abandoned with Falstaff and Scroop. (106)

This compensation, however, is not total and is rather “an easy jocularly which is familiar without being intimate, essentially distant at the same time that it creates an illusion of warmth and spontaneity” (106).

For Welles, the withdrawal from social interaction signals a hostility or disregard towards the well-being of others. The connection that Welles draws between Hal’s rejection of Falstaff and his future military campaign is a shared sensibility, one that Welles rebuffs through the figure of Thornton Wilder whose capsule conversations accord with Hal’s fellowship with his soldiers. In Shakespeare’s play, the Chorus takes note of the king’s “essentially distant” manner when describing Henry’s composure

³ When Henry dispenses with the traitors, for example, Anne Barton points out that the king alternates between the impersonal “we”, in stating the damages done to England, and the personal “I”, in stating the injuries inflicted upon him by Scroop (Barton 1975, 103-4).

on the eve of Agincourt: “Upon his royal face there is no note / How dread an army hath enrouned him” (Shakespeare 1982, IV.Chorus.35-36). While his soldiers are concerned about the French army that encircles them, the king seems indifferent to their number and thus projects onto his soldiers a different understanding of their shared situation. This indifference is good for English morale, but the king’s aloofness to the multitude is also a disregard for their well-being. After the battle, the king will sweep away the untitled, “common men” (IV.viii.77) when he coolly counts off the casualties: “None else of name” (103). The piles of slaughtered men are as unreal to Henry as the choral multitude who were never fully alive. The bawdy conversation of the tavern no longer reaches the ears of this king, and to hear again the sounds of frankness, to so much as appear in the same scene with Pistol, Henry must approach the other characters in disguise.

Falstaff does not disguise himself. The knight puts on a dress in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, but it is to escape a confrontation rather than to enter into another’s confidence⁴. Remarking upon this aspect of Falstaff’s character, W. H. Auden compares the knight to Christ:

The Christian God [...] appears in this world, not as Apollo or Aphrodite might appear, disguised as man so that no mortal should recognize his divinity, but as a real man who openly claims to be God. And the consequence is inevitable. The highest religious and temporal authorities condemn Him as a blasphemer and a Lord of Misrule, as a Bad Companion for mankind. (Auden 1962, 207-8)

In the *Playboy* interview, Tynan asks Welles if he agrees with Auden, and while Welles expresses some reservations about “the word ‘Christ’”, he ultimately assents:

I think Falstaff is like a Christmas tree decorated with vices. The tree itself is total innocence and love. By contrast, the king is decorated only with kingliness. He’s a pure Machiavellian. And there’s something beady-eyed and self-regarding about his son – even when he reaches his apotheosis as Henry V. (Welles 2002, 132)

⁴ Welles does not include this scene in his film.

Welles continues, describing Falstaff as “the prince’s spiritual father, who is a kind of secular saint” (132). Simon Callow finds the description “remarkably counterintuitive stuff” and instead proposes that

[i]t is love – Falstaff’s love of Hal – that is, for Welles, at the centre of the man; and it is love that sanctifies him. Like the woman taken in sin in St Luke’s Gospel, Falstaff’s sins are forgiven him, because he has loved. (Callow 2015, 132)

Emerging from these varied figures of contradiction, delightful and divine is a character whose open incarnation appears to those in disguise as indecent exposure. The scandal of Falstaff is a licentious love that does not guard itself against others like the opaque self-regard of Hal’s beady eyes.

Near the end of *Chimes at Midnight*, there emerges a new wave of feeling, a free-swinging love with Jeanne Moreau as Doll Tearsheet. The battle is won, and Falstaff wades through the partying crowd to make his way towards Doll, not unlike how Henry reaches Catherine after the celebration of Agincourt. Hal and Poinc spy on Doll and Falstaff, but they soon mix together in the open. Bardolph is there grunting and so is the Page, smiling⁵. In an appearance on *The Dean Martin Show*, Welles described Falstaff as “what you might call a swinger. In the late fifteenth century, they didn’t call them swingers, but they swung. And nobody more so than Sir John” (Garrison 1968). The tumble of bodies rolls around as they exchange jeers and endearments, much in contrast to how Henry woos Catherine with sly diplomacy. That is more Olivier’s world where seduction rules. In his adaptation of the play, Olivier cuts out the traitors and parts of the Chorus, decisions that attenuate Henry’s isolation. The multitude is incarnated alongside the king, and when Henry delivers his speeches, the film shows his words register on the faces of his subjects. None betray him. Olivier is also smooth in his courtship with Catherine, but seduction is not always conversation. This wooing does not deliver the king from

⁵ Falstaff’s Page is played by Beatrice Welles, Welles’s daughter.

isolation. In Olivier's film, Henry is still without proper interlocutors, but it may be this solitude that Olivier wished to convey when he closed his lips and played the soliloquy as a voiceover. The words are beyond the frame, for the king is not talking to other characters or even the audience but the only other figure that he can address frankly⁶. This soliloquy is a prayer.

The soliloquy presents a challenge to the director of Shakespeare because film is without the generic controls of theater that make intelligible a character's sudden withdrawal from the scene of action⁷. Without a stage, the soliloquizer appears to be engaged in what Erving Goffman calls "self-talk", which he classifies as a type of "roguish utterance" that "produc[es] communicative effects but no dialogue" (Goffman 1981, 78). These "utterances" are "roguish" not only because they "violate [the] interdependence" (78) that Goffman believes is fundamental to utterances, but also because

our self-talk – like other "mental symptoms" – is a threat to intersubjectivity; it warns others that they might be wrong in assuming a jointly maintained base of ready mutual intelligibility among all persons present. (85)

⁶ Ernst Kantorowicz points out that when "[m]using over his royal fate, over the king's two-natured being, Shakespeare's Henry V is disposed to recall Shakespeare's Richard II, who – at least in the poet's concept – appears as the prototype of that 'kind of god that suffers more of mortal griefs than do his worshippers'" (Kantorowicz 2016, 26).

⁷ Take for example a scene from Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014). The movie takes place entirely indoors at a New York theater space until Riggan Thompson (Michael Keaton) exits the building onto the street. Riggan is a washed-up film actor trying to stage a comeback through a play that he is writing, directing, and starring in. The film's initial absorption in Riggan's production reflects the character's all-consuming obsession with theatrical success. During his excursion, Riggan runs into a disheveled man (Bill Camp) reciting a soliloquy from *Macbeth* as he swings on the metal tubes of a building's scaffolding. After roaring "sound and fury signifying nothing", the man asks Riggan if it was too much: "I was just trying to give you a range". Riggan seems shocked by the performance and abruptly turns away from the man, frightened by his foil who also seems unable to respect the boundaries between life and theatre. In film, all the world is not a stage.

Like Welles, Goffman discerns in public self-absorption a hostility towards others. The reality of the social world rests on the tacit consensus of its participants who project their understanding of the situation through their behavior. A person engaged in self-talk seems absorbed in a reality different from the one shared by his observers and thereby projects onto them a dissenting interpretation, which is nothing less than a challenge to their notion of reality. In film, the turn to soliloquy threatens the understanding, among the characters as well as between the film and the audience, that the characters are in a film and not a theatrical production⁸. The filmed soliloquy thus often serves as the emblem of drama's transposition to film, and how the director negotiates this adaptation reflects the connections the film draws between life, to which film lays claim, and theater, from which film wrests this claim. It is not the claim of the Shakespeare film that it transcends all dramatic contrivance to realize the play in its authentic setting, say, the battlefield, just as Goffman does not claim through his social theory "that social life is but a stage" (4). Rather, the filmed soliloquy, like Goffman, makes a "technical" point: "that deeply incorporated into the nature of talk are the fundamental requirements of theatricality" (4).

Laurence Olivier approached the filmed soliloquy from several different angles. In *Henry V*, Olivier presents the speech as a voiceover, a private conversation between a king and the god of battles. Olivier's *Richard III* casts the Duke of Gloucester as a television host who solicits the audience's involvement in his plots. In these films, Olivier restages the soliloquy to maintain the fiction that the words will be heard by the viewers but not the other characters. Franco Zeffirelli, who approaches *Otello* by way of Verdi, presents a comparable model when he uses the aria to secure the lyric conditions of Othello's impassioned eloquence. In *Hamlet*, Olivier takes a different approach and stages the soliloquy as a speech directed to no one. These soliloquies are the closest to the

⁸ This is Welles's understanding of Olivier: "Larry Olivier has made fine Shakespearean movies that are essentially filmed Shakespearean plays; I use Shakespeare's words and characters to make motion pictures" (Welles, 2002, 132).

dramatic model, but they take place on castle towers and seem less dramatic contrivances than symptoms of the play's madness⁹. The soliloquies verge on the self-talk that Goffman designates as "mental symptoms". Akira Kurosawa presents a similar solution when he does not have Hidetora, his catatonic Lear, rage against the storm and instead has him keep his promise from the English play: "No, I will be the pattern of all patience, / I will say nothing" (Shakespeare 1997, III.ii.37-38). The threat that the soliloquy poses to the integrity of film can be embraced as the effects of the play's action upon its character, or it can be defused by laying alternative foundations for the magical monologue that goes unheard by others.

In *Chimes at Midnight*, Orson Welles breaks new ground. The two main soliloquies of the film present their speakers behind one another, and Welles makes it ambiguous whether they are speaking to themselves or the other person in the frame. The theatrical soliloquy dwells between the address to self and to the audience, and Welles transposes this ambiguity to that of self and other. The first soliloquy of *Chimes at Midnight* is Hal's. When he exits the Boar's Head Tavern, we are given a glimpse of the outside world. Shown through a gate, the view is narrow and quick. We see some trees and a group of horsemen, but Falstaff's voice turns the camera back to Hal. A trunk covers the right side of the frame, almost contiguous with the wooden building of the tavern in whose doorway stands Falstaff. At the bottom of the frame are the tree's branching twigs whose fingers seem to beckon Hal to turn away from the coaxing knight. When Hal is king, Falstaff says, rogue knights like he will "be Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade"

⁹ In his discussion of persistent self-talk, Erving Goffman writes: "an adult who fails to attempt to conceal his self-talk [...] is in trouble. Under the term verbal hallucination we attribute failure in decorum here to 'mental illness'" (Goffman 1981, 82). Goffman appends a footnote to this statement, which captures the interpretive dilemma of *Hamlet*: "I leave open the question of whether the individual who engages in verbal hallucination does so in order to create an impression of derangement, or for other reasons, and is merely indifferent to how he appears, or carries on in spite of some concern for the proprieties. And open, too, the question of whether in treating unabashed self-talk as a natural index of alienation, we have (in our society) any good grounds for our induction" (82n4).

(Welles 1965). Hal does not respond but turns his back to Falstaff and faces the camera. The composition of the soliloquy is then established. Falstaff's face is in the center of the shot. The trunk, Hal, and the branches direct our attention towards Falstaff while Hal whispers his ambitions. The speech stands somewhere between a monologue and a conversation. Falstaff listens, reacts, but does not intervene, and Hal seems to be speaking more for his own benefit than any listener's. The shot is relatively flat, but it has the simultaneous action of Welles's deep focus. The play of Falstaff's face is a counterpoint to Hal's soliloquy in the foreground. The knight's expression moves from surprise to bemused admiration. Caution, perhaps even fear, flits across his face before we see Falstaff bearing the look of patronizing amusement as if he were a parent who has heard his child declare world domination.

The filmed soliloquy, as Welles presents it in *Chimes at Midnight*, does not have the performer flee the scene of social interaction nor does it hold on to the theatrical conceit that these words cannot be overheard by other characters¹⁰. The soliloquy does not secure an inviolable isolation for the performer. The small drama of Falstaff's face expresses the effect of the words upon him, and these features, too, are sociable self-expressions that lay claim to his participation in the scene. Hal's soliloquy serves as a hinge between the tavern and the castle, and while he speaks, a momentary barrier seems to be raised between him and Falstaff, which will, by the end of the film, become permanent. Hal knows this. Falstaff does not. In Shakespeare's play, Falstaff is out of hearing. Welles, in contrast, insists that Falstaff has heard these words but has understood them

¹⁰ Emma Smith describes a similar composition in Welles's *Macbeth* (1948): "A sharply focused, miniature Lady Macbeth in the back of the frame traces the shifting power dynamic of their relationship: alternate shots first establish her in a conventional diminutive position, but at her encouragement 'We'll not fail' (1.7.61), Macbeth moves into the background and she takes up the dominant position" (Smith 2020, 191). What is a soliloquy in *Chimes at Midnight* is a dialogue in *Macbeth*. Thought and speech become intertwined as the two characters seem to share a mind. As Stanley Cavell notes in his meditation on the magical qualities of the play's language: "They exemplify exchanges of words that are not exchanges, that represent a kind of negation of conversation" (Cavell 2003, 238).

differently¹¹. The soliloquy suspends rather than cuts short the interaction between Hal and Falstaff, and when the prince turns to face the knight again, the two pick up their banter. Hal's sly face seems to soothe the rogue as Falstaff resumes colloquy with his royal protégé, and while he lets the prince have the last word, the knight has the last laugh. Falstaff bellows as Hal pounces away towards the castle, and we may notice that the trunk that had covered half the shot was not so thick after all but rather lean, like Hal. The prince clicks his heels, and the trumpets blare at the castle.

Not every character is aware that their soliloquy produces a different understanding between themselves and their overhearers. A muttering retinue surrounds Henry IV as the dying king slashes his way through the castle, and his soliloquy seems more in line with the methodical derangement of Olivier's Hamlet than the cunning theatricality of Welles's Hal. Falstaff, in contrast, solicits his audience rather than have them overhear him; he will not be left alone. In his honor speech, Falstaff constantly beckons Hal for his attention. It is Hal who installs Falstaff into the composition of a soliloquy by turning his back to him. But as Falstaff begins to speak, Hal turns his head now and then to look back at the knight. Once Falstaff ends his "catechism", the battle begins, and afterwards, the two reprise the sequence as the soldiers celebrate the victory with ale. Falstaff holds up a cup to Hal and declares: "If I had a thousand sons, the first humane principle I would teach them would be this: to forswear thin potations, and to addict themselves to sack" (Welles 1965). Welles delivers the lines with a wink, and there is the flash of an advertisement in his promotion of drink, not unlike his work for Paul Masson¹². But here, Hal is not seduced by Falstaff's

¹¹ In "The Long Goodbye: Welles and Falstaff", Samuel Crowl draws our attention to the series of foreshadowed partings in Welles's film. Crowl notes that by including Falstaff in the frame, Hal not only turns his back to the knight but, by looking into the camera, also "separates us from Falstaff, making us members of the Prince's party by confiding to us his regard for the past and his plans for the future" (Crowl 1980, 375). Crowl does not comment whether he believes Falstaff can hear Hal's words, though he does note that Welles shows his critical understanding of the play by "mak[ing] us see Falstaff's inability to comprehend Hal's projected threat of banishment" (376).

¹² As Welles remarks on *The Dean Martin Show*, "this is Shakespeare's first and greatest of all commercials on the subject of booze" (Garrison 1968).

invitation to conversation. The prince turns his back to the knight and lets his cup clatter on the ground as he walks towards the royal retinue. The clatter is a farcical repetition of the trumpets that blared as Hal skipped towards the castle. This time, the knight does not laugh.

The soliloquies of *Chimes at Midnight* are not inviolable modes of self-expression whose contents are absolutely interior to their speakers and thus radically separate from the rest of the film world, but neither are they sociable presentations that lend themselves to reciprocal interaction with other characters. The language of the soliloquy is at once too intimate and inflated, suited neither for rhetorical projection nor dialogic exchange, and by embedding soliloquies into concrete communicative contexts, Welles lends them a peculiar sociability, one that is consonant with the expressionist distortions of his films. The shifts in scale, and contrasts of light and shadow manipulate aspects of the film world so as to reflect the interior states of characters. In *Citizen Kane*, the titular character seems too small for Xanadu but is also too large to be at home in his world. Kane dies clutching a snow globe that encases a replica of his childhood home, the smaller, miniature world of snow and nostalgia that he has outgrown. As a visible feature of the characters' surroundings, the distortions should be available to every seeing character who inhabits this world, but just as they may not hear the words of the soliloquizer, the characters of the film seem not to notice the distortions of their world. Welles's characters can neither describe to one another these distortions nor acknowledge them as their shared condition. To the viewer, these distortions come across as a soliloquized style, a line of communication between film and viewer that is unavailable to the characters. However, unlike the language of a play, the visual components of film are not bound to seeing bodies of the *dramatis personae*. The camera moves independently of the characters, and the soliloquized style of Welles's films raise questions of attribution. It is often unclear whose state of mind the expressionist distortions reflect and what relation the viewer thus obtains through them.

The problem of attribution lies at the center of Welles's *Othello* (1951) whose film style initiates a troubling relationship with the

viewer. In adapting the film, Welles cut out many of Iago's (Micheál Mac Liammóir) lines, particularly the soliloquies he delivers at the end of scenes. In those speeches, Iago lays out his intentions and makes the audience participate in the play's asymmetrical distribution of knowledge. In his *Othello*, Welles creates this asymmetry through the film's visual style. As Emma Smith remarks:

Welles' film has little stylistic affinity with the play's lyrical mode – what the mid-century critic G. Wilson Knight famously called “the Othello music” – and more immediately aligns itself with the disruptive, improvisatory bricolage of Iago. (Smith 2020, 192)

The jagged editing presents a disjointed narrative, and the contrasts in color cleave the frames into black and white sections. The colors organize the frame and govern the film world as the contrast is upheld by light and shadow as well as the color of characters' skins. Embodying the “[f]oul disproportions” (Shakespeare 2006, III.iii.237) that Iago claims to smell on Desdemona's (Suzanne Cloutier) interracial love, the film's style develops an intimacy between the viewer and Iago's manipulations. Observing its artifice, the viewer is left to speculate with Emilia (Fay Compton) that “some eternal villain” (IV.ii.130) has “devised this slander” (133). By removing Iago's soliloquies, Welles enacts his disavowal (“Fie, there is no such man! It is impossible” [134]) and Iago becomes diffuse but pervasive. The viewer cannot tell whether the black and white grid of this world is Iago's invention or the features of a racialized world that he violently exploits. With Welles's *Othello*, viewers develop a familiarity with Iago that cannot be disentangled from their complicity with his racist deceptions.

Welles is notably evasive about race in his *Othello*. Cutting out many of Iago's lines, Welles excludes from the film the play's most vicious proclamations of racial animus, and in addition to displacing Iago to the film's style, Welles further conceals the character behind his own bricolage. The jagged editing shows Welles's hand in cutting and rearranging Shakespeare's text as well

as his responses to production contingencies¹³. Strapped for funding, Welles made the film in pieces, shooting over four years across several countries, and the film's makeshift quality reveals this history. Welles also had to dub in the dialogue, and in the film, he voices both Othello and Roderigo. These two stylistic features, the disjointed editing and multiple voice acting, indicate not only Welles's hand in shaping the film but also Iago's manipulation of the other characters. Welles differentiates Roderigo (Robert Coote) from Othello by giving the former a mawkish voice and thus entangles fantasies of black masculinity with anxieties about white emasculation. The connection between the two characters is also established visually. When Iago murders Roderigo in the bathhouse, the film switches to a disoriented first-person point of view whose overlapping dissolves reprise the first-person sequence of Othello's seizure. These sequences align the viewers with the characters such that the effects of Welles's technique on the viewer coincide with those of Iago's on the characters. The complicity that Shakespeare's soliloquizers sometimes seek with their audience is in Welles's film achieved through its bricolage, the film's soliloquized style, which, unlike the theatrical soliloquy, does not relent until the drama has come to an end. This may be Othello's story, but it is Iago's film.

As an actor, Welles upholds the film's black and white world through his use of blackface. "[O]ne of the legacies of blackface", Ayanna Thompson writes, "is an enduring sense that performing blackness is a white endeavor, and that virtuosity in performance can be tied to cross-racial impersonation" (Thompson 2021, 53-54)¹⁴. As Thompson notes, Laurence Olivier was proud of his full-body minstrelsy in Stuart Burge's *Othello* (1965) and wanted his audience to see the simulated blackness as authentic (62). Welles's blackface is more of a tan, and the divergence in practice reflects a different investment in blackness. Welles had put on blackface

¹³ Marguerite Rippey notes that "[e]arly stage and screen scripts demonstrate that Welles' technique of adaptation consisted of literally cutting and pasting parts of the text to develop a script (Lilly, Box 5, folder 32)" (Rippey 2013, 16).

¹⁴ See Thompson 2011 for a consideration of contemporary critical and directorial discussions on the use of blackface in performing *Othello*.

before. In 1936, when Welles put on his “Voodoo” *Macbeth*, Maurice Ellis, who was playing Macduff, fell ill, so Welles took on the role in blackface. Later, Welles would boast that nobody knew that it was in fact he and not a black actor on the stage¹⁵. Unlike Olivier, Welles did not want his audience to see that he had simulated blackness but wanted them not to see him at all. By assuming blackness, Welles performed the social withdrawal that he found so troubling in Hal, and the investment that Welles has in blackness is once again aligned with Iago’s, a misdirection that allows the performer to disappear from the scene of dissimulation. In *Othello*, Welles is recognizable as Orson Welles in blackface, and while the racial prosthetic connotes a desire for authenticity, it also collaborates with the film’s visual style to have his body vanish into a darkness and become a pure voice free from the vicissitudes of racial embodiment.

The final soliloquy of the film begins with Othello’s shadow projected on a wall, and the screen fades to black as he begins to speak. The black screen functions as the filmic prosthetic that simultaneously racializes Welles’s performance and removes him from the frame. After a few lines, Welles’s head emerges from the right, and his face and torso come in and out of sight as he wades his way through the darkness towards Desdemona’s window on the other side of the frame. The interests of the actor and the role are at odds here. While Welles performs his disappearing act, Othello struggles to maintain his existence on the screen. As he is consumed by Iago’s suggestions, the film’s visual style begins to coincide with how Othello has come to view the world, and more importantly, Desdemona. When Othello opens the curtains to her

¹⁵ Marguerite Rippey suggests it might have been Jack Carter and not Maurice Ellis that Welles replaced. Rippey also raises doubts about Welles’s claim that the audience did not recognize him, given that as a famous radio actor, his voice would have been well-known. In Rippey’s view, Welles put on blackface out of a desire for fraternity: “Welles’s understanding of blackness was that it could render him part of the anonymous throng even when he was playing the leading role in *Macbeth* and despite the fact that, even following his own logic, his famous voice should have revealed him readily to most audiences. Part of his love of disguise, blackface allowed him to escape his role as white intellectual and enter into the realm of undifferentiated masculinity (at least in fantasy), as had his racial and sexual touring of Harlem with Jack Carter” (Rippey 2009, 77).

bed, Desdemona abruptly closes her eyes, and she remains the visual focus of the soliloquy. As in *Chimes at Midnight*, Desdemona's body serves as a counterpoint to the language; her chest heaves and her eyelids twitch as Othello contemplates her murder. Played by Suzanne Cloutier, this Desdemona glows in the darkness that Welles wraps around his body like a cloak. Sound, scene, and body come together in this filmed soliloquy to simulate a blackness that allows Welles to become a speaking shadow all the while upholding Desdemona as the whiteness imperiled by his darkness.

Richard Dyer has read the cinematic trope of the dark man and the glowing woman as the "dark desire for the light" (Dyer 2017, 139). In the interracial drama of Welles's *Othello*, "[d]ark desires are part of the story of whiteness, but as what the whiteness of whiteness has to struggle against" (28), and in Welles's *Othello*, the white actor becomes black by failing in this struggle. As Dyer elaborates, "the whiteness of white men resides in the tragic quality of their giving way to darkness and the heroism of their channelling or resisting it" (28). Othello's growing obsession with Desdemona dwindles his presence on screen as if it were his "dark desire" that is making him black. Welles stages the murder scene as one of failed enlightenment. As Othello lays his head beside Desdemona's, only a fragment of his forehead is visible, and when he looks out from the shadows as a pair of eyes, she calls out to him, not out of drowsiness but in defense. The call to dialogue summons Welles back into the light and brings his vanishing act to a close. It is then by silencing Desdemona that Othello claims a final isolation.

The premier social form in Welles is dialogue, and it is only by way of blackness that a performer elides with impunity the formal demands of this sociality. Welles draws analogous conclusions from Hal and Othello because for him sovereignty and blackness are exclusive as well as exclusionary. There is only one king or black man on screen. But the fate of blackness is not sovereignty¹⁶. In

¹⁶ Frank Wilderson argues that this analogy between exclusions within and from the social world is a ruse: "This attempt to position the Black in the world by way of analogy is not only a mystification, and often erasure, of Blackness's grammar of suffering (accumulation and fungibility or the status of being non-

Welles, blackness connotes the “social death” that Orlando Patterson saw as the constitutive feature of slavery. As Patterson elaborates, it is less so that the slave labors when the master does not or that the master has sexual relations while the slave does not but that, unlike the master, the slave has no claim to have her labor and relations formally recognized by the community in which she lives and labors (Patterson 1982, 6, 44). Othello’s drive towards isolation in Welles’s film is one towards social death, and in his final speech to the Venetians, Othello is a grey face floating in a black pool whose blackness threatens him with oblivion. The overhead shot is followed up by Othello’s low-angle point of view, which shows a group of blank-faced Venetians. Othello’s speech is a direct address, but the Venetians show no signs of hearing him and thus consign his speech to self-talk. It is less that Othello loses his power of speech than that he has been stripped of his right to dialogue. Othello’s plea is for a just history to which, Patterson notes, the socially dead have no claim (5, 79). This Othello does not kill himself. Instead, the Venetians shut an iron lid on him and Desdemona, as if physical and social death were one and the same.

The entombment finalizes Othello’s isolation, brings about his social death, and ends his sensory disorientation that the viewer had accessed through the film’s style. In Welles, social isolation warps the senses, be they of scale, color, or time. In his film *The Stranger* (1946), Welles plays a character who loses his sense of the time and mutters in front of a grandfather clock: “my sense of proportion is failing me these days” (Welles 1946). As in other Welles films, no one but the viewer hears this acknowledgement, along with its Shakespearean echo:

RICHARD

Music do I hear?

Ha, ha, keep time. How sour sweet music is

Human) but simultaneously also a provision for civil society, promising an enabling modality for Human ethical dilemmas. It is a mystification and an erasure because, whereas Masters may share the same fantasies as Slaves, and Slaves can speak as though they have the same interests as Masters, their grammars of suffering are irreconcilable” (Wilderson 2010, 37). Blackface may be its fabricated reconciliation.

When time is broke and no proportion kept.
 So is it in the music of men's lives;
 And here have I the daintiness of ear
 To check time broke in a disordered string,
 But for the concord of my state and time
 Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.
 I wasted time and now doth time waste me,
 (Shakespeare 2011, V.v.41-49)

Here is another character, entombed. Richard II's faults as ruler cannot be separated from his penchant for theater, and the excessive license he has taken in ruling by soliloquy, too personal and too aggrandizing, has trapped him in an eternal monologue heard by no one. The loss of proportions is the consequence of tyranny, the refusal to acknowledge the claims of others, or in a more early modern idiom, the illicit unification of the king's two bodies¹⁷. Imprisoned, the tyrant is stripped of the body politic but is not supplied an alternate social identity, and receiving no confirmation of his self from others, he begins to lose his grasp on reality.

The predicament of the sovereign is democratized in mid-century America where people are regularly deposed from their social roles¹⁸. Unlike the social deaths observed by Patterson, these

¹⁷ This is Lorna Hutson's reading of Kantorowicz and *Richard II*: "Between them, Hereford and Gaunt mock Richard's literalist political theology, his naive equation of his breath with God's, and his mouth with the word of the law" (Hutson 2009, 138). Hutson stresses that Kantorowicz's account distinguishes legal fiction from religious belief.

¹⁸ Kantorowicz recounts the genesis of his project as an encounter with the American incorporation of religious congregations: "One day I found in my mail an offprint from a liturgical periodical published by a Benedictine Abbey in the United States, which bore the publisher's imprint: *The Order of St. Benedict, Inc.* To a scholar coming from the European Continent and not trained in the refinements of Anglo-American legal thinking, nothing could have been more baffling than to find the abbreviation *Inc.*, customary with business and other corporations, attached to the venerable community founded by St. Benedict on the rock of Montecassino in the very year in which Justinian abolished the Platonic Academy in Athens. Upon my inquiry, Max Radin informed me that indeed the monastic congregations were incorporated in this country, that the same was true with the dioceses of the Roman Church, and that, for example,

losses in status are not absolute, and some are even reversible (Patterson 1982, 9, 38). As Erving Goffman enumerates:

One might consider the social processes of firing and laying-off; of resigning and being asked to resign; of farewell and departure; of deportation, excommunication, and going to jail; of defeat at games, contests, and wars; of being dropped from a circle of friends or an intimate social relationship; of corporate dissolution; of retirement in old age; and, lastly, of the deaths that heirs are interested in. (Goffman 1952, 463)

Examples range from the quick disposal of social identities propped up for the span of a polite conversation to the destruction of an identity that a person believed to be permanent, extending beyond their natural lives as their legacies¹⁹. Death is a final farewell and goodbye, a minor death. The viewer of a Welles film experiences a loss in status when it ends. As someone who cannot have her reactions be acknowledged by the film world, the viewer remains perilously close to the characters who experience a loss in status. The soliloquy and its stylistic correlative protect the viewers' status as privileged observers by granting them access to aspects of the film world unavailable to the other characters. Viewers of *Othello* become implicated in Iago's deception through the film's visual style, but they remain secure in their status as observers and are aligned with the blank-faced Venetians who do not respond to Othello's final speech. But in Welles's noir film, *Touch of Evil*, the viewer's isolation is open to abuse, and while the visual style still serves as a privileged line of communication with the viewer, it no longer has the integrity of a soliloquy. This film lies.

In *Touch of Evil*, Orson Welles plays Hank Quinlan, a corrupt cop who frames those he suspects of a crime, and when Miguel Vargas (Charlton Heston) tries to expose him, he faces resistance from the

the Archbishop of San Francisco could figure, in the language of the Law, as a 'Corporation sole'" (Kantorowicz 2016, xxxiii).

¹⁹ The death of the body natural is but a physical example of what is for Goffman a fundamentally social phenomenon, for he considers even the consolation of the afterlife to be that of status: "a dying person may be asked to broaden and empty his worldly loves so as to embrace the All-Father that is about to receive him" (Goffman 1952, 457).

other characters who have been responding to Quinlan's actions with varying degrees of complicity, ignorance, and willful disavowal. Robin Wood describes the film's effects to be "worrying" and "not entirely free of distaste" (Wood 2006, 188). Noting common themes and motifs, Wood compares the film to *Macbeth* but ultimately contrasts how the two works relate to the audience: "Shakespeare may make us feel that his *Macbeth* represents potentialities that exist in all of us, but he never sucks us into complicity with him, as Welles does with Quinlan – we are never invited to *condone* *Macbeth's* crimes" (188). *Touch of Evil* lays bare Quinlan's corruption as well as his animosity towards Mexicans but nonetheless affirms his "famous intuition" by revealing that Manolo Sanchez (Victor Millan) had planted the bomb; he "confessed" (Welles 1958). Proof is secondary in this world where the smell of a steamy secret is enough to discredit someone as an upstanding member of society. The viewer comes to participate in this practice of presumption as the film leaves ambiguous whether Susan Vargas (Janet Leigh) has been assaulted by a group of Mexican men whom the film presents in various menacing Dutch angles. But the truth of the matter is ultimately unimportant as the viewer becomes convinced that something awful has happened to Susan for having ventured too deep into the wrong side of the border.

Welles delivers all this quickly, and the viewer is not given the time, like Miguel, to sit down and sift through the frames in search of planted evidence. At the end of the film, viewers are left less with a clear account of the details than with an uneasy feeling that the film has done them wrong. There is then a formal tension to Welles's films. The frames are rigorously composed, and close attention yields additional features of their design, but his films are fast. Unlike Hitchcock whose stylistic clarity and perfect pacing seems to prosecute the plot, Welles's narrative befuddles the viewer like a con artist talking too quickly for any mark to fully comprehend the intentions behind his designs. That these designs are artistic is for Welles an abiding interest. The line between art and a con is thin. The viewer need not understand the plot to *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) to have been affected by it and is in no doubt that the gullible Irish American has been framed, one way or

another. The con is delicate but fatal, and the swift end to Welles's films that denies us knowledge of what we saw also robs us of our status as viewers.

At the end of a Welles film, viewers experience a loss of intimacy that the film had led them to believe would be lasting. The oft-remarked extravagance of Welles's films seems to promise perpetual conversation that persists even through soliloquies and would continue on after death. Falstaff is the emblem of this promise, who, when caught playing dead by Hal, declares: "Counterfeit? I lie, I am no counterfeit. To die is to be counterfeit" (Shakespeare 1987, V.iv.113-14). For Falstaff, death is the only true lie. All other lies are but a part of life, which holds together the multifarious and mutually contradictory presentations of self. But in turn, each self must perish at the end of each presentation, and the unease felt at the end of every social interaction is for Goffman a minor death. When we part with our friends, we are left alone, no longer the person we were with them. It is difficult to say goodbye well, to console our friends and ourselves of our immanent minor deaths. We may suspect a person too fluent in the language of goodbyes to be close to a con artist who never forgets that his intimacy with his marks is temporary and, in the wake of the con, eagerly abandons them to their new status as losers. Here, Orson Welles diverges from the charlatans that he explored. The unease that viewers feel at the end of a Welles film marks the difficulty that he has in taking leave of his viewers. At their end, Welles's films return to their beginnings, and while these returns leave the viewer unsure where they stand with the film, they help avoid the finality of a farewell.

A few months before his death, Welles enclosed in a birthday message to Joseph Cotton a couplet from a Shakespeare sonnet. Cotton did not attend Welles's memorial service, saying that Welles would not have wanted such a gathering. Instead, Cotton sent as a message the couplet that he had received from Welles: "But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restored and sorrows end" (Cotton 2000, 216-17). Helen Vendler has mapped the complicated temporal structure of this sonnet with great clarity (Vendler 1997, 165-68), and *Sonnet 30* may present the design of Welles's films, which recall with renewed remorse "many a

vanished sight" (Shakespeare 2002, *Sonnet 30*, 8). The closing couplet, however, cannot be found in a Welles film, which refuses to deliver "thee (dear friend)" (13) a Rosebud that would bring the tortured ruminations to an end. The more Wellesian closure may come from *Othello*: "But I do love thee! and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (Shakespeare 2006, III.iii.92-93). Welles's men cannot help themselves, and nobody saves them. To survive these men, one must leave them. That is what Susan Alexander does, as does Hal. The last friendly words that Hal says to Falstaff are a greeting: "Good night" (Welles 1965). The knight smiles and waves, for he hears, "See you soon". The scene is reprised with Doll Tearsheet when the knight heads to Westminster: "When wilt thou leave fighting o' days and foining o' nights, and begin to patch up thy old body for heaven?" (Welles 1965). Leaning weakly in the doorway, her hand limp at her side, Doll appears to be in mourning, aware in advance that Falstaff will soon be mortified by Hal's betrayal. But Falstaff brushes her off and heads to his banishment: "Peace, Doll. Do not speak like a death's head. Do not bid me remember mine end" (Welles 1965). The conversation must continue, and Falstaff refuses to die the minor death at the end of every social interaction. If Falstaff cannot see that Hal will betray him, it is because he never learned how to say goodbye.

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“You Dare to Compare Yourself to Shakespeare?”: Philip Roth, American Bard

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Philip Roth’s writing has been consistently inspired and influenced by Shakespeare’s theater on multiple levels. This essay aims to investigate Roth’s Shakespearean imagination by tracing the evolution of characters, themes, symbolism, and motifs derived from the Bard’s plays, focusing in particular on *Operation Shylock* and *Sabbath’s Theater*. Throughout his career, Roth’s negotiations with Shakespeare were often antagonistic and competitive, but, as time passed, allusions to the Bard in his novels became more accurate, while Roth’s writing took on a strong performative vein. In his most accomplished works, Roth ‘invented’ (or reinvented) the character of “the author” – the writer, the playwright, the artist – and set a pseudo-autobiographic alter-ego on the stage of contemporary America. For a writer who continually performed the character of “the author” in his texts as well as outside (in interviews, essays etc.), it is only natural to model his public persona on the English playwright, eventually impersonating the role of “American bard”.

Keywords: Philip Roth, Bard, American literature, Shylock, Falstaff

I am a theater and nothing more than a theater.
Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*

Perhaps no contemporary American novelist has been more consistently inspired by Shakespeare than Philip Roth. Throughout his long and prolific career, Roth’s writing has been affected by theater – especially Shakespeare’s – on multiple levels. The purpose of this essay is to investigate Roth’s Shakespearean imagination by tracing the evolution of characters, themes, symbolism, and motifs derived from Shakespeare’s plays, but also examining what Catherine Morley has recently defined as Roth’s “bardic

proclivities”, his self-conscious attempts to “relocat[e] ‘the Bard’ temporally and geographically, effectively bringing him to the United States” (Morley 2016, 115). Roth himself ironically dramatized the surprise and irritation of some critics at his Shakespearean ‘impersonations’ in his 1990 novel, *Deception*. When the protagonist, an adulterous novelist significantly called Philip, is asked by one of his mistresses why he always depicts women as shrews in his books, the writer mentions Shakespeare, but his interlocutrix angrily erupts: “You dare to compare yourself to Shakespeare?”¹ (Roth 2008, 525)². Given the novel’s title and the fact that we are led to read this passage as a mock-interview staged by one of Philip’s lovers, one can infer that Roth the performer/narrator is rehearsing the role of the “American bard” for the benefit of multiple audiences: his mistress (in the book’s plot), his readers (in the text’s fictional universe as well as in real life) and his critics (metafictionally).

After a survey of Shakespeare’s presence in Roth’s early life and works, I will tackle at length two of his most successful novels with complex Shakespearean reverberations – *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) and *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995) – that have since become cornerstones of contemporary American fiction. As a matter of fact, the extent of Shakespeare’s influence on Roth’s writing escalates throughout the years: from the Sixties to the Eighties, occasional references to the Bard pop up quite at random, when besides writing novels, short stories, essays, and reviews, Roth is also busy writing plays for theater and television, adapting

¹ Curiously enough, it seems that at least on another occasion, at the very beginning of his career, Roth was unfavorably compared to Shakespeare, as he told his biographer Blake Bailey. After Roth’s talk at the 1960’s *Esquire* symposium in San Francisco, “some poor woman [in the audience] got up and in a quivering voice asked us some question about ‘the bard of Stratford’, which I understood to be an unflattering comparison between that gentleman’s talents and the combined talents of the three of us on the stage” (Bailey 2021, 204). Given that the other speakers were Ralph Ellison and John Cheever, at least he was in good company.

² The works of Philip Roth have been collected in a ten-volume edition published by the Library of America between 2005 and 2017. All the volumes are edited by Ross Miller, except the last one, edited by Roth himself.

some of his own works for the screen. In this period, Shakespeare's influence is particularly strong in Roth's comic works, either as a satirical comment on contemporary politics, or as a self-encouragement to mischievous and unrestrained performances. During the Eighties, when Roth's fiction starts to get substantial critical appreciation all over the world, mentions of Shakespeare become more frequent and accurate, while Roth's writing takes on a strong 'theatrical' vein, also thanks to the author's closeness to actress Claire Bloom. Then, in the Nineties, Roth's metafictional debt toward Shakespeare's theater reaches its peak, manifesting itself in the very titles of his novels and, most importantly, in the performative strain of his most accomplished fiction. Finally, at the turn of the millennium, Roth's ongoing dialogue with Shakespeare shifts from single characters and plays to the Bard's representative figure, when he publicly assumes the Whitmanian role of "American bard".

1. Shakespeare's Theater in Roth's Early Life and Works

According to his friend Benjamin Taylor, in his old age Roth "hated the stage and would, like Cromwell, have shut down all theaters if he could" (Taylor 2020, 91). This is the umpteenth exaggeration by an artist keen to provoke as well as entertain his audience, not only in his novels but also in essays and interviews. Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's most famous alter-ego, says of himself in *The Counterlife*:

All I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self [...]. What I have instead is a variety of impersonations I can do, and not only of myself – a troupe of players that I have internalized, a permanent company of actors that I can call upon when a self is required, an ever-evolving stock of pieces and parts that forms my repertoire. [...] I am a theater and nothing more than a theater. (Roth 2008, 300-1)

Theater was always a vital source of reference to Roth because, as he stated in an interview, "it's a part of literature, and a part of literature I know something about" (Lawson 2007). He was always attentive to the effect a performance might have on the audience:

Taylor himself revealed that though the aged writer no longer cared to go to the theater, he was amused by “the theater chronicles” (Taylor 2020, 92), that is, his friend’s anecdotal tales about the unusual behavior of the audience during performances he attended.

In fact, Roth’s engagement with theater goes back to his college years³; as a young student, he “liked jumping around on the stage”, as he himself ironically revealed in an interview released in 2007, when he was seventy-four:

Scandalously, I played the shepherd in *Oedipus Rex*, the one who knows that the baby was found on the lake with its ankles tied together. I played that character as a very old man – I played it as older even than I am now, and I still don’t walk that way. Then I played in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, I was the son Happy, and then another half-dozen plays. (Lawson 2007)

He also liked to perform what he called “Fake Shakespeare” with Nela Wagman, the eleven-year-old daughter of a friend, “lurching around the room like Richard III and speaking in pseudo-Elizabethan diction” (Bailey 2021, 343). Such performative skills are a trademark of Roth’s public persona, and they became ever more evident as time passed and his public appearances increased along with his growing reputation. According to Joyce Carol Oates, he eventually “evolved into a performance-artist in prose”, and in the

³ The January 1964 issue of *Playboy* features a short story by Philip Roth titled “An Actor’s Life for Me”, focused on a young married couple’s dreams of becoming a playwright and an actress (Roth 1964). David Brauner notes that “[t]he story was omitted from the supposedly comprehensive bibliography of Roth’s works included in Hermione Lee’s 1982 monograph and there is no discussion of it [...] in any published criticism on Roth”, as if the author somehow wanted to repudiate it (Brauner 2016b, 104). David Kepesh’s juvenile “penchant for mimicry” in *The Professor of Desire* (1977) leads him to aspire to a career in the theater, and during his college years he is awarded leading roles in university productions of diverse plays, appearing also in a musical comedy where he sang and danced. Years later, however, he feels humiliated by his earlier stage performances that cause him feelings of shame, embarrassment, and self-disgust. For an analysis of acting as a metaphor for sexual performance, see Brauner 2016a.

course of his career, he "perfected his 'rants' – like a stand-up comedian whose very intensity captivates his audience" (Beckerman 2018). Morley describes Roth as "a born performer" who arrived at his eightieth birthday party "[l]ed in by a marching band from Weequahic High School [...] to the sound of drums and brass" (Morley 2016, 109).

As a boy, Roth was probably familiar with the "bowdlerized edition of Shakespeare that [his father] Herman had won as a sales prize for Met Life" (Bailey 2021, 27). When he was at college, he found himself studying among "the unrebelling sons and daughters of status-quo America at the dawn of the Eisenhower era", and was naturally drawn to courses that "typified everything that the marketplace deemed worthless", such as "Literary Criticism, Modern Thought, Advanced Shakespeare, and Aesthetics" (Roth 2008, 355). It wasn't long before he found in Shakespeare a bitter admonition on contemporary political events; in his autobiography, he recounts that the day after Adlai Stevenson lost the presidential elections, he stood in class and, "under the pretext of explicating a passage about the mob in *Coriolanus*, excoriated the American public (and, by implication, the Bucknell student body, which had solidly favored Eisenhower) for having chosen a war hero over an intellectual statesman" (356). The tendency to read Shakespeare as a commentary on "the psychological mechanisms that lead a nation to abandon its ideals and even its self-interest" (Greenblatt 2018, 1-2) remained a constant in Roth's life. In 2018, a few months before passing away, the novelist wrote an enthusiastic blurb for Stephen Greenblatt's book on Shakespeare and politics⁴: Roth's endorsement, published on the back cover of the book's first American edition, described the volume as a "brilliant, beautifully organized, exceedingly

⁴ In 2018, Roth told Charles McGrath that after having retired from writing fiction he was reading "a heterogeneous collection of books", among them "Greenblatt's book about 'how Shakespeare became Shakespeare', *Will in the World*" (McGrath 2018). In 2013, Greenblatt had accepted the Emerson-Thoreau Medal awarded to Philip Roth by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on his behalf.

readable study of Shakespeare's tyrants and their tyrannies" that "manages to elucidate obliquely our own desperate [in Shakespeare's words] 'general woe'" (Greenblatt 2018). One should not forget that Roth also had a scholarly knowledge of theater and that at the beginning of his career he wrote vitriolic reviews of contemporary drama for *The New York Review of Books*⁵.

Besides having been a juvenile actor, a natural performer, and an ardent reader and commentator of plays, for a brief period in the Sixties, after the publication of his first full-length novel, *Letting Go*, Roth also pondered a career as a playwright, though, as he confessed to Taylor decades later, he considered himself "the worst playwright in American history" (Taylor 2020, 92). Nonetheless, from the late Fifties to the Nineties he wrote a number of plays, teleplays, and movie scenarios – some of them completed, others left unfinished after the first drafts and later abandoned – that are now collected in the Philip Roth Papers section at the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.⁶ The

⁵ According to Bailey, "he wrote two long reviews in nine months that were memorable for their provocative disregard of whatever passed for political correctness in those days" (Bailey 2021, 267). Among Roth's targets were James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*, LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*, and Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice*.

⁶ The list of Roth's ventures in drama as it appears on the web catalogue of the Library of Congress includes: "A Coffin in Egypt" (television play, 1959), "Grimes Case" (movie scenario, 1963), "The Fishwife" (one-act play, 1964), "Buried Again" (one-act play, 1964), "A Woman in the House" (television series, with Alfred Alvarez, undated), "Greed, or the Egomaniacs" (play, undated), "The Pregnant Wife" (television play, undated), "The Penetrator" (unproduced movie, undated), a revised version of an English translation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1969, 1981), and the dramatization of his own novels *The Ghost Writer* and *The Prague Orgy*. For an analysis of some of these works, see Witcombe 2014. In his biography, Bailey mentions at least another aborted play with an ominously Shakespearean title, "1957: The Taming of the Id". Roth began writing it shortly after the publication of *Letting Go*, and a revised version of it, titled "The Nice Jewish Boy", was publicly read at the American Place Theatre on 23 June 1965: "The director was Gene Saks, and the two lead parts were read by promising off-Broadway actors, Dustin Hoffman and Melinda Dillon", though, as Bailey reports, "it was no good". After this failure Roth "spent a year or so vaguely considering another rewrite before deciding that he disliked the whole collaborative aspect of theater" (Bailey 2021, 229).

earliest one, a television play titled "A Coffin in Egypt", dates back to 1959 and is about a Jewish collaborator in the Vilna Ghetto of 1941, while the most accomplished (and interesting) one – a one-act play written in 1964 and called "Buried Again" – deals with a Jewish salesman who dies in middle-age and is judged by "a panel of celestial judges who offer him choices pertaining to reincarnation, but he insists on maintaining many of the characteristics of his previous life – in particular, his Jewish identity" (Witcombe 2014, 116).

References to theater and to Shakespeare's plays and characters are frequent in Roth's early novels, but they mostly appear as seemingly casual remarks and occasional allusions. Characters in *Letting Go* (1962) discuss at length at dinner how much easier it is to identify with Shakespearean heroines – Miranda, Ophelia, Desdemona – than with male characters like Hamlet and Othello, while the protagonist of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) is sarcastic about the theatrics going on in his own family and complains to his psychoanalyst: "[A]ctually what we are playing in that house is some farce version of *King Lear*, with me in the role of Cordelia!" (Roth 2005, 362). In his 1989 preface to the thirtieth anniversary edition of his debut book, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959), Roth asks himself: "What did the tiresome tension between parents and children in lower-middle-class Jewish Newark – arguments about *shiksas* and shrimp cocktail, about going to synagogue and being good – have to do with Shakespeare [...]?" (Roth 1989). The implicit answer is "not much", at least until Roth realized that "the best of English prose and poetry" he had read at college "could be rooted in anything close to him". At some point in the Sixties, he found out that Shakespeare and the "literature of the kind T. S. Eliot praised" could help him enter "a world of intellectual consequence precisely by moving [him] beyond the unsubtle locutions and coarse simplifications of [...] a tiny provincial enclosure where there was no longer room for the likes of him" (Roth 1989). As it happened, Shakespeare initially played a

maieutic role for Roth⁷ – the Bard of Stratford was his guide into transgression and indiscretion, a master of mischief who authorized the young ambitious writer to dare and exaggerate, to challenge the literary establishment and go rogue in his works, though this could imply a renunciation of the early fame he had achieved with his first book. Incidentally, this matches Greenblatt's idea that Shakespeare's "enduring and global success [...] is due in part to his willingness to let go of it, a willingness perhaps conveyed by titles like *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *What You Will* (the subtitle of *Twelfth Night*), and *All's Well That Ends Well*" (Greenblatt 2016, 394). We could say that Roth's "art of immaturity", as well as his brazen habit of telling the "rude truth"⁸ through coarse impersonations, satirical performances, and ludicrous travesties, owe much to Shakespeare's theater.

This is immediately evident in *Our Gang* (1971), Roth's satirical novel about Richard Nixon, composed exclusively of dialogues and monologues; here, the author unleashes all his Shakespearean verve to chastise and mock the politician's convoluted speeches, exposing his devious intentions and challenging Nixon's public position on the Vietnam War. In the fourth chapter – subtitled "The Famous 'Something Is Rotten in the State of Denmark' Speech" – Nixon's alter-ego Trick E. Dixon addresses the nation about "the liberation from Danish dominion of a landmark that has been sacred for centuries to English-speaking peoples around the world, and particularly so to Americans":

I am speaking of the liberation of the town of Elsinore, the home of the fortress popularly known to tourists as "Hamlet's Castle". After centuries of occupation and touristic exploitation by the Danes, the

⁷ In a half-serious essay titled "Philip Roth's Final Hours" (written when Roth was still alive), Timothy Parrish imagined the author rereading *Portnoy's Complaint* and "laughing over every page": "How did he think of that? He looked down upon his nakedness. How did we think of that?! (Shakespeare was the answer, but he was too entranced to remember)" (Parrish 2016, 71).

⁸ *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* is the title of a seminal book by Ross Posnock, who analyzed, among other things, the deep connection between Roth's writing and the Anglo-American literary tradition (Posnock 2006).

town and the castle, which owe their fame entirely to William Shakespeare, the greatest writer of English in all recorded history, are occupied tonight by American soldiers, speaking the tongue of the immortal bard. (Roth 2005, 529)

It appears that "Shakespeare is employed by Tricky Dixon to sophisticatedly draw on the common cultural history of all English-speaking peoples", relying "on the inability of the American public to sort out fictional and factual elements of this cultural memory" (Kinzel 2013, 21-22). Roth does not just allude to *Hamlet*, but intertextually plays with the entire Shakespearean corpus, so that, when Tricky informs the American citizens that "the ground on duty at Elsinore was so taken by surprise that when roused from his bed by a knocking at the gate, he came to the door in his pajamas and opened it so wide that our brave Marines were able to overrun and secure the grounds in a matter of minutes" (Roth 2005, 529), the reader immediately recognizes echoes of *Macbeth's* porter scene.

Clearly enough, the American invasion of Elsinore serves as a bitter comment on the incursion of American troops into Vietnam (especially if we consider Tricky's comments about Denmark's "tenth-rate military power" as compared to America's), but Roth also intends it as a literary operation of 'colonization', complete with threats of a likewise literary retaliation:

[I]f the Danish Army should attempt to harass or dislodge our Marines in any way whatsoever from "Hamlet's Castle", it would be interpreted by Americans of all walks of life, professors and poets as well as housewives and hardhats, as a direct affront to our national heritage. I would have no choice but to respond in kind by retaliating against the statue of Hans Christian Andersen in Copenhagen with the largest air strike ever called upon a European city. [...] [S]hould the state of Denmark, now or in the future, attempt to occupy Mark Twain's Missouri, or the wonderful old South of *Gone with the Wind* [...], I would no more hesitate to send in the Marines to free Hannibal and Atlanta and Richmond and Jackson and St. Louis, than I did tonight to free Elsinore. (Roth 2005, 530)

Besides rendering the militaristic and patriotic rhetoric used by Nixon into a sophistic and rather comical speech, the idea of “a detachment of one thousand brave American Marines” engaged in a mission to ‘liberate’ Shakespeare’s literary setting from the “foreign invaders” (529-30) can also be read as a metaphor for Roth’s powerful appropriation of Shakespeare’s legacy; we could say that his systematic appropriation, ‘Americanization’, and ultimately reinvention of Shakespeare’s theater began with this very novel, where the English Bard is used as a justification for American imperialism and Hamlet’s famous lines are turned into a political slogan.

Roth’s following novella, *The Breast* (1972), tackles the performative aspect of Shakespearean plays through the *topos* of transformation, mainly derived from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and inspired by Kafka’s renowned novella, but also largely employed in Shakespeare’s theater. Instead of being transformed into an ass, like Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, comparative literature professor David Kepesh finds himself changed into a giant breast; at the hospital, while the doctors keep wondering about his absurd predicament, Kepesh spends hours discussing Shakespeare with his partner, Claire, and listening to recordings of plays, especially Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* and *Othello*, Paul Scofield’s *Lear*, and the Old Vic’s production of *Macbeth*. Kepesh does not just listen to the plays, as he states in the novel:

In the beginning I used to try to amuse myself when I was alone in the evenings by imitating Olivier. I worked with my records during the day to memorize the famous soliloquies, and then I performed for myself at night, trying to approximate his distinctive delivery. After some weeks it seemed to me that I had really rather mastered his *Othello*, and one night, after Claire had left, I did the death-scene speech with such plaintive passion that I thought I could have moved an audience to tears. (Roth 2005, 637)

If in *Our Gang* Roth learns the Shakespearean art of political satire and linguistic exploitation, in *The Breast* Shakespeare’s theater offers him a lesson in performance and impersonation; like his

author, Kepesh studied Shakespeare as a young man, but having discovered after his "endocrinopathic catastrophe" that his own life "is not tragedy any more than it is farce" (637), he uses the Bard's works to train his memory and diction, listens to great actors in order to refine his delivery, and learns to wear the mask of one Shakespearean character after another.

Kepesh's reference to his partner, Claire, in connection with acting – "She is helping me with my Shakespeare studies" (636) – may sound ominous in retrospect. As a matter of fact, Roth's interest in theater went into high gear in the mid-Seventies, when he began dating English actress Claire Bloom, who was to become his wife in 1990; their marriage, however, would last only five years (mostly spent in divorce litigation). In London, "Roth rediscovered the joy of going to the theater, which he'd lost entirely in the States. He prepared for Royal Shakespeare productions by rereading a given play the afternoon of its performance, so he could have it 'right in [his] head' while he watched" (Bailey 2021, 432). From 1977 on, Roth wrote a number of TV dramas with roles for her partner, including a modernization of David Margarshack's translation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. In her autobiography, Claire Bloom reveals that in 1981 (the year *Zuckerman Unbound* was published), she devised "with Philip's help [...] several one-woman performances of Shakespeare, initially studies of Viola, Volumnia, Katherine of Aragon, and Juliet"; later on, the two of them concocted a program "even more ambitious: two further Shakespeare presentations, *Sisters and Daughters* and *Women in Love*", where she played the roles of "Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Imogen, Titania, Rosalind, and Isabella" (Bloom 1996, 199).

In the mid-Eighties, Roth adapted a play by Chekhov, *The Pregnant Wife*, for television, along with two of his own novels, *The Ghost Writer* and *The Prague Orgy* (though the latter remained unproduced). Finally, in 1994, in what was probably Roth's last venture into drama, he tried without success to acquire the rights to *Journey into the Whirlwind*, the first part of a two-volume memoir by the late Eugenia Ginzburg, a Russian author who suffered

eighteen-year imprisonment in Soviet penal camps⁹. In the meantime, Shakespeare's theater had already migrated from the stage and the TV screen to the pages of his novels: after the *Zuckerman Bound* tetralogy (1979-85, where he created his most famous alter-ego, who also became the protagonist of *The Counterlife*), and a novel, *Deception* (1990), composed entirely of dialogues between an American writer named Philip and his various mistresses, in 1993 Roth published his first truly Shakespearean novel: *Operation Shylock*; the following year saw him feverishly working on a novel, *Sabbath's Theater*, that would reveal all his bardic furor and be considered by most critics, and by himself as well, his true masterpiece.

2. Roth's Shakespearean Novels: *Operation Shylock and Sabbath's Theater*

Mark Shechner was among the first critics to suggest that *The Counterlife's* division into five acts "may be Roth's way of hinting that Shakespeare, not Swift, is its patron saint" (Shechner 1989, 220). Finally, in his 1993 review of *Operation Shylock*, Harold Bloom highlighted the close relationship between Roth's writing and Shakespeare's theater – a connection that goes far beyond the mention of *The Merchant of Venice's* Jewish character in the title (Bloom 1993). More recently, in *The American Canon*, Bloom argued that "[i]n Shakespearean terms, Roth writes comedy or tragicomedy, in the mode of the Problem Plays: *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*" (Bloom 2019, 394). In fact, what David Scott Kastan, the editor of the Arden edition of *1 Henry IV*, wrote about Shakespeare's history plays applies to Roth's novels of the Nineties as well: "Comedy here isn't subordinated to

⁹ Confident that Ginzburg's "powerful and moving story" had all the elements of a drama for the screen, Roth wanted to adapt it into a film for British television, because he believed Ginzburg was "to the Russian terror what Anne Frank was to the Holocaust, as a witness and writer". When Mondadori, who owned the television rights, refused the writer's offer and decided, against the wishes of Ginzburg's son and heir, to sell the rights to a Hollywood scriptwriter, Roth withdrew from the project and abandoned drama forever (Bedell Smith 1984).

history, nor does it compete with history. Rather, comedy is revealed to be part of the very same fabric, exposing the exclusions and biases in our usual definitions of history" (Kastan 2002, 16); works like *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000), like Shakespeare's history plays, can be understood "in two senses, from above, so to speak, or from below", depending on whether the reader/audience "values the polished and composed over the boisterous and robust", or, "like those that filled the playhouse yard", demands "something more immediately engaging, energetic and various" (Kastan 2002, 35). No wonder that Roth's most accomplished works have been greatly appreciated by scholars and literary critics, but also acclaimed by the general public, given that they lend themselves to a number of readings.

During the celebration of Roth's eightieth birthday, Hermione Lee chose as a topic for her speech¹⁰ what she deemed "a central theme in Roth's work", namely, "How often, how dramatically, and how usefully, Roth invokes Shakespeare in his comic tragedies of feeling it as a man" (Lethem et al. 2014, 18). Lee tracks down many Shakespearean features in Roth's oeuvre:

Roth hears and responds in Shakespeare to the extreme conjunctions of plain, simple, demotic speech and high rhetoric, the power and audacity of original language, the bursting out inside tragedy of wild grotesquery and buffoonery, the leaps of imagination between violence and pathos, tenderness and savagery, the full-blooded erotics, the sense of mortality, and the questioning of what it means to be human. (Lethem et al. 2014, 21)

However, Shakespeare's theater also inspires Roth in subtler, metafictional ways. For instance, the Shakespearean idea that we

¹⁰ The speech was delivered during the ceremony organized by the Philip Roth Society in conjunction with the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee in the Newark Museum's Billy Johnson Auditorium in Newark, New Jersey, on 19 March 2013. The contributions were collected and published in a volume edited by Jonathan Lethem, issued by the Library of America in 2014 and titled *Philip Roth at 80: A Celebration* (Lethem et al. 2014).

are all characters performing on the great stage of human existence, subject to the antics of a mischievous puppeteer, and bound to interpret the role assigned to us, is the core of both *Operation Shylock* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Reflecting on Shakespeare's plays, Greenblatt mentions the "strange sense that his characters and plots seized upon him as much as he seized upon them" (Greenblatt 2016, 394). Roth himself felt something similar about his two novels, as he confessed in an interview: "You know, you find the character, and the character dictates the book, [...] his potential as a person, his life's work, his passions, his hatreds – if you get the right combination, you're on fire, you're on fire, and I felt on fire with *Sabbath's Theater*" (Sykes 2011).

In *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, Roth once again blends fiction and autobiography to reflect on the difficult cohabitation of Jews and Muslims in the occupied Palestinian territories, a theme he had already tackled in the second section of *The Counterlife*. Here, however, the positions of all parties are presented through a cacophony of voices – assertive, hostile, powerful, troublesome, hilarious, authoritative, recitative – uttered by a group of characters determined to perform their roles to the very end, endlessly chatting and arguing, polemicizing and bickering in an ongoing dialogical counterpoint. Ironically, a character talks extensively about *loshon hora*, or "evil speech", "the laws that forbid Jews' making derogatory or damaging remarks about their fellow Jews, even if they are true" (Roth 2010, 306). In fact, the choice of a proper "voice" becomes an historical and typical Jewish issue in the novel:

Part of the Jewish problem is that they never know what voice to speak in. Refined? Rabbinical? Hysterical? Ironical? Part of the Jewish problem is that the voice is too loud. Too insistent. Too aggressive. No matter what he says or how he says it, it's inappropriate. (Roth 2010, 305)

The novel's incendiary plot unfolds in Jerusalem over three days. It ignites when the protagonist and narrator, an American writer called Philip Roth, becomes aware of a mysterious lookalike

who goes around Jerusalem posing as him; he impulsively decides to go to Israel in order to confront his double, whom he names Pipik, a nickname Roth himself was given as a child. In an essay called "A Bit of Jewish Mischief" that appeared in *The New York Times* just before the publication of the novel, Roth presented *Operation Shylock* as a true narrative of facts (Roth 1993) – a "confession", as the subtitle indicates. In the novel's preface, the author explains that while he was in Jerusalem, he was contacted by an elderly secret agent, Louis Smilesburger, a Prospero-like figure who recruited him for "an intelligence-gathering operation for Israel's foreign intelligence service, the Mossad", to be conducted in Athens, code name "Operation Shylock" (Roth 2010, 7). Then, in the epilogue, the protagonist declares that he was instructed to delete his forty-odd-page-long final chapter called "Operation Shylock", where he had reported on the mission, because it contained "information too seriously detrimental" to the Israeli government (327). He also considered that "it might be *best* to present the book not as an autobiographical confession [...] but [...] as fiction, as a conscious dream contrivance" (330). So, in the final "Note to the Reader", the author admits that "This book is a work of fiction" and concludes by stating: "This confession is false" (367), though, given the novel's subtitle and what is stated in the epilogue, we cannot be sure whether the "confession" the author is referring to entails the whole book or just the final note. If this were not enough, Roth's provocative mischief reached beyond the pages of the novel and extended to interviews, during which he duped journalists and critics by swearing over and over again that what happened to him in the book was literally true.

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is the author of what could be defined as a violent and bloody 'Jewish mischief'¹¹:

¹¹ According to Harold Bloom, "[w]ithout Shylock, *The Merchant of Venice* would be one of the most inventive of romantic comedies; with him, it is a severe enigma" (Bloom 2002, 19-20). We could say something similar about *Operation Shylock*: without the character of Philip Roth, it would be an inventive, flamboyant spy story not to be taken seriously. With Roth's authorial alter-ego, however, it becomes a sort of a puzzle and acquires ominous historical meanings.

when Antonio cannot repay the Jew's loan of three thousand ducats, Shylock demands "in a merry sport" (Shakespeare 2011a, I.iii.141), as a "merry bond" (169), a pound of the man's flesh. His cruel mischief stems from his vindictiveness for the insults and abuses he received as a Jew, but the reasons he gives the doge for his merciless behavior – "I'll not answer that! / But say it is my humour. Is it answered?" (IV.i.41-42) – are not so dissimilar from the justifications Smilesburger offers in *Operation Shylock* for the violence Israelis perpetrate against Palestinians: "I will offer no stirring rhetoric when I am asked by the court to speak my last words but will tell my judges only this: 'I did what I did to you because I did what I did to you'" (Roth 2010, 323). Not coincidentally, the password the Mossad gives the narrator for his contact in Athens is the opening line of Shakespeare's Shylock: "Three thousand ducats" (Shakespeare 2011a, I.iii.1).

At some point in Roth's novel, the Jewish antiquarian Supposnik, a secret agent working for Israeli police who is also a scholar of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, gives the narrator a long lesson on Shylock's figure as a negative crystallization of the Jewish identity, linking it to America's stereotypical national personification:

[F]or four hundred years now, Jewish people have lived in the shadow of this Shylock. [...] To the audiences of the world Shylock is the embodiment of the Jew in the way that Uncle Sam embodies for them the spirit of the United States. Only, in Shylock's case, there is an overwhelming Shakespearean reality, a terrifying Shakespearean aliveness that your pasteboard Uncle Sam cannot begin to possess. (Roth 2010, 250-51)

Clearly, the elusive "Operation Shylock", together with the novel bearing the same title, should also be read as Roth's mission to rehabilitate the figure of the Jew in America – "a response to the potent myth of Shylock" (Bloom 1993) that aims at rewriting and

somehow correcting the Jew's character¹². Nevertheless, Roth's lookalike is convinced that Israeli violence against Palestinians will eventually be fatal for the Jewish people, causing a new Holocaust – just as, at the end of Shakespeare's play, Shylock's vindictive mischief backfires and ruins him. According to Pipik, "with its all-embracing Jewish totalism", Israel is "deforming and disfiguring Jews as only our anti-Semitic enemies once had the power to do" (Roth 2010, 71). Following this logic, Israelis wear Shylock's mask, willingly impersonating the role of the treacherous and petty Shakespearean Jew.

Yet, in the novel's final pages, Roth mischievously overturns the situation once again, when his homonym narrator confesses his admiration for the ruthless Mossad agent who recruited him:

Yes, Smilesburger is my kind of Jew, he is what "Jew" is to me, the best of it to me. Worldly negativity. Seductive verbosity. Intellectual vengery. The hatred. The lying. The distrust. The this-worldliness. The truthfulness. The intelligence. The malice. The comedy. The endurance. The acting. The injury. The impairment. (Roth 2010, 362)

Such a description goes directly back to the stereotypes about the Jewish identity attributed to Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock – the very stereotypes Roth's novel was intended to dispel and that his narrator ends up admiring and reinforcing. In this sense, Harold Bloom is right in stating that the narrator's real double is not so much Pipik as Shylock because he represents "the embodiment of the Jewish self-hatred of which Roth has so often been accused" (Shostak 2004, 145). In the fictional epilogue, the narrator declares to have excised from *Operation Shylock* the eponymous chapter, as if to argue that Jewish identity cannot be fixed or defined once and for all, being a composite set of experiences, opinions, voices, and viewpoints, often violently in conflict with one another. "[I]f all

¹² Debra Shostak writes that "Operation Shylock must in some sense be translatable as 'Operation Represent-the-Jew'", not only metaphorically but also literally, since Smilesburger asked the narrator "to represent Jews in a secret mission to uncover Jewish backers of the Palestinians" (Shostak 2004, 145).

individual presence is performance”, Debra Shostak argues, “then cultural identity, too, is moot, and postmodern ontology accomplishes whatever the Diaspora has failed to do with respect to ‘Jewishness’” (144-45). Similarly, no clear position on the Arab-Israeli conflict emerges from the novel since all characters engaged in the debate expose valid reasons for their own ideas – or, like Shylock and Smilesburger, they simply refuse to give a rational explanation for their own actions.

In his review, Bloom argued that “*Operation Shylock’s* ‘Philip Roth’ is a descendant of the greatest of fictive humorists, Sir John Falstaff, who is there to be insulted and to return more, and more wittily than he receives” (Bloom 1993). Of course, Bloom could not have known that Roth’s following novel, *Sabbath’s Theater*, would feature a truly Falstaffian protagonist, Mickey Sabbath, the Jewish puppeteer who perfectly embodies Roth’s Shakespearean art of ambiguities: at the same time victim and perpetrator, failed performer artist and brilliant confidence man, Sabbath is the very essence of Shakespearean (and Jewish) mischief; his life is a non-stop performance on diverse stages, from the theater off-off-Broadway where, at the beginning of his career, he staged a failed *King Lear*, to the subway car where as an old man he recites passages from Shakespeare’s tragedy while begging for alms.

In Sabbath’s voice, we find echoes of the greatest Western literature, from Rabelais’ Gargantua to Cervantes’ Quixote, from Chaucer’s Wife of Bath to Melville’s Ahab; nonetheless, the novel’s tutelary deity is undoubtedly Shakespeare. As an epigraph for the book, Roth chose a line of the aged Prospero in Act V of *The Tempest* – “Every third thought shall be my grave” (Shakespeare 2011b, V.i.312) – and the author himself described Sabbath as “a jokester like Hamlet, who winks at the genre of tragedy by cracking jokes as Sabbath winks at the genre of comedy by planning suicide” (Roth 2017, 397). According to Hermione Lee, Sabbath is “Prospero and Falstaff and Lear and the Fool all rolled into one” (Lethem et al. 2014, 18).

Undoubtedly, the two characters who better represent Sabbath’s tragicomic essence are Lear and Falstaff: besides raging and acting

irrationally, "[f]or part of the novel Sabbath is Lear on the brink of suicide blaming, as the old king does, the women in his life" (Scheckner 2005, 228). Surely enough, the old puppeteer considers himself "a man / More sinned against than sinning" (Shakespeare 1997, III.ii.59-60). However, Shakespeare's tragedy is more than a simple background to Roth's novel, since it helps Sabbath reframe his own life and cope with the ordeals of his youth. As an old man, he still broods over the "disastrous" version of *King Lear* he staged as a rookie director, with his ex-wife, Nikki, as Cordelia, and himself impersonating Lear. In the novel's long second chapter, titled "To Be or Not To Be", Sabbath gets on the subway (the "Suicide Express") "shaking his cup and reciting from *King Lear* the role he hadn't had occasion to perform since he'd been assailed by his own tomatoes", making fun of the cultural establishment by devising an imaginary catch-in phrase to promote his present performance: "Shakespeare in the subway, *Lear* for the masses – rich foundations love that stuff. Grants! Grants! Grants!" (Roth 2010, 562). This thought prompts a long flashback through Sabbath's past that goes on for about eighty pages, until the narration abruptly comes back to the present with six lines from Act IV of *King Lear*, starting with: "Pray, do not mock me / I am a very foolish fond old man" (641; Shakespeare 1997, IV.vii.59-60). Sabbath's recitation stops when he forgets a line, and then his reverie starts again, but his past experiences intermingle with Shakespeare's play creating an original mishmash of memories, desires, frustrations, and expectations in a pseudo-Shakespearean style and language:

Methinks what? Methinking methoughts shouldn't be hard. The mind is the perpetual motion machine. You're not ever free of anything. Your mind's in the hands of *everything*. The personal's an immensity, nuncle, a constellation of detritus that doth dwarf the Milky Way; it pilots thee as do the stars the blind Cupid's arrow o' wild geese that o'erwing the Drenka goose'd asshole as, atop thy cancerous Croatian, their coarse Canadian honk thou libid'nously mimics, inscribing 'pon her malignancy, with white ink, thy squandered chromosomal mark. (Roth 2010, 641-42)

Another two-page flashback follows, styled as an interior monologue juxtaposed with lines from the play, and Sabbath relives the most traumatic event in his childhood, the death of his brother Morty in World War II: "And Lear says it was a Tuesday in December 1944, I came home from school and saw some cars, I saw my father's truck [...]" (642). Finally, the narration returns to the present and we find out "what had caused him to go blank": a beautiful young girl sitting in the subway has been staring at him, and now she gives him the line: "'Methinks', she said, quite audibly now, 'I should know you, and know this man'" (646). The two go on reciting Shakespeare's lines until Sabbath, who all the while has been thinking about his ex-wife, mistakes the girl (who is impersonating Cordelia) for Nikki's daughter and asks her who her mother is. The spell is suddenly broken, and while the girl realizes her terrible mistake in talking to an equivocal stranger in the subway ("To have been moved by this mad monstrosity because he could quote Shakespeare!"), Sabbath declaims, "no less brokenly than Lear, 'You are the daughter of Nikki Kantarakis!'" (647), causing her to panic and flee. The section aptly ends with Sabbath quoting once again Lear as if addressing his readers – "Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish" (648; Shakespeare 1997, IV.vii.83-84) – while acknowledging through free indirect speech his own pathetic situation, not much different from Shakespeare's protagonist: "This was true. It was hard for him to believe that he was simulating any longer, though not impossible". This awareness is followed by another quotation from Lear's dying speech – "Thou'lt come no more; / Never, never, never, never" (Shakespeare 1997, V.iii.306-7) – and by a final remark about the inevitability (or is it the unacceptableness?) of old age: "Destroy the clock. Join the crowd" (Roth 2010, 648).

Despite the centrality of *King Lear* in Sabbath's life, he explicitly identifies himself with Falstaff. When a disgusted girl refuses to participate in an orgy and yells at him: "You're nothing but a fat old man!", he wittily replies: "So was Falstaff, kiddo. So was that huge hill of flesh Sir John Paunch, sweet creator of bombast!" (420),

and then quotes Shakespeare to describe himself: "That villainous, abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan" (Shakespeare 2002, II.iv.450-51). Peter Scheckner draws a convincing parallel between Shakespeare's fat knight and Roth's transgressive, bawdy puppeteer, "who instinctively understands the best way to overpower the mess of life is to choose more of it":

Roth creates the same role for Mickey Sabbath as Shakespeare did for Sir John: Mickey, a failed puppeteer, is the uninvited guest in a world he finds wholly antagonistic. Not princes, kings, or pretenders to the throne, but laws, sexual restraints, social protocol of every sort, and the political correctness of art and speech are what Sabbath most hates. [...] Conscious that in their respective worlds they were expected to die with honor or crawl with dignity to old age, both become wondrously disrespectful, profane, vulgare, and, given the constraints of old age and poor health, riotously sexual. This is how they will maintain their humanity. (Scheckner 2005, 221)

While characters in *Operation Shylock* play their mutually antagonistic roles on the historical stage of the middle eastern conflict, Roth describes Sabbath as "a multitudinous intensity of polarities, polarities piled shamelessly upon polarities to comprise not a company of players but this single existence, this theater of one" (Roth 2017, 397). Sabbath is a cunning illusionist, an experienced ventriloquist, and a malicious trickster who is also the author of his own character: we must not forget that, like Shakespeare and Roth, he is playwright and performer at the same time. The performative aspect of the novel – testified by Roth's (and Sabbath's) attention to the subtlest aspects of language, the grain of words, the inflection, the rhythm, even the accent of any spoken syllable – is also its most striking feature, and results from an evolution in the author's Shakespearean imagination. In fact, Sabbath's verbal explosions, as well as the refined literary and metafictional allusions buried in the novel's subplots, make him not only a descendant of the Falstaff of *Henry IV* but also, and somehow more importantly, the ideal twin of the insulted and humiliated (though hardly defeated) Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. As

Giorgio Melchiori remarked, Falstaff's comic play is "the culmination of Shakespeare's experiment with English as a living organism subject to infinite individual variations", "the most thorough exploitation of the potentialities of the English language in all its nuances" (Melchiori 2009, 4-5). In Roth's novel, Sabbath cannot stand the trite sentences, the specialized jargon, the catchphrases, and the clichés slavishly uttered by his wife Roseanna, so that his frequent tirades against "AA slogans and the way of talking she had picked up from AA meetings or from her abused women's group" (Roth 2010, 449) make him so mad that he could easily echo Falstaff's bitter complaint: "Have I lived to stand at the taunt of one that makes fritters of English?" (Shakespeare 2009, V.v.141-42).

Moreover, Sabbath's Croatian mistress, Drenka, is strongly reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Mistress Quickly*, "an arch-equivocator and manipulator of language with a 'genius for unintended and unperceived obscenities'" (Melchiori 2009, 8). Sabbath's repeated efforts "to make Drenka a decent narrator of her [sexual] adventures" (Roth 2010, 436) call to mind the comic scene of the Latin lesson in *Merry Wives*, where the parson's attempts to teach grammar to a boy are constantly "interspersed with the grotesque misconstructions and salacious equivocations of *Mistress Quickly*" (Melchiori 2009, 6):

[Drenka] was weakest at retaining idiomatic English but managed, right up to her death, to display a knack for turning the clichéd phrase, proverb, or platitude into an objet trouvé so entirely her own that Sabbath wouldn't have dreamed of intervening – indeed, some (such as "it takes two to tangle") he wound up adopting. (Roth 2010, 437)

Drenka emerges from Roth's novel as a true, if involuntary, artist of the word: her English is full of misplaced sentences, broken periods, and unintentional puns, but her malapropisms turn out to be comic witticisms quite worthy of the Elizabethan stage: "a roof under my head ... when the shithouse hit the fan ... you can't compare apples to apples ... the boy who cried 'Woof!'" (437). On

the contrary, Sabbath's wife "Roseanna looked to belong to another group of Shakespearean heroines entirely – to the saucy, robust, realistic circle of girls like Miranda and Rosalind" (448).

In the end, Roth's oeuvre can be read as a unique, long work in sixteen volumes: each plot reinterprets, refutes, and enhances the previous one, while the same characters seem to enter and exit their novels' stages like players between the acts of a drama, changing costumes and playing different parts, but always swearing "by the very fangs of malice", like Viola disguised as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, that they are not what they seem. No wonder that, in a metafictional twist at the end of *The Facts*, Zuckerman recommends his author to name his autobiography "*Goodbye Letting Go Being Good*" (Roth 2008, 437), playing on the titles of three novels by Roth. In a number of interviews, Roth explained that Sabbath's character stemmed from ideas he conceived while writing *Operation Shylock* and that Seymour "Swede" Levov, the morally irreproachable protagonist of his following novel, *American Pastoral*, originated from Roth's intolerance of Sabbath's "instinctual turbulence" (Roth 2017, 397). What differentiates Roth's earlier characters from his most mature and accomplished ones is exactly their Shakespearean complexity: according to Bloom, "the difference between Portnoy and Sabbath is the shadow of Shakespeare, of King Lear's madness, and of Falstaff's refusal of embitterment and estrangement" (Bloom 2019, 395).

For all their Shakespearean reverberations, the most striking feature of Roth's novels of the Nineties is probably their characters' voices. Sabbath's fingers have "a distinctive voice, their power to produce their own reality can astonish people" (Roth 2010, 484); for the puppeteer, "[c]ontentment is being hands and a voice" (594), but it will be his own voice, recorded on a tape while he is harassing a female student, that will cause his sacking from the university where he teaches. In *American Pastoral*, the voice of the protagonist's daughter plays a crucial role in the plot: "If only Merry had fought a war of words, fought the world with words alone" (Roth 2011, 318), thinks Levov referring to the girl's stutter, maybe events could have unfolded in a less tragic way. The second novel of the trilogy,

I Married a Communist, focuses on radio-star Ira Ringold, who dramatizes inspiring episodes of American history imitating the voices of people like Wild Bill Hickock and Jack London; naturally enough, Zuckerman, the story's narrator and a great admirer of Ira's performances, calls the book of his own life "a book of voices" (Roth 2011, 606). Coleman Silk, the protagonist of the trilogy's final novel, *The Human Stain*, was raised by a father who "had another way of beating you down. With words. With speech. With what he called 'the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens'"; the father's voice sounded "as though even in ordinary conversation he were reciting Marc Antony's speech over the body of Caesar" (Roth 2011, 790). One cannot disagree with Morley, who states that "the Shakespearean theme surely reaches its peak in the American trilogy" (Morley 2016, 109): truly enough, all three protagonists are, each in his own peculiar way, tragic heroes, whose downfall would befit the last act of a Shakespearean tragedy. Yet without *Operation Shylock's* Jewish mischief and Sabbath's fastidious tirades about the English language, along with his outrageously rough performances, Shakespeare would have probably remained little more than a well-read allusion in Roth's pages, a topic discussed by learned characters, or a device to vehiculate comic and satiric attacks.

As Greenblatt argues, "Shakespeare is the embodiment worldwide of a creative achievement that does not remain within narrow boundaries of the nation-state or lend itself to the secure possession of a particular faction or speak only for this or that chosen group" (Greenblatt 2016, 396). In Roth's oeuvre, as in Shakespeare's plays, no opinion is more authoritative than the next one, no final answer is ever given, no character can consider him or herself the author's sole mouthpiece: each point of view is systematically compensated by an opposite take; the same character can play different roles (as it happens in *The Counterlife*), or even trespass ontological boundaries and chastise his own author (as Zuckerman does in *The Facts*). Behind each mask there is always another one, because, in the end, everything leads back to the same Prospero-like demiurge, "Philip Roth", a supreme

authorial figure whose name we are always supposed to write in quotation marks. In turn, "Shakespeare created out of himself hundreds of secondary agents, his characters, some of whom seem even to float free of the particular narrative structures in which they perform their given roles and to take on an agency we ordinarily reserve for biological persons" (Greenblatt 2016, 395). The omnipresence of Roth's authorial personae in his texts keeps us from forgetting that each character's utterance finally stems from the same tireless conjurer of stories, who can impersonate with the same credibility an irreverent ventriloquist and malicious playwright like Sabbath, as well as a chameleon-like biographer and emphatic chronicler like Zuckerman, who in *American Pastoral*, while dancing with an old college acquaintance, identifies himself so completely with the character he is writing about that he takes on his voice for the rest of the novel, virtually disappearing from the pages of his book.

3. *An American Bard at Last!*¹³

In the latter part of Roth's career, and especially after his death in 2018, some journalists and literary critics have been saluting the novelist as the "American bard"¹⁴, thus explicitly linking his multifaceted authorial personae to a great lineage of writers – from Shakespeare to Whitman – regarded not only as great, representative poets, but also as repositories of national lore whose "role was to memorialize the history, myths, and stories of a nation" (Morley 2016, 110). As if to officially sanction Roth's status

¹³ This is the incipit of an enthusiastic anonymous 1855 review of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, actually written by Whitman himself, who self-promoted his public persona by proclaiming himself the "American bard".

¹⁴ Among others, Sylvia Barack Fishman (Joseph and Esther Foster Professor in Judaic Studies at Brandeis University) described Roth as "the Shakespeare of our American age" (Fishman 2018), while Melissa Knox (University of Duisburg-Essen) called him "a Jewish bard [...], our American bard" (Knox 2015). J. M. Coetzee was already convinced that "at his very best", Roth "reaches Shakespearean heights" (Coetzee 2004).

of “American bard” in prose, towards the end of her speech at Roth’s eightieth birthday party, Hermione Lee remarked:

I am not quite trying to tell you that Philip Roth is The Bard, and I’m not trying to turn Newark into Stratford-on-Avon or this Newark venue into the Globe Theatre. After all, for one thing, as might already have occurred to you, Shakespeare wasn’t Jewish. And for another, Shakespeare didn’t live to 80, only to 52 – by which time Philip Roth had got as far as *Zuckerman Bound*. My god, think of what Shakespeare might have written if he’d lived as long as Philip Roth!

But I am saying that Roth has Shakespeare deep in his head and that there is something Shakespearean about the way he uses him. (Lethem et al. 2014, 20)

As Morley stated, “Roth’s bardic propensities extend well beyond his engagement with a long line of influences, and even beyond his deployment of Shakespearean themes”, to “[t]he consideration of the language in terms of its audial impact, the matching of the sounds and the subject” that clearly suggest “a mind given over to the business of language-making and performance” (Morley 2016, 110). Not surprisingly, one of the narrators in *I Married a Communist*, the high school teacher Murray Ringold, runs into Zuckerman after “attending a conference which – in its title at least – registers Roth’s ambition: ‘Shakespeare and the Millennium’”. In this way, argued Morley argued, “Shakespeare is brought into the new millennium, both generically and thematically, in a tale of public betrayal in which Roth infiltrates and appropriates the themes and tropes of Shakespearean tragedy” (115).

Shakespeare’s legacy in Roth’s works remained strong in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as the title of the author’s twenty-sixth novel, *Exit Ghost* (2007), testifies. Roth made it clear in an interview that the source of the title is a stage direction in *Macbeth*, though he is aware that the same direction also appears in *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*: “Last year in the summer I was going to see a production of *Macbeth* here in America, and I re-read the script that afternoon, and I came upon the Banquo scene, ghost scene, and it just leaped out – exit ghost” (Lawson 2007). In the novel, the aged

Zuckerman returns to New York to have a surgical procedure that could enable him to restore his sexual potency, but he finds a city completely different from the one he had left eleven years before. People are shocked by the somehow unexpected re-election of George W. Bush, described by a character through a line of Hecate's and the three witches in *Macbeth* as "a wayward son, / Spiteful and wrathful" (Roth 2013a, 510; Shakespeare 2015, III.v.11-12). Significantly enough, Zuckerman's farewell from Roth's fictional universe consists in metaphorically stepping from the (political and social) stage and setting himself among the audience:

I was familiar with the theatrical emotions that the horrors of politics inspire. From the 1965 transformation into a Vietnam hawk of the peace candidate Lyndon Johnson until the 1974 resignation of all-but-impeached Richard Nixon, they were a staple in the repertoire of virtually everyone I knew. You're heartbroken and upset and a little hysterical, or you're gleeful and vindicated for the first time in ten years, and your only balm is to make theater of it. But I was merely onlooker and outsider now. I did not intrude on the public drama; the public drama did not intrude on me. (Roth 2013a, 525-26)

Similarly, a roommate of the protagonist of Roth's following novel, *Indignation* (2008), prepares for the role of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* and recites his lines aloud, practicing his exit line, which sounds like another of Roth's bitter valediction (directed to his critics?): "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you" (Roth 2013b, 114; Shakespeare 2008, V.i.371). *The Humbling* (2009) is entirely focused on an aged Shakespearean actor who fails to play Prospero in *The Tempest* and then realizes he is no longer able to remember his lines from *Macbeth*: "He couldn't do low-intensity Shakespeare and he couldn't do high-intensity Shakespeare – and he'd been doing Shakespeare all his life. [...] The only role available to him was the role of someone playing a role" (Roth 2013b, 228-29). The actor is obsessed with "Prospero's most famous words", which he has "mangled" on stage: "Our revels now are ended. These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air" (Shakespeare 2011b, IV.i.148-50). For him, these final

two syllables “had the aura of an obscure indictment even as they came to make less and less sense” (Roth 2013b, 230). One cannot fail but read this as another statement of surrender by the author: not coincidentally, after a final novel, *Nemesis* (2010), structured like a Greek tragedy, in 2012 Roth announced his definitive retirement from writing, somehow replicating “[t]he most celebrated retirement” in literary history, “Shakespeare’s return to Stratford after the staging of *The Tempest* in 1611”, when he “followed Prospero into the civilian life of a distinguished country gentleman” (McCrum 2012).

According to Harold Bloom, “Shakespeare has taught us to understand human nature” – he “invented” the human character as we understand it, so that “[p]ersonality, in our sense, is a Shakespearean invention, and is not only Shakespeare’s greatest originality but also the authentic cause of his perpetual pervasiveness” (Bloom 1998, 2-4). Similarly, Greenblatt talks of Shakespeare as being “the greatest expert the world has ever known” in “‘distributed personhood’ [...]: the ability of an artist to fashion something [...] that carries agency, his own and that of others, into the world where it can act and be acted upon in turn” (Greenblatt 2016, 395). In the same spirit, we could say that in his most accomplished works, Roth ‘invented’ (or reinvented) the character of “the author” – the writer, the playwright, the artist – and set him on the stage of contemporary America. It is only a secondary issue that sometimes he called this quintessential artist/performer “Philip Roth”, causing resentment among critics and willingly engendering misinterpretation and confusion between the man and the character, the actor and his roles. Roth himself told Hermione Lee, who interviewed him for *The Paris Review*, that “a writer is a performer who puts on the act he does best – not least when he dons the mask of the first-person singular. That may be the best mask of all for a second self” (Lee 1984). And what better and more ambitious role for a writer who performs the character of “the author” than William Shakespeare himself, the man who “changed our ways of presenting human nature, if not human nature itself”, and who, ironically enough, “does not

portray himself anyway in his plays", declining, as Bloom states, "to create himself"? (Bloom 2002, 16-17). In spite of the media frenzy generated by the publication of Blake Bailey's 'official' biography of Roth, we could say about the "American bard" what Greenblatt stated about the Bard of Stratford: "it is not really necessary to know the details of Shakespeare [sic] life in order to love or understand his plays" (Greenblatt 2016, 394) because both artists live a perfectly full-rounded life inside their works.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that if Shakespeare is the hidden author, then Roth is the hypervisible one. In this sense, whether the reason was a Bloomian "anxiety of influence" or a Hemingwayan "competition with dead men", Roth's negotiations with Shakespeare were often antagonistic and competitive. In *I Married a Communist*, after reading Feste's line from the last act of *Twelfth Night* – "And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges" (Shakespeare 2008, V.i.369-70) – Murray, who is one of the two narrators of the novel, laments that he "was being asphyxiated inside Shakespeare" (Roth 2011, 680). Referring to this passage, Morley speaks of Roth's "uneasy engagement with Shakespeare" that is part of his "literary engagement with precursors as an implicit feature of the contemporary epic of America" (Morley 2016, 115-16). In the memoir *Patrimony* (1991), a deep reflection on genetical heritage as well as on the significance of cultural and literary legacy, Roth describes his father as "the bard of Newark" (Roth 2008, 657) who passed him the lore of the city; though in *The Facts* he considers his father's repertoire not so large – "family, family, family, Newark, Newark, Newark, Jew, Jew, Jew" – he candidly admits: "Somewhat like mine" (Roth 2008, 319).

While explicitly acknowledging his descent from the "bard of Newark", Roth tacitly alludes to his 'parentage' with the Bard of Stratford by progressively encouraging a juxtaposition between his works and Shakespeare's. In a 2006 interview, Roth acknowledged *Hamlet* as an inspiration for the crucial graveyard scene of *Everyman* (2006) and left the journalist speechless by half-jokingly confessing: "So I thought, 'OK, let that happen. Let's see. Let's see if I can do it better than Shakespeare'". The interviewer reported: "He laughs,

softly at first and then in bursts. ‘So I had *Hamlet* here, and my pages over here’” (Ulin 2006). We can easily imagine Roth keeping a volume of Shakespeare’s plays always open on his writing desk, to guide him through the stages of his career. In *The Facts*, he states: “The stories I told of my protected childhood might have been Othello’s tales about the men with heads beneath their shoulders” (Roth 2008, 379), while in *I Married a Communist* Zuckerman says: “When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: ‘Listening’” (Roth 2011, 606). In Roth’s case, we could easily add: “watching and reading Shakespeare’s plays”. As to whether he was really serious in comparing his work to that of the Bard of Stratford, or even in trying to outdo Shakespeare, we can only rely on his Falstaffian answer to the stunned journalist: “I’ll leave that to people like you [...] to be foolish enough to judge” (Ulin 2006).

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A Nakedness Rejected: Inverting Paradigms of Sovereignty between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth*

Gianna Fusco

The present essay traces the intertextual relationship between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* looking at two main areas of structural correspondence. The first one consists in issues of rhythm, pace, and textual overlapping, with regard to which specific attention is given to scenes from the TV series that echo moments in the Shakespearean tragedy. The second area of analysis is constituted by the focus both works bring on the question of sovereign power. Through the lens offered by Agamben's theory of the perturbing similarities between the structural positioning of the sovereign and the homo sacer at the margin of the law, the article looks at Macbeth's and Walter White's respective parabolas as attempts to attain sovereign power, while at the same time rejecting the inevitable implications such positioning brings with it.

Keywords: *Breaking Bad*, *Macbeth*, Walter White, Power, Sovereignty, Rhythm, Diegesis, Sleep

Comparisons between contemporary U.S. TV series and Shakespeare's theatre have been circulated repeatedly at the level of journalism and specialized websites, especially with reference to productions belonging to the so-called Platinum Age of U.S. television. Typically, an article, blog entry, or forum thread advancing such parallel offers insights into how a certain TV show rewrites the characters or re-elaborates the themes of a specific play, claiming that knowledge of the Shakespearean text allows a fuller understanding of the series. The relationship of intertextuality thus propounded functions to further promote the cultural prestige currently attached to so-called 'quality' TV series, conferring on them the same aura of high culture and universalistic

reach we typically see associated to Shakespeare's works. At the same time, since the insights into the workings of the human soul provided by his verses keep speaking to audiences today, often under the guise of apparently unrelated narratives, it reinforces the idea that all human experience has been effectively and lastingly captured by the Bard and indeed no story can be told that is, after him, totally original.

Breaking Bad is no exception in this sense. Starting off as an average performing series in terms of ratings in 2008, the AMC creature by Vince Gilligan raised to the status of cult TV over the course of its five seasons, and by the time its final episode aired in 2013 it was hailed as one of the highest achievements in the genre, lauded for its writing, acting, cinematography, and even soundtrack. At its most basic, *Breaking Bad* can be described as the story of how, following a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer, non-descript, mild-mannered, and terribly frustrated high-school chemistry teacher Walter White (Bryan Cranston) from Albuquerque (New Mexico) turns into the most feared drug kingpin of the U.S. Southwest border region, fights to defend his dominant position against both the other big shots in the drug trade and the DEA, and stays unrepentant until his death, despite the decline of his empire and the tragic impact of his choices on his family and loved ones. It is around the time when the final season aired, and with a certain sustained recurrence over the following years, that the connection between *Breaking Bad* and Shakespeare, and more specifically *Macbeth*, is advanced by commentators of the series at different levels, from journalistic reviews to scholarly publications¹.

Indeed, the similarities are striking, making the comparison almost unavoidable: both *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* bring the audience in close contact with the appalling and seemingly unstoppable spiral of violence and crime in which the main character is precipitated as a consequence of his ambition and thirst for power. The goriness of repeated bloodshed, an absence of remorse that signals the full embracing of evil over good, the

¹ See, among others, Bossert 2012; Gualtieri 2013; Brown 2013; Bellis 2013; NerdcoreMovement 2013; Cantor 2019; Chisum 2019.

obsession with preserving the power conquered at the cost of turning one's back to the community's shared moral values, the increasing and eventually utter isolation of the protagonist are all elements common to both narratives and thus actively suggesting a parallel between the two that is picked up not only by TV pundits, but also by Shakespeare's scholars and, more generally, specialists. Director Jack O'Brien, for example, interviewed by *Variety* about the Broadway debut of his production of *Macbeth*, called the latter "the original template for *Breaking Bad*" (Setoodeh 2013). But what is meant by "the original template"? To put it in the words of Shakespeare's scholar Ray Bossert: "Among Shakespeare's 'breaking bad' characters, Macbeth's internal mind – guilt-ridden, insecure in its masculinity, and thoroughly preoccupied with patriarchal duties – will most help us understand why we believe in Walter White as a character" (Bossert 2012, 67). Paul Cantor says something similar when, advancing the idea that "we have to analyze the series in terms derived from high culture", he states that "we all know a famous figure in literature who is as criminal as Walter White and yet is generally accepted as a hero – Shakespeare's Macbeth" (Cantor 2019, 93-94). Judging from these words, and the analyses that the two authors construct around them, it seems that the main, if not the only, point of contact between the two texts is the similarity between Walter White and Macbeth, or better, the way in which the former makes sense to us as a character who is simultaneously an incarnation of evil and a hero especially because we have an antecedent in the Scottish play that sets the terms of this complex ethical relation. However undisputable such a claim may be, though, it does not say much about the Shakespearean "original template", nor about the articulate influence it has been long exerting on our popular culture. By being only used for the purpose of providing analytical categories that are relevant to 'read' Walter White, Macbeth (both the play and the character) is presented in terms that are certainly well-known, yet inevitably flattened as well.

As Bossert's passage quoted above indicates, Macbeth is only one of the several Shakespearean characters who 'break bad', so that further textual evidence must be offered to establish a parallel between the two works. Regardless of how much of a villain a

protagonist is, in fact, can we have Macbeth without the “Weird Sisters”? Or can we have Macbeth without “Lady Macbeth”? While for several commentators the first question is quickly answered by equating the Weird Sisters’ prophecy to Walter White’s cancer diagnosis, the answer to the second question is much more elusive. Skyler White (Anna Gunn) is in fact surely a manipulative and emasculating wife, yet she never acts towards her husband in Lady Macbeth’s seductive manner, nor does she in any way push him to ‘break bad’. In an attempt to identify who “serves the same dramatic role of Macbeth’s consort” in the AMC series, Bossert resorts to White’s partner in crime, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), as the one who provides the protagonist with “resources, inspiration, and sometimes simply the additional manpower needed to conduct crime” (Bossert 2012, 75), only to acknowledge shortly after that “Walter also serves as Pinkman’s own Lady Macbeth” (75), who pushes him deeper and deeper into the criminal world. This swinging of the “dramatic role” of the Lady back and forth between Walter White and Jesse Pinkman actually tells us that what we are witnessing here is the partial overlapping between the characters’ definitions rather than a structural similarity between them and their functions within the narrative. First of all, far from just serving as a spur to her husband’s ambition, Lady Macbeth constitutes a textual site from where a fatal combination of mutual passion, personal ambition, sensuality, and domineering attitude emanate, all qualities that have hardly anything to do with the relationship between White and his young partner Pinkman. Furthermore, there is a co-dependence between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as characters or dramatic roles that does not allow the one to exist and be fully recognizable without the other. In other words, if at times in the narrative Walter White serves as Pinkman’s Lady Macbeth, shall we conclude that, albeit within the circumscribed space of those episodes, Jesse Pinkman is himself Macbeth?² On the other

² The textual function we see as embodied in Lady Macbeth may be disseminated across different characters in *Breaking Bad*, yet it seems to me that it is the enigmatic Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito), officially the owner of the fast-food chain Los Pollos Hermanos and actually the man who efficiently runs a huge drug operation across New Mexico, who most approximates the Lady through

hand, calling Macbeth a “criminal”, as Cantor does, cannot but be an oversimplification of a question that is actually central to the definition of “breaking bad” in the Shakespearean play, namely the nature and the limits of sovereign power in its relationship to the law. If it is true that Macbeth’s blameful actions constitute a crime in moral terms, the same cannot be quickly and unproblematically established in their relationship to the law of the country (something that fully applies, instead, to Walter White). As Emma Smith clarifies, “*Macbeth* depicts a series of murders for which the law cannot give redress, since the king himself is their perpetrator” (Smith 2013, 5), and the shift from regicide king to self-made kingpin is too consequential not to be given close attention within the context of an intertextual analysis of the two works.

The following pages are an attempt to pursue such an analysis by focusing on two areas of poignant relevance to the relationship between the two works. First, I will look at the formal elements (rhythm, pace, instances of overlapping) that produce structural echoes between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth*; then I will move to the ethical interrogation both works produce with regard to the issues raised by hubristic agency and the fact of giving/fearing death.

1. Echoes

There is a scene in *Breaking Bad* that is quite representative of the way in which the parallel between the TV series and the Scottish play runs deeper than it might be expected. I am referring to the “fugue state” that Walt White simulates in the episode “Bit by a Dead Bee” (season 2, episode 3). Having been kidnapped and kept prisoner by Tuco Salamanca (the meth-sniffing and borderline mental cartel man in Albuquerque), Walt knows that he needs a good story to reappear in the midst of the frantic search his family

his coaxing and manipulations. See especially season 3, episode 5, when, in order to convince White to work for him, Fring shows him the state-of-the-art chemistry lab he would be responsible for and motivates him by appealing to his masculinity, offering him a chance to finally see himself in the role of the heroic husband and father: “And a man... a man provides. And he does it even when he’s not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he’s a man”.

has launched to find him. He thus goes to a supermarket and undresses completely as he walks along the aisles, a behavior that of course leads to hospitalization and psychiatric evaluation as he claims not to remember anything from the past few days and tries to blame chemotherapy and cancer-induced stress for the situation. Since no amount of reassurance on his side that he feels fine now seems to satisfy family and doctors alike, and having been reassured that their conversation is protected by absolute confidentiality, he decides to spin the lie differently to the psychiatrist who has now almost full control over his life and future:

There was no fugue state. I remember everything. The truth is... I couldn't stand to spend another second in that house. I just had to... get out, and so I left. I didn't think about it, I just did it. [...]

Doctor, my wife is seven months pregnant with a baby we didn't intend. My fifteen-year-old son has cerebral palsy. I am an extremely overqualified high-school chemistry teacher. When I can work, I make \$43,700 per year. I have watched all of my colleagues and friends surpass me in every way imaginable, and within eighteen months I will be dead. And you ask why I run?

The moment encapsulates Walt's capacity to simultaneously lie and say the truth, and foregrounds the way in which utter vulnerability and mental health issues are seen as interconnected and justifying one another. Appearing stark naked in public, in fact, lands credibility to Walt's story but also exposes his helplessness as a terminally ill man, thus producing a tautological circle by which Walt's overall wretchedness triggers and explains his borderline psychiatric state, while the latter further constitutes him as vulnerable and dependent. His naked body thus becomes a powerful manifestation of this mechanism and his conversation with the psychiatrist an attempt to manipulate it and establish that, despite his precarious mental health, which would be confirmed by a need to escape his own family and might even authorize forms of institutional limitation to his freedom, he can still be in control of his own life. By leveraging his pitiful state as a rational explanation for his actions, Walt turns the attempts to reduce him to bare (i.e.,

naked) life – institutionalized, exposed, vulnerable – into a form of power that he wields precisely to revolt against such condition and reclaim uncompromising agency.

A plausible albeit not immediately apparent connection with *Macbeth* is suggested by the presence also in the tragedy of a scene in which the protagonist's mental health is exposed as frail and an effort must accordingly be made to preserve his power and authority in the face of this form of vulnerability. I am of course referring to the scene of the banquet during which Macbeth is the only one who repeatedly sees Banquo's ghost, a taunting and accusing presence that sends him into fits he is unable to disguise even in public and that both he and his wife explain as an infirmity that should be ignored:

LADY

Sit, worthy friends; my lord is often thus,
 And hath been from his youth. Pray you, keep seat,
 The fit is momentary; upon a thought
 He will again be well. If much you note him
 You shall offend him, and extend his passion.
 Feed, and regard him not.
 (Shakespeare 2015, III.iv.50-55)

MACBETH

I do forget.
 Do not muse at me, my most worthy friends,
 I have a strange infirmity, which is nothing
 To those that know me.
 (82-85)

What I find of interest here is not so much that both texts deal with the question of the protagonist's precarious psychological state, but rather the fact that this common theme is used in *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* alike to point at a specific weakness of the leading character which is wielded as a confirmation of power in the form of an exception. Because he is now the king, his lords must pretend that Macbeth is fine and perfectly in control of himself, accepting the clearly false explanation that his affliction is an old and innocuous one. Nobody in fact has ever witnessed anything like his current

state of mind, despite having presumably shared with him the service of Duncan and the battlefield for a quite long time. It is exactly because he is the sovereign that he claims for himself (and Lady Macbeth supports him in demanding it) the right to exist and act in a space that is in a certain sense separate from his illness, as if his agency were not affected by it despite his obvious impairment. There is, between the two scenes, a structural correspondence given by the fact that not only both deal with the connection between mental health and power, but also do it within a similar paradigm of norm and exception: both Walt White and Macbeth demand to be acknowledged and treated as special cases, the former because of his helplessness in the face of death – what we might call the fact of being reduced to bare life – the latter because of his sovereignty that allows him to legitimately give death – what we might refer to as the king’s sacredness.

Scenes like the one discussed above and reflecting a consonance between the two works that is somehow inscribed within the structural organization of the *Breaking Bad* narrative vis-à-vis *Macbeth* are not an isolated instance, as is intimated also by the most apparent formal similarities between the play and the TV show: both are divided into five parts (acts/seasons), yet the beginning and end frame the protagonist, as we will see, in significantly different ways; both make a peculiar use of the customary form of their respective genres, *Macbeth* being the shortest and fastest moving of Shakespeare’s tragedies and *Breaking Bad* featuring an uncharacteristically short first season and a longer final one³; both can be seen as dividing the narrative in three movements (vs. the five parts) revolving around the confrontation between the main character and three (groups of) antagonists (Duncan/Tuco, Banquo/Gus, Macduff and Malcolm/the Aryan Brotherhood)⁴. Yet, rather than any immediate formal correspondence (such as the repartition of the plot into the same number of acts/seasons), I want to bring forth the presence of specific moments that, by functioning

³ The production of *Breaking Bad* was affected by the 2007-2008 writers’ strike in Hollywood, which explains the relative shortness of the first season.

⁴ For this three-movement organization of the text in *Macbeth*, see Smith 2013, 66-67.

as a recognizable punctuation in the development of the narrative, signal the momentarily alignment between the otherwise unlike rhythms of the Elizabethan play and the twenty-first-century TV series.

The first of these moments is provided by the prophecy/diagnosis, that is, the sudden confrontation of the protagonist with what he has reasons to consider a reliable prediction about his future. The encounter with the Weird Sisters/oncologist precipitates Macbeth/Walter White in the depth of a moral crisis that seizes and agitates his conscience with unprecedented violence, making it possible for him to contemplate crime as a viable route to pursue, rather than just a fantasy to be (half-)secretly entertained. The two episodes, however, while having in common the fact of projecting the protagonist towards a foreseeable future, are also discordant in ways that seem to me crucial in order to fully appreciate how Macbeth morphs into Walter White. First of all, the Scottish Thane meets the Weird Sisters at the pick of his military career: a member of the nobility and a successful general who has just almost single-handedly crushed a rebellion against the Crown, he is widely honored and publicly praised for his courage on the battlefield and his loyalty to King Duncan. By luring him with the prospect of becoming himself the King of Scotland, the Witches only add to an already impressive list of triumphs, thus forcing him to confront and acknowledge his own insatiable ambition. Despite the caveat that the glory they predict for him is a transient one and will not be passed down onto his progeny, there is little doubt that for Macbeth himself the prophecy is a magnificent one.

The situation could not be more radically different for Walter White when in the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad* he is told that he only has a few months to live due to inoperable lung cancer, a diagnosis that is all the more ironically tragic as the fifty-year-old patient has never smoked in his life. The man is struck with the news at an already very low point in his life, marked by professional frustration, social humiliation, and family difficulties. The father of a disabled teenage son and the husband of a beloved yet emasculating wife who is pregnant with an unplanned second child, White is in fact a once brilliant scientist who ended up

resentfully teaching chemistry to bored high-school kids for a wage that is so low as to force him to take up a part-time job at a local car wash to make ends meet. It comes as no surprise, then, that while Macbeth can barely disguise the excitement provoked by the vision of his future and immediately writes his wife with a full account of the events, White initially reacts by doing absolutely nothing, absorbing the news and, all by himself, slowly coming to the decision of turning to crime, ostensibly to provide for his family after his death.

Regardless of the nature of the prognostication – be it the happy promise of inscrutable powers or the inescapable catastrophe announced by medical diagnosis – the prophecy carries out the structural function of opening up a space of radical agency for the two men. In this territory, they perceive themselves as being finally outside the reach of customary punishment – Macbeth because he is going to be king and embody the law, and White because he is going to die before the law can get to him – so that their actions are not exactly exempt from consequences but are, in a certain sense, indifferent to them. We can appreciate the shift in the ethical ground of their ruminations (from weighing the burden of doing evil to including a sort of impunity in the equation) by looking at the subtle way in which both the tragedy and the TV show stage the prophecy not as the inaugural moment in their moral corruption but as the outside intervention that eventually unleashes the tempting thoughts they had been already entertaining. As Lady Macbeth points out to her husband as she tries to resolve him to carry out their plan, in fact, the idea of seizing the power by killing Duncan is not a seed planted in him by the encounter with the “fatal sisters”, but had been already contemplated by him long enough to consider its feasibility: “Nor time nor place / Did then adhere, and yet you would make both” (Shakespeare 2015, I.vii.51-52). By allowing him to think of his accession to the throne as a fact already known to forces placed beyond the realm of human experience and rational understanding, the prophecy projects the regicide onto a horizon made of preordained events, where Duncan’s violent death is not only perfectly justifiable but to a certain extent even necessary for a superior will to be satisfied. This self-reassuring interpretation of

the purposefully ambiguous words used by the three witches contributes to determine Macbeth to action by pressing him to face the crucial ethical dilemma posed by the idea he now toys with of being the predestined next King of Scotland, that is, whether to wait for events to unravel by themselves or to maneuver to hasten their coming to fruition: "If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (I.iii.146-47); and then: "I am settled, and bend up / Each corporeal agent to this terrible feat" (I.vii.80-81). In other words, what is really at stakes is not so much his kingship but his agency.

Despite being mostly described as an excessively meek, law-abiding citizen for whom the terminal cancer diagnosis constitutes the proverbial last straw in an unusual accumulation of misfortunes, Walter White as well is not exactly the innocent character his own creator Vince Gilligan described as Mr Chips turning into Scarface⁵. As acutely noticed by Cordelia E. Barrera, in fact, the pilot episode already gives us a glimpse into White's troubled conscience and its possible disposition to corruption before the devastating conversation with the doctor, thus indicating how blaming his transformation solely on that trauma is part of the character's self-delusional attitude that has for a considerable part of his life resulted in disappointing and backfiring choices. Commenting on how at Walt's birthday party his brother in law and DEA agent Hank Schrader (Dean Norris) steals the scene bragging about a recent drug "bust that yielded over \$700,000 in cash", thus adding to Walt's sense of "eroded masculinity", Barrera points out that

Hank does more than impose a masculine script intended to reflect the imbalance of power and physical prowess that he continually lords over Walt. He helps seed an idea in Walt's mind. "It's easy money... until we catch you", jeers Hank. [...] Significantly, this seed is sown *before* Walt learns that he has cancer. (Barrera 2016, 21)

⁵ The expression was used by Gilligan in an interview to explain how he had originally pitched the show to AMC. Since then, as noticed by Wood, the line has "stuck and proliferated wherever the series is discussed" (Wood 2015, 24, note 8). See also MacInnes 2012.

Not unlike Macbeth, once he is given the chance to see what awaits him in the near future, White is faced with the dilemma of agency: should he just wait for the inevitable to happen, enduring his fate while subjecting himself to one humiliating job after another⁶, or should he finally act upon the resentment and indignation he has been nursing for much of his adult life and that by now constitute a core part of his true self? If he is really going to die in a matter of months, the ethical responsibility of his actions will stay with him, but he counts on escaping the social consequences deriving from them, which reveals how his apparent adjustment to society and its rules is to be interpreted rather as begrudged endurance than as moral rectitude.

Set right after the beginning of their respective narratives and ostensibly offering impunity alongside inevitability, the prophecy/diagnosis does not work merely as the removal of some inner moral sentinel, but rather functions as an injunction to choose, before the events void their choice of its ethical content, between passivity and agency, the latter emerging as the true object of desire for both Macbeth and Walter White. In other words, even as they rationalize bending their ethics to suit their desires, the real reckless move for both Macbeth and White is embracing guilt rather than giving up agency in the face of a preordained fate that would make them perfectly innocent, but also perfectly passive. We can then understand how the happy news that his cancer is in remission and his life predictably longer (season 2, episode 9) throws Walt in an uncontrollable fit of rage that he tries to dominate by punching the towel-dispenser in the hospital restroom: unwilling to go back to his life of Job-like resignation (Izzo 2015), he realizes that the future looms ahead with the injunction to indefinitely repeat what he had thought of as a single act of reckless, amoral courage, a resource he will now have to tap into unreservedly for his gradually emerging sense of self not to be crushed.

In the iconic “Fly” episode (season 3, episode 10), haunted by a fear of contamination in his lab that is as irrational yet tangible as

⁶ The fact that even high-school teaching is humiliating for this man who has an acute sense of being a veritable genius cannot be overemphasized.

Macbeth's horror at the sight of Duncan's blood on his hands, Walt ruminates on the conundrum produced by his unexpectedly prolonged life: "I've lived too long", he tells Jesse, a line that echoes the famous "I have lived long enough" from the fifth act of the Scottish play (Shakespeare 2015, V.iii.22). Both men mourn with these words the loss of what they aimed to secure, together with and through power, that is, a revered position in their circle: "You want them to actually miss you" (Walt), yet "that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have" (Shakespeare 2015, V.iii.24-26). These undeniable echoes notwithstanding, the conceptual difference between "too long" and "long enough" and the structurally heterogeneous positioning of the two lines invite further consideration. While Macbeth's line, occurring in the final act of the tragedy, expresses the awareness of his declining reputation as a king, regardless of the outcomes of the military confrontation with Malcolm and Macduff that is about to take place, White's reckoning occurs almost at the exact centre of the narrative (i.e., in the thirtieth episode out of sixty-two) and stems from his realization of having no other choice than to continue to lead a double life as Heisenberg, even at the cost of losing his family, since the perfect moment to die, still loved and appreciated, has eluded him: "I missed it. There was some perfect moment that passed me right by". Rather than, or in addition to, evoking the declining king of the fifth act, a compelling intertext for the "Fly" episode can be found in the third act of the Shakespearean play (again, we are approximately half way through the narrative), where Macbeth comes to terms with the evil he has committed and that which he knows he is going to perpetrate:

MACBETH

I am in blood

Stepped in so far, that should I wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

(Shakespeare 2015, III.iv.134-36)

The passages commented above show how, despite proceeding at a pace that is apparently independent from that of the Scottish

tragedy, *Breaking Bad* repeatedly intersects it at critical points and even reproduces its alternation of extraordinary accelerations, marked by chaotic violence, and moments of introspection, with Walt's repeated attempts at retiring from the drug business echoing Macbeth's soliloquys. A particular striking instance of structural overlapping between the two works is provided by the insertion in the first part of both *Macbeth* and *Breaking Bad* of a scene that somehow stands on the threshold of diegesis, a rhetorically rich yet quite cryptic comment on the protagonists' respective parabolas. I am referring to the "Porter" scene in the second act of *Macbeth* (II.iii.1-20) and the "Negro y Azul" narcocorrido that opens the seventh episode of the second season of *Breaking Bad*.

Irreverent and verging on obscenity, the Porter's monologue has long seemed so at odds with the dark tone of the tragedy that for centuries directors tended to cut it from representations and several critics considered it an interpolation⁷. More recent readings, however, have insisted on its role in materializing the spatial threshold between the inside of the castle – which is turned into a hell by Duncan's murder – and the outside, as well as in calling attention to a temporal threshold splitting time between a before preceding the regicide and an after following it. The third threshold evoked by the character is that between the diegetic world and the extradiegetic one, the most obvious reason for this being provided by the fact that the scene can be read as a thinly disguised commentary on the Gunpowder Plot⁸. Moreover, while the knocking at the gate, despite taking place off stage, is part of the diegetic dimension, as is confirmed by the fact that the Porter will eventually open the door to allow Macduff and Lennox in, the first part of his speech eerily refers to the act of welcoming in a series of imaginary and totally invisible characters, whom he drunkenly addresses as if they were bodily present on stage and through

⁷ The alternating fortune of the Porter's speech is well-known in Shakespeare's studies, from Coleridge's rejection of the scene as vulgar to De Quincey's defense of it as hauntingly relevant. For an anthology of critical writings on *Macbeth*, including Coleridge and De Quincey, see Shakespeare 2013.

⁸ Critics have noted how the use of "farmer" and "equivocator" by the Porter might be a coded reference to Father Garnet, the mind behind the Gunpowder Plot. See Wills 1995.

which he obliquely communicates about the whole play with the audience. By foregrounding delusion (in the figure of the farmer), duplicity (the equivocator) and greed (the tailor), the speech not only incapsulates in fact some of the main themes of the play, but also offers a key to interpret Macbeth's actions as resulting from his arrogant blindness to the possible ambivalence of words and circumstances. The blurring of the border separating the fictive and the real world is reiterated in the last line of the Porter's monologue that accompanies the opening of the door: "I pray you, remember the porter" (II.iii.19-20). The words, while expressing a request to Macduff and Lennox for a tip, are in fact often delivered to the audience, adding a sense of divination to the whole scene.

A similarly liminal diegetic space is occupied by the only narcocorrido featured in *Breaking Bad*, "Negro y Azul", which constitutes the teaser to the episode by the same title (season 2, episode 7)⁹. Visually, it functions as a pop music videoclip, announced as such by the name of the band, Los Cuates de Sinaloa, and the title of the song that appear in the footer of the opening frame. The overall aesthetics is that of a Mexican low-budget production mixing a catchy traditional sound with old-fashioned video transition effects, both characteristics evoking a music scene in sharp contrast with the glossy U.S. entertainment industry and its costly pre- and post-production practices. In ways that can be compared to the structural function of the Porter's speech in *Macbeth*, "Negro y Azul" is apparently a purely entertaining interlude that actually accumulates perturbing elements calling attention to the blurring and crossing of borders at several levels. Under the guise of a straightforward pop music video narrating the irresistible rise of a new drug lord, it directly addresses in fact the impact produced by the new player on the border-crossing meth trade, which goes beyond questions of power and involves historically laden issues of identification and cultural affiliation, as is marked by the opposition between the 'cartel' and the 'gringos'. The dimension of the borderland is emphasized by the presence of Spanish lyrics and English subtitles, with a line from the final part of the song stressing how there is actually no distinction between

⁹ For the narcocorrido as a music genre, see Jamarillo 2014 and Barrera 2016.

the two countries anymore due to a common drug culture and economy: “Ahora sí le quedó bien a Nuevo México el nombre. / A México se parece / En tanta droga que esconde”¹⁰. The visuals further complicate the concept of borders by pointing at the separation between the diegetic and the extradiegetic worlds as an unstable and blurry threshold. Los Cuates de Sinaloa – a real Mexican band based in Phoenix (Arizona) and popular also for its narcocorridos – are featured playing guitars and looking straight into the camera while occupying the same scenic space – a staple image of the (New) Mexican desert landscape – of a man viewed from behind and impersonating the mysterious Heisenberg with his signature porkpie hat.

So far, despite the ambiguity introduced by the overlapping between the real “Cuates” and their diegetic counterpart, the singers might be read as characters – that is, as a representation of a narcocorrido band and its cultural function of narrating the drug trade as a heroic form of self-affirmation and resistance – within the fictional world of *Breaking Bad*. However, adding to the feeling of disorientation produced by this unusual opening of the episode, these images are interspersed with what appear to be police stakeout videos showing members of the cartel belonging to the fictional world of the series, such as Tuco Salamanca and Tortuga. Since this fictive footage would be available just to the DEA within the perimeter of the diegesis, the band can use it as visual material accompanying their narcocorrido only if they do not belong to the same level of the narration and are in a position to comment on it from the outside. And yet, such comment emanates from a peculiarly partial perspective, one in which the visual narrative has (and gives) access to what the police knows about the cartel and what the cartel knows about Heisenberg, but not to the latter’s real identity, which is unknown to both the police and the cartel, thus producing a skewed point of view that ambiguously reflects multiple and shifting diegetic positionings while resting on the threshold of them all. Confirming its belonging to a liminal

¹⁰ The English subtitles provided for the TV series audience are as follow: “Now New Mexico’s livin’ up to its name. / Looks just like Mexico / In all the drugs it’s hiding”.

narrative space, one that allows for deep insights yet not omniscient knowledge, the narcocorrido can retrospectively be seen as correctly predicting White's death as a consequence of his involvement in the drug business (rather than his cancer), while it incorrectly attributes his execution to the cartel's retaliation for usurping their territory.

Indeed, White is not killed by any of his antagonists, who are instead eliminated by him one by one, but finds his death in a carefully planned suicidal attack on the Aryan Brotherhood, the neo-Nazi gang that, after briefly taking the cartel's place as Heisenberg's criminal associates, has stolen his \$80 million stash and killed Hank. This finale is where *Breaking Bad* takes a decisive turn away from *Macbeth* and sheds light on the Americanization of the paradigmatic villain/hero character and on the structural differences and similarities between the two systems of power within which the two protagonists operate. The end of the Scottish play portrays Macbeth as utterly isolated, already defeated even before Macduff kills him off stage, humiliated by the sudden revelation of having fallen prey to the Weird Sisters' ambiguous words. In the final scene of the tragedy, it is not Macbeth but the ghastly sight of his severed head that is on stage surrounded by acclamations of his successor, Malcolm. There is no doubt that *Breaking Bad*, despite ending on the death of its protagonist, produces a completely different sense of closure. Having spent a considerable time estranged from his family and hiding out in New Hampshire under a false identity, with cancer no longer in remission and the end of his life fast approaching, Walt White goes back to Albuquerque to see his family one last time and die what he considers a more dignified death than the one he faces because of his terminal illness. Producing one last acceleration in the narrative, we see Walt finding a way to bequest nearly \$10 million to his children through Gretchen and Elliot Schwartz¹¹, fatally

¹¹ Since Jr. refused his money and the police would trace and seize it if he tries to transfer it, Walt intrudes in the Schwartz's mansion and makes them believe that he has hired two hitmen to kill them unless they make a donation corresponding exactly to the sum he leaves with them in cash to a trust fund in the name of his children when Jr. turns eighteen. Thus, believing the money to be part of an

poisoning with ricin Lydia (Laura Fraser) – the uber-greedy and fastidiously prissy partner in crime presiding over the transnational meth distribution – and exterminating the Aryan Brotherhood that had meanwhile literally enslaved Jesse to force him to cook Heisenberg’s blue meth formula for them, only to be fatally hit by a round of bullets shot by an ingenious automated weapon he had himself designed and assembled.

As noted by Emily Nussbaum, despite the main character’s death, this is not a tragic end, but rather a perturbingly “closure-happy” one: “It’s not that Walt needed to suffer, necessarily, for the show’s finale to be challenging, or original, or meaningful: but Walt succeeded with so little true friction – maintaining his legend, reconciling with family, avenging Hank, freeing Jesse, all genuine evil off-loaded onto other, badder bad guys – that it felt quite unlike the destabilizing series that I’d been watching for years” (Nussbaum 2013). Even though I do not agree with some of Nussbaum’s conclusions – e.g., it is hard to say that Walt truly reconciles with his family when Jr. (RJ Mitte) stays unflinching in his decision to cut off any tie with him – it is true that the closure the series pursues comes at a price, with too many ‘wins’ for the protagonist to stay consistent with the relentlessly disturbing and often catastrophic character of the moral choices he has made up until the final episode. The latter thus mixes the series’ ambition towards tragedy with the aesthetics of western and action movies, whereby the (anti)hero dies substantially undefeated and only once his thirst for revenge and his personal sense of justice are appeased through violence spectacularly inflicted on his enemies¹². Despite the demise of his meth empire and the loss of his family, White cannot be said to be unequivocally defeated in the series finale, nor in any way humiliated the way Macbeth is, but rather rises as still the hero of his own story – “I did it for me”, he tells Skyler (season 5, episode 16) – and a powerful force in and over the lives of many around him. It is exactly the specific positioning of Macbeth and

effort by the two philanthropists, Jr. would be in a position to take it without violating his own staunch morality, and the police would not be able to trace it back to White.

¹² Alessandra Stanley, in *The New York Times*, describes the shooting against the Aryan Brotherhood as “a scene from a Quentin Tarantino movie” (Stanley 2013).

White around the axis of power that the last part of this essay will be concerned with.

2. Symmetries

Both of them studies in the nature of evil, *Macbeth* and *Breaking Bad*, as we have seen, position their respective protagonists – at the beginning of their moral descent into crime and towards the end of their parabola – at a very different and even symmetrical angle with regard to power, a positioning that is all the more relevant since the structural echoes as well as the instances of thematical intersection and overlapping between the two texts are unmistakable. A quite emblematic illustration of this nearly specular positioning is the relationship the two men have with sleep, with Macbeth who, lamenting he has murdered sleep itself, famously starts suffering from an impairing insomnia the moment he kills Duncan, and White who confesses that: “Ever since my diagnosis, I sleep just fine” (season 2, episode 8). Given the quite evident connection between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* especially with regard to the characterization of the protagonist, the comparative analysis of this nearly perfectly flipped scenario can shed some light on a relevant aspect of the Shakespearean play and the way in which it is treated in the TV show. This aspect, I will try to demonstrate, is the nature and the operational sphere of sovereign power and its connection to the physical body of the man claiming and wielding it, for which Agamben’s formulation of the relationship between the paradoxical life of the *homo sacer* and the “excessive” life of the emperor will provide fundamental insights¹³.

In a thought-provoking article about sovereign sleep that tries to reconcile within a comprehensive interpretative paradigm Kantorowicz’s theory of the king’s two bodies and Agamben’s concept of bare life, Benjamin Parris argues that “[i]f sleep can be murdered, then the play suggests it has, or better yet *is*, a body with a strange life of its own, which carries a holy valence in the case of sovereign sleep” (Parris 2012, 123). It is because of this mystical

¹³ See Agamben 1998, especially the chapter “Sovereign Body and Sacred Body” (91-103).

holy valence that, Parris further argues, “[i]mmediately upon killing the sovereign [...] Macbeth is visited by a voice that condemns his act *not* as an act of homicide, but rather as a metaphysical violation that murders sleep itself” (129). In maintaining that sleep is a body with a life of its own which is mystically sealed to the king’s natural body, Parris is somehow aligning his thinking to Kantorowicz’s general notion that the sovereign has more than one body, whereas the concept of an act of killing which does not fall under the rubric of homicide clearly brings forth Agamben’s understanding of sovereignty and regicide as juridically inhabiting a space that is not that of ordinary law (a regicide is ‘more than’ a homicide). Agamben, however, develops his notion of the sovereign’s “sacred life”, which would make him a figure perturbingly akin to that of the *homo sacer*, exactly in order to supersede the theory of the two bodies, stating that “it is as if the emperor had in himself not two bodies but rather two lives inside one single body: a natural life and a sacred life” (Agamben 1998, 100). Death is then the moment when these two lives – which are both sealed to the same body natural and, for the structure of sovereignty to be upheld and effectively exert its power, are indistinguishable from each other – get suddenly separated from the body and from each other, so that while the natural life is buried with the body, sacred life survives and is passed on to the king’s successor: “for the sovereign, death reveals the excess that seems to be as such inherent in supreme power, as if supreme power were, in the last analysis, nothing other than *the capacity to constitute oneself and others as life that may be killed but not sacrificed*” (101).

Because sleep resembles death and exposes the extreme vulnerability of the defenseless natural body, sovereign sleep is a condition that eerily allows to glimpse the otherwise unfathomable separation between the two lives of the king. Sleep, however, as Lady Macbeth insists to her insomniac husband, is also a much-needed physiological process, and the alternation between wake and sleep a rule to be observed in order to lead a healthy life. In light of the disorder brought about by Duncan’s killing, it is possible to read sleep as a metaphor transposing the rule of law into the language of biological functions, and insomnia as its suspension, an image of a state of exception inaugurated by the

regicide. In taking the king's life, Macbeth violates the metaphysical order sustaining sovereign power by forcing the separation of the two lives of the king at the moment when their existence, intertwined in the same body natural, becomes perceptible through sleep. By treating Duncan's vulnerable sleeping body as killable bare life, Macbeth produces the suspension of the law without being king, opening a breach into the fabric of sovereignty that immediately translates into the absence of sleep. He even captures the fracture his usurpation of sovereign power produces in him and in the state with extraordinary precision when he tells his wife of the voice he heard after committing the crime: "Still it cried, 'Sleep no more' to all the house; / 'Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more'" (Shakespeare 2015, II.ii.42-44). "Glamis" is the title Macbeth has at the beginning of the play, when he still is considered an honorable nobleman and a valiant soldier, and it is this world that he shatters by killing sleep (the norm) in Duncan's body. "Cawdor" is the title that Duncan had just conferred on him, and it is at this stage of his career that he allows his ambition to prevail on his loyalty; thus, in killing sleep, he produces a suspension of the law that legitimately made him Thane of Cawdor and which retreats from him. "Macbeth" evokes his name as a king, so a projection into the immediate future; being the outcome of usurpation, the title only exists in a state of exception and the absence of sleep signals the impossibility for Macbeth to fully access sovereignty by embodying the norm. For this reason, in becoming king he cannot reconcile himself with sleep (i.e., embody the law he himself as a sovereign constitutes) since, in killing the sovereign – and in actively choosing to do so even though he could have simply waited on his prophesized accession to the throne to come to fruition – Macbeth embodies a fully secular, utterly individual, vicious ambition that radically challenges the "unselfconsciously theologically authorized sovereignty" embodied by Duncan (Drakakis 2013, 135). Thus, despite trying to perform, through the regicide, the constitutive violence by which sovereign power comes into being, Macbeth only attains "a starkly reductive imitation of what is, in reality, the inexplicable paradox that resides at the heart of the institution of sovereignty itself" (139). In other words, he can

no longer sleep because the king's two lives do not adhere perfectly to his body natural, and his sovereign power only embodies the exception and not the norm.

The longing expressed by one of the lords for an ordinary time under the law when

LORD

we may again

Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives;
Do faithful homage, and receive free honours,
All which we pine for now
(Shakespeare 2015, III.vi.33-37)

further confirms Macbeth's rule to consist in the indefinite perpetuation of a state of exception marked by the reiterated performance of constitutive violence, such as the killing of Banquo and the massacre of Macduff's family. No reference is made, in the lines quoted above, to the moral shortcomings of the tyrant as a source of distress, "faithful homage" being tied not to any personal quality of the king but only to his sovereignty, fully embodied as the power to declare the state of exception without the need to perpetuate it endlessly. This fine distinction is foregrounded again in the fourth act, through the quite lengthy exchange between Macduff, who tries to convince him to confront Macbeth and claim the throne of Scotland, and Malcolm who, fearing treason after his father's killing and wanting to test Macduff's allegiance to his cause, gives of himself a hyperbolic account as a quintessential sinner with none of the honorable qualities becoming a king. However, none of the listed vices, from lust to avarice, seems to deter Macduff from his hope that Macbeth will be eventually replaced by Duncan's son, until the young man proclaims that

MALCOLM

had I power, I should

Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
Uproar the universal peace, confound
All unity on earth.
(IV.iii.97-100).

Malcolm too pretends here to be willing to throw the country into a state of exception like the one it is going through under the rule of the usurper of his father's throne.

Signaled by the absence of sleep as exception to a necessary rule, Macbeth's overreaction to the regicide he himself commits can be seen as originating in the sudden realization that, following Agamben's argument, the sovereign inhabits the same liminal territory defining the law as the *homo sacer*, and that the king's sacred life has its symmetrical correspondent in the *homo sacer's* bare life¹⁴. As the latter cannot in any way leave his condition of bare life and stop being the exception producing the law, thus the former cannot in any way separate his body natural from his sacred life and stop determining "the complex dialectic of 'rule' and 'exception'" (Drakakis 2013, 138).

It is exactly this shared liminal space inhabited by both the king and the *homo sacer* that helps us understand how the apparently inconsistent treatment of sleep and insomnia in *Macbeth* and *Breaking Bad* accurately reflects the different positioning of the two protagonists vis-à-vis sovereign power. Whereas Macbeth nearly recoils before the revelation of the king's sacred life and clings onto wakefulness as a sort of protection from the inescapable vulnerability tied up to power, White's reaction to his diagnosis is a pondered one and produces a sweeping shift from an apparently passive surrendering to his fate to a conscious revolt against his ultimate designation as bare life. As he talks to the doctors and learns that not only is his cancer medically incurable but it is also socially and politically untreatable, since any available therapy or support is financially beyond reach for him, Walt comes to realize his positioning at the margins of the sociopolitical order which, by

¹⁴ In her analysis of *Breaking Bad*, Serena Fusco briefly touches upon Agamben's theory reading Walt and Gus as "fac[ing] each other as sovereign and homo sacer", and noticing how the opposition is "both absolute and reversible" since "the sovereign and the homo sacer both inhabit the sphere where law and violence transmigrate into each other and found each other" (Fusco 2016, 36).

abandoning him with no resources, exposes him to death¹⁵. Paradoxically, instead of being deprived of peace because of his utter destitution, White finds determination in knowing exactly the space he inhabits. As he tells a visible shaken new patient in the oncology ward:

I have spent my whole life scared. Frightened of things that could happen, might happen, might not happen. Fifty years I've spent like that. Finding myself awake at 3 in the morning. But you know what? Ever since my diagnosis, I sleep just fine. [...] I came to realize it's that fear that's the worst of it, that's the real enemy. (season 2, episode 8)

Coming to terms with the fact that for society he is already dead (because of incurable cancer) and has long been not really alive (because of both his self-harming choices and the workings of neoliberal capitalism that marks lives like his as expendable) allows Walt to realize how misplaced his fear was. "Things that could happen", "might happen", or "might not happen", in fact, cannot in any way affect his structural positioning as already bare life, since the *homo sacer* is a figure of radical marginality for whom no route is available to be fully included back in the sociopolitical order that depends on his "inclusive exclusion" for its existence¹⁶.

We can thus better understand White's refusal of Gretchen and Elliot's offer to pay for treatments that would prolong his life but that, falling under the category of charity, would still deny him agency and the chance to exert it in ways consistent with his moral code, including the successful performance of prototypically masculine and heteronormative traditional roles (the bread-winner husband, the charismatic father, the high-achiever scientist). For a brief moment in season 1, episode 5, Walt believes and happily reacts to the possibility that Elliot is offering him a job at Gray

¹⁵ Slongo traces to Foucault's seminars of 1972-73 the first evocation of that specific figure of archaic Roman law that Agamben will later bring to the fore of his theory. Foucault does not refer to this figure by the name of *homo sacer*, yet describes it as someone who is not directly condemned to death, but is rather exposed to death by being placed outside the law and its protection, to the point that anybody could kill them with impunity. See Slongo 2019, 641.

¹⁶ Agamben calls "*relation of exception* [...]" the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion" (Agamben 1998, 18).

Matter, the company he had helped founding and from which he had later been estranged, a moment that can be seen as the primary act of exclusion that leaves an indelible mark on Walt's life and is bound to be endlessly replicated until his cancer diagnosis. By rejecting his millionaire friends and their help, Walt is certainly acting out of self-destructive pride, but is also pointing at and revolting against a smaller scale, symbolic version of the sovereign decision including life through its ban. In turning to crime as the sole form of effective agency that is really available to him, he unwittingly exposes and acts upon "the structural analogy between the sovereign exception and *sacratio*" (Agamben 1998, 84), that is to say, the capacity of the former to produce the latter. Moreover, intuitively discarding the structurally impossible transition from the liminal state of bare life to full and empowered citizenship, he boldly attempts to move from one pole of this relationship to the other. As noted by Izzo, in fact, "Walter White becomes the sovereign figure that suspends the law and produces a state of exception claiming for himself the power to decide over the life and death of others" (Izzo 2015, 326, my translation)¹⁷. In other words, since "the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns" (Agamben 1998, 84), these two symmetrical figures occupy a contiguous, even overlapping space where the law is suspended, and where the king can kill without committing a crime and the *homo sacer* can be killed with impunity. The cancer diagnosis roots Walt in this space of indistinction and allows him to see the symmetrical opposite figure of his condition, a positioning which he then tries to claim for himself. When Jesse, trying to convince him to sell their meth operation and retire with millions of dollars each, asks a reluctant Walt whether he is in the meth business or in the money business, he hubristically replies: "Neither. I'm in the empire business" (season 5, episode 6).

Like Macbeth, White compulsively reiterates acts of constitutive violence whereby he tries to establish his own sovereign order,

¹⁷ Izzo reads *Breaking Bad* as a post-9/11 narrative and Walter White as a figure for the U.S. response to the attacks, a response based on the claim to unilateral suspension of the law in order to wage preemptive war against the so-called "rogue states".

which rests precariously on his arrogant belief that, due to his exceptional qualities as a chemist, he cannot be replaced, and Heisenberg will reign over the production and distribution of the finest meth in the world until his death. This extreme self-confidence betrays his delusional belief that by accessing sovereignty he can leave behind all traces of utter vulnerability connected to bare life. Unlike Macbeth, White starts sleeping well exactly because he is blind to the intimate interdependence between sovereignty and *sacratio*. It is for this reason that, in probably one of the most famous scenes of the series, he tells his wife: "I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No! I am the one who knocks!" (season 4, episode 6), as if his power exempted him from any form of vulnerability.

In the last part of the series, Walt is pushed back towards the pole of bare life as he loses his family, money, influence, even his name, and is left with only his frail, cancer ridden body to protect from the DEA and the Aryan Brotherhood alike. He spends several months into hiding, living in an isolated hut in New Hampshire under a false name and letting the realization of his condition slowly sink in. The surrounding landscape – cold, snowy – marks such a stark difference with suburban New Mexico and its warm colors as to become a constant visual reminder of his ban: hunted, invisible, he has no right other than to die or let himself be killed. When he goes back to Albuquerque, the way he moves across space draws attention to his condition as a *homo sacer*, a paradoxical figure of undeadness, and anticipates his actual death. Between visiting Skyler, watching Jr. get back home from school, illegally buying weapons, meeting with his once partners Lydia and Uncle Jack, breaking into the Schwartz residence, Walt always appears and disappears from houses, streets, public venues like a ghost, unseen by most and manifesting his presence only to those he decides to meet. And yet, even in this we can see a claim to agency, a revolt against one's condition. It is not society that marks him as invisible, but Walt who removes himself from the field of visibility to exert some leverage in the world despite his condition of ban. Again, and until the very last moment of the narrative, Walt reiterates his challenge to a sociopolitical order that constitutes him as

expendable bare life. Dispensing retribution and bequeathing what remains of his fortune, dictating even the terms of Skyler's negotiation with the DEA after his death, Walt incessantly repeats his uncompromising claim to agency in the face of a structure of power that depends on the capacity to produce him as bare life in order to preserve its own existence. By choosing how and when to die, thus taking such decision away from any external force, Walt brings a radical challenge to sovereign power that, regardless of its efficacy, aims at exposing its constitutive capacity to decide over life/death.

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Shakespeare in Washington: From *House of Cards* to Capitol Hill

Carlo Pagetti

In the twentieth century Shakespeare became a sort of incubator of mass culture and its formulaic genres. The history of Richard III enjoyed a popularity of its own: this Machiavellian dark lord was explored in an American context by Al Pacino in the movie *Looking for Richard* (1996), where one of the main characters, Buckingham, was acted by Kevin Spacey. Together with director Sam Mendes, Spacey, in the role of Richard Gloucester, made of *Richard III* the main performance in their ambitious Bridge Project (2011).

The experience achieved by Spacey was crucial in the creation of the TV Netflix series *House of Cards*, conceived by Beau Willimon, whose pilot, directed by David Fincher, and aired on February 1, 2013, introduced the viewers to the deeds and misdeeds of the ambitious, scornful, ruthless American politician Frank Underwood, resolved to destroy enemies and friends in order to become President of the United States, explicitly a contemporary Richard Gloucester, also partly Iago, and partly Macbeth, supported by his wife Claire, interpreted by Robin Wright, a power-hungry Lady Macbeth.

Keywords: *House of Cards*, Kevin Spacey, *Richard III*, American Presidents

In *The Alteration*, an alternative history novel published in 1976 by the well-known British author Kingsley Amis, England is ruled by a repressive Catholic regime, and the great theatrical season flowering between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century never did blossom. While trying to fly from his destiny, Hubert, a young opera singer who must undergo castration in order to have his beautiful voice preserved, is captured by Jacob, a Jewish kidnapper of rich people, who asks for a ransom to free them. Jacob explains to Hubert that the Jews are discriminated and persecuted, and utter “some

harangue or recitation” Hubert had never heard before: “Have we not eyes? Have we not hands, organs, proportions, senses, affections, passions?”, and so on (Amis 1978, 151). To the reader there are no doubts that Jacob is quoting Shylock’s memorable speech in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (III.i.49-61). That speech as well as the name of the playwright are unknown in Amis’s authoritarian England:

“You know those words? You know who wrote those words?”

“No”.

“No. Your priests burnt his playhouse and his books, and would have burnt him besides but for the King, whom he’d once made to laugh”.

“Laugh? What was his name?”

“So instead, you know what they did, those priests? They attached his goods and excommunicated him and transported him to New England. There, you may see his plays”.

“In New England?”

“Yes, in New England. So, then?”. (Amis 1978, 152)

As the imagined American Shakespeare is obviously a political author and the TV series *House of Cards* with its feigned President the main topic dealt with in this paper, we might envisage a New England *Tempest* in which two brave sailors defeat the tyrannical Duke of Milan and his minions with the help of a proud Indian warrior in order to establish the utopian commonwealth suggested by the theories of an old courtesan.

The appropriation of Shakespeare in the new American Republic implied the creation of an American Shakespeare canon, based on the belief that Shakespeare’s plays embodied democratic values, such as the rebellion against absolute monarchy and the overthrowing of bloody tyrants. In a sense, the United States was the true country where Shakespeare’s expectations could be fulfilled.

Such a patriotic interpretation was reinforced by the American playwright and amateur critic Delia Bacon’s theories about Shakespeare’s authorship, included in Bacon’s *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* (1857), sponsored by Nathaniel Hawthorne, who, few years later, in a 1863 essay, would “shap[e] for posterity the unshakable image of Bacon as a madwoman in the

attic, a gothic figure who might have stepped out of the pages of his fiction" (Shapiro 2010, 121). Yet, although there is no documentary evidence supporting Bacon's findings, one admits that her remarks are quite fascinating, as they coalesce around a "compelling story of how a handful of remarkable and frustrated men, led by Bacon, began collaborating, through great drama, to oppose the 'despotism' of Queen Elizabeth and King James" (107). The fact that Delia Bacon gained a certain number of cultured sympathizers is proof that a democratic collective 'Shakespeare' was popular among the American literati and statesmen.

In any case, Shakespeare was a strong influence in nineteenth-century literary America. In *The American Renaissance* (1941), F. O. Matthiessen pinpoints his overwhelming impact on the thought and the works of Melville and other contemporary writers. Towards the end of the century, when the faith in an autonomous American culture gave rise to a hostile reaction against well-established British literary monuments such as Walter Scott and Shakespeare himself, Mark Twain's parodic bits and shreds scattered in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) forebode the deconstruction of the Bard in the popular culture of the twentieth century.

Thus, in David Brin's *The Postman* (1985), and more explicitly in the ensuing film directed and interpreted by Kevin Costner in 1997, the 'postman' Gordon Krantz performs a "bastardized, one-man version of *Macbeth*" to the inhabitants of a "Post-Chaos" American village (Brin 1985, 33-34). The implication underlying this clever science fiction novel suggests that America will be rebuilt by reconstructing the full text of a Shakespearean tragedy.

Another piece half-memorized by Gordon and appreciated by his audience is an "inspiring speech [...], that one of Abraham Lincoln's" (Brin 1985, 36), the Gettysburg Address, most likely. The real Abraham Lincoln was an enthusiastic admirer of Shakespeare's plays on the stage:

The histories and tragedies of Shakespeare that Lincoln loved most dealt with themes that would resonate to a president in the midst of civil war: political intrigue, the burdens of power, the nature of ambition, the relationship of leaders to those they governed. The plays

illuminated with stark beauty the dire consequences of civil strife, the evil wrought by jealousy and disloyalty [...]. (Goodwin 2005, 611-12)

Among his favorite plays, frequently studied and perused by him, Lincoln enumerated to the actor James Hackett: "Lear, Richard Third, Henry Eighth, Hamlet, and especially Macbeth" (611). In March 1864, one of the best young players, Edwin Booth was admired by Lincoln and by his former political rival William Henry Seward, now secretary of state, in Grover's Theatre, Washington: "They saw Booth in the title roles of Hamlet and Richard III. They applauded his performance as Brutus in *Julius Caesar* and as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*" (612). Thirteen months later, on April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth, Edwin's younger brother and an actor himself, played the role of an American Brutus off stage, killing the President, he considered a new Caesar, in Ford's Theatre, Washington.

In the visual arts, the popularity of Shakespeare was captured by John Singer Sargent in his queenly portrait of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth (1889), now at the Tate Britain Gallery, London. For the American intellectual elite the journey to England was planned also to see Shakespeare rehearsed on the London stage by the best contemporary players. This is the case of Henry James, who had read and loved Shakespeare since his childhood:

All of Henry James's work shows that he had been saturated with Shakespeare from his earliest days. He had known him as a boy in Lamb's re-telling of the plays; he had seen him acted in many forms – not only the Shakespeare of old New York theatres, but the Shakespeare of Dickensian London, and the Shakespeare of the Lyceum, the heavily costumed creatures of Henry Irving. (Edel 1977, 2:476)

Among Shakespeare's dramas, two of them were especially pertinent in the United States: *Othello*, because of the controversial mixed-blood marriage between Othello and Desdemona, pilloried also by President John Quincy Adams in 1835 (Shapiro 2020, 25-27), and *The Tempest*, the American play *par excellence*, both for its colonial setting and for the evolutionary implications of Caliban's character (159-62).

From the end of the nineteenth century, the United States witnessed the diffusion of the popular culture of the dime novels, and other printed forms of entertainment, in which the role of literary tradition was not obliterated, but, rather, made subservient to the needs of a large reading public, who could appreciate – or even be gratified by – Shakespearean plots, dramatic characters, quotations. The growth of the film industry was another landmark, and Shakespeare was one of the first classic sources exploited on the screen. He increasingly became a sort of incubator of mass culture and its formulaic genres on the screen and on the page: western, detective stories, romance, fantasy and science fiction, graphic novels (Pagetti and Cavecchi 2012-13).

Recent American television series adopt and manipulate Shakespearean plots and characters, both in the field of epic (*Game of Thrones*) and in the arena of political drama (Dyson 2019). The extremely successful *Game of Thrones* (2011-19, 8 seasons) had a distinctive imprint drawn from Shakespeare's history plays, particularly the ones involving the Wars of the Roses and the ruthless fight for the crown opposing different feudal families, although the surplus of sex would be unconceivable on the Elizabethan stage and the large amount of heroic fantasy recalls less Shakespeare than Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* stories and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Also Walter Scott's historical romance, one of Mark Twain's main polemical targets, plays a role especially in *Game of Thrones*, that could be enjoyed as a parody of the medieval values of honor, chastity, and loyalty.

In any case, the Shakespearean trend is enhanced by the acting of British and American players who had interpreted Shakespeare on the stage: in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (the second TV series, 1987-94, and a few following movies), Patrick Stewart was Jean-Luc Picard, the captain of the starship *Enterprise*. In Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*, a cinematic trilogy constantly rerun on the TV screen, Ian McKellen was Gandalf, the providential white magician. As we will see, the versatile Kevin Spacey, the main character in *House of Cards* (2013-until he was fired in 2017), is an outstanding Shakespearean actor himself.

One of the main Shakespearean figures scrutinized by the American culture is, without any doubt, the devious, crookback

Richard III. Shakespeare himself was aware of the dramatic potentialities of his Machiavellian villain, and he worked on him both in 2 *Henry VI* and 3 *Henry VI*, changing his identity from fanatical supporter of the family cause and of his father, the Duke of York, to brooding schemer denying any blood link, before unleashing all his ambiguous power of seduction (on other characters and on the audience as well) in *Richard III*. In a sense, Frank Underwood's character in *House of Cards* is the template of Shakespeare's Richard Gloucester, who consciously construes his own role in the *Henry VI* plays, until he emerges as an arch-villain, opening his mind only to the audience, in 3 *Henry VI* (*Richard Duke of York*, in the *Norton Shakespeare Histories* volume based on the Oxford Edition), to whom he reveals that he will "set the murderous Machiavel to school":

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
And cry "Content!" to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions. (Shakespeare 2008, 3*HVI*, III.ii.193
and 182-85)

This psychological development is apparent on the screen in the 1955 colorful historical drama by Laurence Olivier, acting the lead role and directing his own production of *Richard III*. In any case, terrifying villains such as Richard III and Macbeth achieved a new strength and urgency in the aftermath of World War II, as embodiments of the Nazi *Übermensch* ideological madness (Pagetti 2007). In the same context, the heterogeneous sprawling field of American popular culture was ready to participate to the Shakespearean banquet cannibalizing, and sometimes cleverly exploiting, a whole lot of Shakespearean paraphernalia, to be exhibited to a huge audience and reading public.

In 1996, Al Pacino directed and interpreted *Looking for Richard*, an intriguing movie probing into the meaning and actual possibility of creating a version of Shakespeare's play in his own country, where the historical knowledge of medieval England and the intricacies of Shakespeare's language were largely ignored. As Pacino debates with his fellow players, a couple of British

Shakespearean actors, and a few outstanding scholars, the same rhythms of the blank verse are alien to the tradition of American theatre, although a few scattered pieces of performance in which Pacino gets the lion's share do suggest that the project of an American Richard is indeed feasible, maybe on the screen more than on the stage. One of the actors taking part in the tentative rehearsals is a youthful Kevin Spacey. Although I would not call Spacey's interpretation of Buckingham memorable (he is deprived of the repentant man's soliloquy in the Tower before his beheading), Spacey enlivens the role with sufficient ease and a touch of candor, as one of the credulous allies of the "bottled spider" (Shakespeare 2008, *RIII*). Spacey, at the beginning of a brilliant career as a movie actor, had played the cripple Roger "Verbal" Kint, a subtle and cunning character in *The Usual Suspects* (1995), directed by Bryan Singer, where he deceives the police officers questioning him about the criminal activities he was involved in by conjuring up the figure of an obscure gang leader, actually a double of himself. Spacey's American proto-Gloucester, feigning his deformity, is unmasked too late, while the spectators see him leave the police station without hobbling and realize he was pretending to be a lame man. They were deceived as well.

A few years later, in 2011, Spacey and Richard Gloucester would meet again, this time on the stage, with the help of Sam Mendes, who had directed Spacey in the prize-winning *American Beauty* (1999). While Spacey had been artistic director of the London Old Vic since 2003, Sam Mendes was in charge of an ambitious international enterprise, the Bridge Project (Spacey, Mendes and the Bridge Project Company 2013), culminating in the performance of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, in which Spacey had the leading role, to be staged around the world, or, rather, to the Anglo-American global audiences (Pittman 2020, 6). After the debut at the Old Vic Theatre (June 18, 2011), *Richard III* was rehearsed also at the Politeama Theatre, Naples, on October 14 and 15, 2011. Spacey's interpretation was certainly impressive: a grim and sardonic hunchback, held up by a sort of orthopedic device imprisoning his left leg, and striding like a strange crustacean, he unleashes the ruthless demeanor of a grotesque creature determined to grab and preserve the crown, at the same time well aware that he has to fight

not only against his enemies, but also against his physical inadequacies. The coronation scene in which, enwrapped in an oversized royal cloak, the new king, striding towards the throne and turning his misshapen shoulders to the audience, stumbles and falls clumsily to the ground is one of the best theatrical tricks I have personally seen performed.

It is worth remembering that Mendes and Spacey were eager to pinpoint the present-day implications of their *mise-en-scène*, mentioning two dictators, Gaddafi and Mubarak, as contemporary counterparts of the Elizabethan Gloucester (Mendes and Spacey 2011). To bring home these implications, Spacey wore dark sunglasses, the ones favored by the Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi (Pittman 2020, 4). Ten years later, one wonders what they would make of the behavior of a very recent American President. One point Spacey stresses is the “unique, very special” relationship Richard establishes with the audience, because “[he] confides in his audience, and they become his co-conspirators” (Mendes and Spacey 2011). Mendes adds to Spacey’s remark: “only with Richard and Falstaff do you have a man walk to the front of the stage, eyeball the audience, and say ‘you, you people sitting in these seats, I’m talking to you directly’. It remains daring, even now” (Mendes and Spacey 2011).

While the Bridge Project was approaching his conclusion, Spacey was being involved in the production of *House of Cards*, an ambitious Netflix TV series, together with film director David Fincher, with whom he had acted in *Seven* (1995), and Beau Willimon, the original creator and scriptwriter, adapting the British author and former Conservative politician Michael Dobbs’s novel with the same title, published in 1989, and shifting it to an overtly American background, with its location based in Washington, D.C. The BBC had broadcast an English version of it in 1990. In an interview released to *The Baltimore Sun*, Spacey declared: “The great thing about the original series and Michael Dobson’s [sic] book is that they were based on Shakespeare. The direct address is absolutely *Richard III*” (quoted in *HuffPost* 2017).

On February 1, 2013, “Chapter 1”, the pilot episode, directed by Fincher, was shown on Netflix, and *House of Cards* became immediately popular, especially thanks to the performances of

Spacey (Frank Underwood, a very ambitious, experienced South Carolina congressman), and Robin Wright (his wife Claire, a veritable American Lady Macbeth). Obviously, the strong female role played by Wright immediately suggests comparisons with *Macbeth* (Auxier 2016). Yet Claire achieved a full relevance only in the following series, stretching until 2017, when, during the production of season 6, Spacey's fall into disgrace (not as an actor, but for his personal behavior as a sexual predator, although he would be acquitted of all charges brought against him) meant the exclusion of his character from the series and, ultimately, in 2018, the cancellation of the whole political saga. It is likely that the popularity of *House of Cards* was enhanced by the digging out of the bodily remains of the 'real' Richard III in Leicester (2013), and by the celebration of the Yorkist king: "it is as if Richard has found a new way to live. He has escaped the grave and moved from England. Frank is the new 'boar' who devours ribs, hates children, wields the power of his Lady Macbeth-like wife, and needs no horse" (Walker 2014, 411). In more than one sense, Underwood is certainly a hungry creature, mauling his prey like a shark or swallowing two plates of ribs at 7:30 AM at *Freddy's*.

Undoubtedly, from the very beginning, Shakespeare is the divinity presiding on *House of Cards*, through the agency of Spacey and his expertise as stage actor, despite the fact that the television medium, as it happens in a movie (i.e. in Oliver's *Richard III*), requires different techniques, and the extensive use of close-ups. The supple, ironical face of Spacey is pivotal in shaping the identity of a mischievous, razor-sharp mind, trying to seduce not only the other characters, but also the spectators, his willing accomplices, sharing his dark scheming and agreeing with his evaluation of foes and potential allies. As we are going to consider the pilot episode (a sort of declaration of intents) directed by Fincher, we will focus on Spacey-Underwood as Richard Gloucester, putting aside other remarkable influences, ranging from Macbeth to Iago. In the case of Iago, Underwood's nasty innuendos undermining President Garrett Walker's self-esteem clearly suggest an Othello-Iago relationship, but Walker, as a President-elect, is largely absent in "Chapter 1": Walker speaks through Linda Vasquez (Sakina Jaffrey), his Chief of Staff, a Latino (as Underwood tells the viewer,

with a touch of racial slur), in order to deny Underwood the job of secretary of state promised to him, because Walker (or, rather, Linda) believes he will be more useful as Majority Chief Whip in the Congress. In any case, in the pilot Underwood's asides, his frequent "breaking of the fourth wall" (*HuffPost* 2017), establish a pattern reminding at least the more educated spectators of Richard Gloucester's first soliloquies:

Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams
To set my brother Clarence and the King
In deadly hate the one against the other. (Shakespeare 2008, *RIII*,
III.i.32-35)

The picture is completed by the pleasant, carefree, somewhat humorous behavior employed by Underwood in his talking exchanges with friends and enemies, adding a genteel Southern flavor to the character. Yet, "I don't trust anyone", says he looking beyond the screen towards us, his invisible partners in crime¹. During the Presidential Inauguration Ceremony, we see him dancing and even prettily flirting with a woman politician he is manipulating. The Inauguration Ceremony allows the director and the scriptwriter to show a wide range of relevant characters, while stressing, at the same time, Underwood's loneliness, when his face fills the frame and he confidentially opens his own mind to the spectators. He is a sort of Hobbesian "Foole", who "reaps the benefits of the social contract [...] while betraying those around him" (Courtland 2016, 117).

Fincher and Willimon drew inspiration for the Presidential Inauguration from the beginning of Oliver's *Richard III*, with the gorgeous crowning of Edward IV. There, only when the court moves into the open air and rearranges itself in a magnificent pageant, the dark shadow of the crookback speaks out his own sinister and menacing mind to the audience. In *House of Cards*, we participate in the Presidential Inauguration and enjoy the merry procession of political winners, from whom Underwood-Richard,

¹ All the quotations from the TV series are taken from Fincher 2013.

very much one of them, detaches himself when he vents his bitterness and irony on the viewers.

As a matter of fact, the incipit of the pilot – or, maybe, we should say, its prologue – consists of a short episode, beginning with the noise of a car hitting someone or something in the dark. Frank Underwood steps out of his house, finds a dog hurt by the car, and decides to kill him, giving us a philosophical piece of his mind, based on his (very personal) distinction between useful and useless pain: “I have no patience for useless things”. Therefore, he kills the wounded dog, while “we begin to realize that we are somehow involved in what we are seeing. He looks at the camera – at us directly – and we have our first Underwood aside” (Gray 2016, 16). The metafictional techniques employed by Fincher break down the illusion that both the characters and viewers of *House of Cards* live in a coherent, ethically sound society: if ‘we’, the viewers, stand for Underwood, we plunge into his amoral world, and become postmodern subjects shrouded in his dark thoughts: “there’s no denying that there’s something inexplicably alluring when Frank turns to us, like the lure of a mythic siren beckoning us to rocky shores” (Aarons 2016, 57). As Shakespeare’s villain says to the audience in the above mentioned soliloquy in 3 *Henry VI*: “I’ll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall / I’ll slay more gazers than the basilisk” (Shakespeare 2008, 3HVI, III.ii.186-87). “Gazers”, indeed, are the viewers of *House of Cards*. Thanks to a televisual illusion, the viewer is permitted to be in touch – to touch – two Underwoods: the representative of the glamorous world of the Washington political elite, and the brotherly mate visiting his/her home and whispering to him/her his mischievous project beyond the looking-glass of the family television set. After all, we know the devil does exist in different places, times, shapes.

“Welcome to Washington”, Underwood says in one of his first asides. The devious (certainly not ‘frank’) Underwood hovers on the scene as a bird of prey, patiently waiting for the right time to strike in the post-Darwin world Shakespeare had foreseen in *Richard III*. Also the love relationship between Frank and his wife Claire (who revealingly calls him Francis, as if, for her, the private persona were different from the public statesman) is formulated by Underwood through a Darwinian metaphor: “I love that woman. I

love her more than sharks love blood". Much more restrained, Claire emphasizes the need of the couple to be perfectly tuned: "[W]e do things together". The fact that Claire ruthlessly manages an international charity organization constitutes a sub-plot reinforcing the role of Claire as the double of the main character, whose first name re-echoes hers: Frank and Claire, indeed.

The strong bond with Claire does not prevent Frank, or Francis, Underwood from radiating his erotic desires all around, especially when he can subjugate his lovers for his own benefit. Thus, "Chapter 1" introduces the character of the ambitious young journalist Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara), who is ready to establish a secret sexual liaison with the outstanding politician in order to win access to important government documents. She will not enjoy a long life in Washington. Engineering potential sexual scandals is one of the weapons Underwood cynically deploys, also because he is well aware that his enemies, as well as his (temporary) allies, are weak, corrupted individuals, easily blackmailed, as it happens with Philadelphia representative Peter Russo (Corey Stoll), a jovial womanizer and drunkard. After encouraging his ambitions, Underwood will destroy him, as Richard Gloucester had done with Hastings or Buckingham. Later in the series, we will see that even his faithful murderous secretary Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly) – a sort of Tyrrell to Richard III – is not completely without soft spots. Anyway, he is another of Underwood's shadows, doubling him, if necessary, and speaking in the first person plural: "We can help with that", he suggests, during a secret meeting with the police commissioner who would like to be appointed Mayor of Washington.

It is worth noticing that recent interpretations have dwelt on Richard Gloucester's subversive erotic drive (Greenblatt 2008, 366). In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the sexually charged meeting between Richard and Anne is the best example, but we remember other instances in which sex and power are entangled, as in the only mentioned figure of Mrs. Shore, whose favors both King Edward IV and Lord Hastings enjoy. Incidentally, in Laurence Olivier's *Richard III*, Mrs. Shore did appear physically in the coronation scene. Richard Gloucester's sally to Clarence, unjustly imprisoned in the Tower by their brother the King – "Why, this it is when men

are ruled by women" (Shakespeare 2008, *RIII*, I.i.62) – is relevant also in the Republic of the United States. Also Richard III's speech to his soldiers before the battle of Bosworth harps brutally, even gloatingly, on the violation of the objectified female bodies, explicitly compared with the land, which the victory of the "bastard Bretons" would entail: "Shall these enjoy our lands? Lie with our wives? / Ravish our daughters?" (V.vii.66-67).

The American Shakespeare is basically involved in politics, and the American Richard is not necessarily a mean or ineffectual leader, but one willing to obliterate moral principles and personal alliances in order to rule. After all, there is a continuity between Lincoln-Julius Caesar murdered by Booth-Brutus and the would-be President-as-villain played by Spacey-Underwood, except for the fact that we have shifted from one of the most tragic events in the history of the United States to the studios of a successful TV series. Let us move back to the political reality of contemporary history. Can we see, after the recent events culminating in the insurrection and the invasion of Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, Donald Trump as King Lear, a raving, revengeful old man (overthrown, ironically, by an older rival), as it was suggested by Kathleen Parker in *The Washington Post*?

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare's tragic protagonist comes to life as fiction's most powerful example of narcissistic personality disorder, a man who devolves from being a mere fool to gradually going mad.

For the past four years, we've witnessed a similar tragedy in the person of Donald Trump, who might have been a great president but for his own many personality disorders. (Parker 2021)

The psychological approach of the *Washington Post* columnist is not entirely satisfactory in the case both of the Shakespearean tragic character and of the former U.S. President, but it is certainly revealing of the persistence of Shakespeare's world in contemporary culture. Two years before, in 2019, another *Washington Post* opinion maker, Henry Olsen, had compared Trump, under siege as the Democrats threatened to impeach him, to Lear:

An angry, bitter man who believes himself the victim of injustice will not go quietly into the night. Instead, he will meditate on the mischief of his foes and lash out.

[...]. Just as Lear found comfort in the army of the king of France, which arrived with his rejected daughter, Cordelia, to avenge his deposition, so, too, will Trump find comfort in the army of the Republican Party. (Olsen 2019)

Maybe the comparison with King Lear is a bit generous, and Trump did not certainly have to face Lear's ungrateful daughters. Trump's notorious use of fake news might indeed make him more similar to Richard Gloucester.

However, as far as Shakespeare (a great plotter in the realm of theatre and literature) is concerned, one wonders whether we might also consider in *2 Henry VI* the figure of Jack Cade, the king of misrule, self-proclaimed heir of Mortimer, therefore legitimate king of England, breaking the relatively peaceful order of the English hierarchy, full of Satanic energy. Shakespeare's rebel is not unworthy of a brave death, when he fights, a starving and destitute man, against Alexander Iden, a minor squire in Kent, who will be handsomely rewarded by the king (Shakespeare 2008, *2HVI*, V.i).

The populace following Cade and ransacking London is represented by Shakespeare as a foolish and ruthless mob, murdering their hostages because, like the Clerk of Chatham, they can write and read:

CADE

[...] Dost thou use to write thy name? Or hast thou a mark to thyself like an honest plain-dealing man?

CLERK

Sir, I thank God I have been so well brought up that I can write my name.

ALL CADE'S FOLLOWERS

He hath confessed – away with him! He's a villain and a traitor.

CADE

Away with him, I say, hang him with his pen and inkhorn about his neck. (Shakespeare 2008, *2HVI*, IV.ii.91-99)

We might imagine the Clerk of Chatham as one of the despised intellectuals belonging to the ‘deep state’ or “the New World Order”, denounced by Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric, when, on January 6, 2021, he “rehearsed the debunked allegations of massive fraud which he’d be propagating for months” (Mogelson 2021) to a mixed lot of faithful fanatics. “Before Trump had even finished his speech, approximately eight thousand people started moving up the Mall. ‘We’re storming the Capitol!’ some yelled” (Mogelson 2021), in a debased carnivalesque rewriting of the invasion of London undertaken by Jack Cade’s ragtag army. In Washington, a host of lunatics, deranged patriots and libertarians, white supremacists, self-styled Proud Boys and picturesque QAnon followers, broke into the Capitol building.

Theirs is neither the power nor the glory. Ultimately, as it happens in Shakespeare’s plays, victory belongs to the ruling class. The grinning face of Frank Underwood, like the Cheshire Cat’s, haunts us even after the downfall of the villain. “We’re in the same boat now, Zoe”, in the pilot of *House of Cards* says Richard the Shark to his accomplice, soon to become his victim, while they watch together not a TV screen, but a large picture with two rovers pushing a boat, and adds: “Take care not to tip it over. I can only save one of us from drowning”. Zoe will die without even understanding what is happening to her. In the Elizabethan universe, where God still existed, Richard Gloucester’s first victim, George of Clarence, was prophetically warned of his murder by a nightmare, related to Brackenbury, the Lieutenant of the Tower of London. Both “my brother Gloucester” and himself were “embarked to cross to Burgundy”:

[...] As we paced along
 Upon the giddy footing of the hatches,
 Methought that Gloucester stumbled, and in falling
 Struck me – that sought to stay him – overboard
 Into the tumbling billows of the main.
 O Lord! Methought what pain it was to drown,
 What dreadful noise of waters in my ears,
 What sights of ugly death within my eyes. (Shakespeare 2008, *RIII*,
 I.iv.16-23)

The metaphor of the sinking ship (and of the drowning seafarers) belongs to an old cultural tradition. In our bitter times, it could be applied to Donald Gloucester throwing overboard his former faithful ally (Vice President Mike Pence?), or to the mutinous fury of Trump's followers swallowing up the ship of state.

Waiting for the new episode of a very American saga, we wonder: where is Prospero? *Who is Prospero?*

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MISCELLANY

Murder by Words*

Franco Moretti

The title of this essay comes from Hölderlin's "Remarks on *Antigone*", and the realization that in tragedy the most significant – and dangerous – acts are the words a character utters. After briefly discussing how wars and civil wars have offered the tragic imagination some of its typical materials, the essay examines two extreme cases – Sophocles' *Antigone* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* – that make certain aspects of tragic form particularly clear. In their antithetical ways, Sophocles' dialogues and Shakespeare's soliloquies illustrate the way words accompany the course of action, especially near the turning-points of Antigone's and Macbeth's existence. A brief coda on Büchner's *Danton's Death* will suggest a possible nexus between tragic form and the modern perception of history.

Keywords: Tragedy, Civil war, Stichomythia, Poetry, Hegel

1.

My title comes from Hölderlin's "Remarks on *Antigone*", where he writes, with his typical compression, that "[t]he Greek-tragic word is deadly-factual", and finds its logical conclusion in "the actual murder with words" (Hölderlin 1988, 113-14). At times, words kill in the literal sense: they have a coercive power from which death follows inevitably. Creon's order that Antigone be buried alive *is* her death, just as Schiller's Grand Inquisitor *de facto* executes Don Carlos by proving to King Philip that he has the politico-theological

* These pages were given as a Zoom lecture for the cycle "Extrema Ratio. Lezioni per questo tempo", organized by the University of Siena in 2020. In translating them, I have tried to preserve the spoken and slightly uncanny feel of that period. The three main texts used in the talk are Sophocles 1998, Shakespeare 1972 and Büchner 2012.

duty to sacrifice his son. Elsewhere, the effect is less direct, as when Pylades, in the single line he is given in the *Choephoroi*, evokes the oracles of Apollo to overcome Orestes' hesitation in front of Clytemnestra, or when Iago beguiles Othello into avenging a betrayal that has never occurred. The strategies differ, but in all cases a harrowing death is accompanied – and usually prompted – by memorable language.

Words kill, because in tragedy they are part of a conflict that becomes rapidly radicalized to the point that death becomes unavoidable. To be sure, not all plays we call tragedies lead to death, nor do all theorists associate tragedy and conflict; in the *Poetics*, for instance, tragedy consists in a “chang[e] from prosperity to adversity”, where the essential point is the shift from one extreme condition to the opposite one rather than conflict as such (Aristotle 1995, 69). The idea becomes truly central only in Hegel's *Aesthetics*:

[D]ramatic action [...] rests entirely on *collisions* of circumstances, passions, and characters [...]. Therefore what we see in front of us are certain ends individualized in living characters and very conflicting situations. (Hegel 1975, 2:1159)

“Conflicting situations”, then. But of what kind?

2.

With a struggle to death, it's almost inevitable to think of war; and, neat coincidence, the oldest tragedy we have, *Persians*, has indeed at its center one of the most famous battles in history – the Battle of Salamis. But by the time the play opens, the war is already over: a messenger reports what has happened to the Persian court, but tragedy lies *in what follows* the battle. *Agamemnon* opens with a servant, on the roof of the royal palace, at night, “like a watchdog”, to see whether a flame flares up; and it does, on Mount Ida, then Lemnos, Mount Athos, closer and closer to Argos. “Fire in the night”: the signal that Troy has fallen (and is of course burning), and that the Greeks are coming home. War – *the* war of antiquity – is over. And now tragedy begins. *Antigone*, the first choral ode:

“Beam of the sun, fairer than all that have shone before for seven-gated Thebes, finally you shone forth, eye of golden day” (Sophocles 1998, 100-4). The long night has ended, the Seven have been defeated, Thebes is saved, war is over – tragedy has already begun. *Hamlet* opens, like *Agamemnon*, at night: a group of soldiers atop a castle, nervous, talking of recent wars and wondering about current threats; a ghost in battle armor appears. But in the next scene the King sends an embassy to Norway, and the war is avoided. An army will eventually cross the stage, but is headed elsewhere. War is close, but is not *inside* the play.

A war that simultaneously *is* there, and isn't. It is there in order to shatter the constraints of ordinary life, unleashing the violence that is necessary for tragic plots. *Macbeth's* double opening: the witches – and the battle that reveals Macbeth's capacity for killing. But they're really the same thing. War is what *liberates the witches*. What was dark and unthinkable comes into the open.

War as a trigger for tragedy, then – but almost never as its core. Because war is usually waged against an external enemy – Persians, Turks, Protestants, the enemies of Brandenburg, whatever – whereas tragedy focuses on *internal* enemies. Civil war. “The war within the family”, as the French classicist Nicole Loraux has called it in a great essay (Loraux 1997): *Seven Against Thebes*, with the two brothers who kill one another in front of their city; Lear's daughters, Nero and Britannicus, Karl and Franz Moor... And then the oedipal thread of children against parents and parents against children – Oedipus, Orestes, Electra, Hamlet, Segismundo, Carlos...

Civil war, then, as the horizon of tragic form; but horizon only, because in the theater all is mediated by a handful of individuals, and the representation of politics is inevitably stylized – the war within *the family*, not within the state. Still, a couple of strong structural parallels exist. Civil wars “don't accept the legitimacy of neutrality”, writes the Italian historian Gabriele Ranzato; there is of course a “grey area' [of] all those who aren't clearly taking sides”, “an area which is usually much broader than that of actual fighters” (Ranzato 1994, xlvi, my translation); but the fighters don't recognize such a choice as legitimate, they want everyone to take sides, and if they don't, they crush them. In *Hamlet*, only Laertes

takes sides between Hamlet and the King, but whoever comes near the two antagonists ends up dead just the same – and in fact neutral characters are the first to die: Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Gertrude, and finally Laertes as well.

Rejection of neutrality; and then, “a violence that completely exceeds the finality of war”, as Ranzato puts it: “social and political contrasts, radical as they might be, are never enough to explain the cloud of violence typical of civil war” (Ranzato 1994, xlv-xlvi, my translation). Same in tragedy. Not just death, but torture, blinding, incest, mutilation, rape, dismemberment, cannibalism: *Bacchae*, *Oedipus*, Seneca, *Lear*, the Jacobean, Lenz’s *Soldaten*, *Penthesilea*, *Lulu*...

3.

How does one speak of a literary genre that has existed for twenty-five centuries in half an hour? One solution is to look for the ‘center’ of the genre. “*Tristram Shandy*”, wrote Shklovsky in *Theory of Prose*, “is the most typical novel in world literature” (Shklovsky 1991, 170). You understand Sterne, you understand all novels. Shklovsky was perhaps the greatest literary theorist of the past century, but on this point he was wrong, and I will do exactly the opposite of what he recommends: instead of looking for *the* tragedy that synthesizes them all, I will focus on two extreme and almost unrepeatable cases. (Ideally, I would like to write a book on tragedy entirely composed of extreme cases, as so many signposts for the forces that shape its form.)²

First extreme case: *Antigone*. The attack of the Seven has been rejected, Eteocles and Polynices have killed each other, the interim sovereign of Thebes, Creon, has decreed that Eteocles be buried with every honor, having defended the city, while Polynices, who has led the enemy army, is to be left unburied, prey to dogs and birds. Antigone, Polynices’ sister, disobeys and covers the corpse. A guard discovers her and drags her in front of Creon:

¹ That extreme cases embody the forces that act on a form, and hence help us understand them, is an argument I have developed in “A Passion for Anomaly: Exceptions, Norms, Extreme Cases, Carlo Ginzburg”, forthcoming in *False Movement: On the Quantitative Turn in Literary Study*.

CREON

Do you admit you have done this, or do you deny it?

ANTIGONE

I say that I did it, and I do not deny it.

[...]

CREON

And did you know of the edict that prohibited it?

ANTIGONE

I knew. How could I not? It was clear. (Sophocles 1998, 442-43, 447-48)

Much has been written about the values – political autocracy and family piety – that Creon and Antigone stand for; here, though, I will focus less on what they say than on *how* they say it: that is to say, on dialogue. To us, the use of dialogue in a play seems perfectly natural, but it isn't: as Figure 1 shows, this is not how tragedy began.

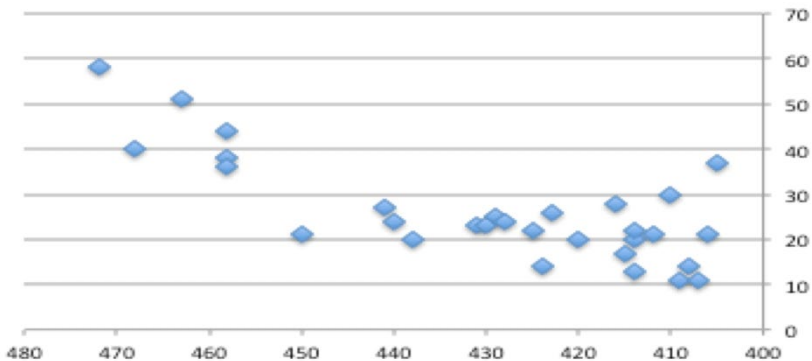


Fig. 1: This chart indicates the percentage of tragic language assigned in Athenian tragedies to messengers and the chorus, the two groups who are *de facto* excluded from dramatic dialogue, as messengers merely report what has happened off scene, while the chorus mostly sings and comments (and its dialogic function is quite *sui generis*). Early on, about half of the text was not in dialogue, though this part drops to 20% or less at the end of the century, while dialogue increases correspondingly from about half to 80-90% of the play.

If dialogue was not the birth of tragedy, it was however the form towards which tragedy quickly evolved, and the reason is simple:

dialogue is *where language and conflict meet*. In its exchanges, conflict is not something that is spoken about, it is *the very way people speak*. Not content, but form. “Alles ist Rede gegen Rede”, “speech against speech”, writes Hölderlin in his “Remarks on *Oedipus*” (Hölderlin 2003, 201). And Hegel:

[T]he completely dramatic form is the *dialogue*. For in it alone can the individual agents express face to face [...] [the] ethically justified “pathos” which they assert against one another [...] in solid and cultivated objective language. (Hegel 1975, 2:1172-73, 1214-15)

A conflict to death, expressed “face to face” (“gegeneinander”, “one against the other”; an adverb Hegel uses in several similar passages of the *Aesthetics*) by antagonists with equally “justified” values. The Greek capacity to have enemies speak to each other is incredible. *Persians*: in the oldest surviving tragedy there isn’t a single Greek: only those who tried to destroy Greece, and almost did. What made possible this readiness to give the enemy strong arguments and to *listen* to them while in the middle of a deadly conflict – what made this possible then and unimaginable now – is, I think, the crux of a political anthropology of tragedy. Unfortunately, I see the problem, but not the solution.

4.

Creon: the sovereign, a man, adult, in power, surrounded by guards. Antigone: a young woman, alone; from the royal lineage, true, but the disproportion is glaring. Dialogue balances their forces. It’s the form by which *a counterpoint to power is created*. Stichomythia, one verse each – according to Adolf Gross, about 40% of *Oedipus the King* was in stichomythia (Gross 1905, 49-51) – is the textbook example:

CREON

Do you admit you have done this, or do you deny it?

ANTIGONE

I say that I did it, and I do not deny it.

[...]

CREON

And did you know of the edict that prohibited it?

ANTIGONE

I knew. How could I not? It was clear. (Sophocles 1998, 442-43, 447-48)

“How could I not? It was clear”. It is (also) this absolute *clarity* that makes *Antigone* a limit case. Human beings fear clarity and hate it, wrote the young Lukács in “The Metaphysics of Tragedy” – and even in tragedy, we will see, clarity isn’t always a given. But in *Antigone*, it’s unmistakable. (With a stroke of genius, Straub and Huillet staged it under the midday sun.) Words kill by burning all the bridges. They are as sharp as an act; they foreground the act. “I did it”: “to do”, “to act” is a key semantic field here. The first time the Guard comes on stage, he immediately says: “I didn’t do the deed” (239). And later, when he returns with Antigone: “Here is the one who did the deed” (384).

In a clash between family and *polis*, one is tempted to think that Antigone’s deed is what any family member would do – that hers is an “immediate” ethical action, as Hegel has it. But it isn’t. The play opens with Antigone and Ismene, Polynices’ two sisters, and the very first line evokes their common bond (which Hölderlin condensed in the spellbinding “Gemeinsamschwesterliches”, “shared substance of our being sisters”) as if to underline that the two sisters are indeed one. But Ismene refuses to do what Antigone does. Antigone’s act is not natural, *it’s a choice*, and to leave absolutely no doubt about it, Sophocles has her bury Polynices *twice*. Repetition is frequent in tragedies – Segismundo ‘dreams’ his freedom twice in Calderón, Herod sentences Mariamne to death twice – because it *eliminates chance*. Tragedy wants *decisions*. “Stop, Herod”, says Mariamne in Hebbel’s play:

You have perhaps

This very instant your fate in your hands

And can direct it wheresoever you please.

The moment comes for every human being

When our star’s charioteer hands over to us

The rein of fate. This only is awful

That we don’t know that moment (*Herod und Mariamne*, III.vi)

Antigone knows the moment. She not only buries Polynices, she *proclaims* it. “I say that I did it” (and she had already announced it to Ismene *before* acting). Saying it aloud makes the act explicit, public. It claims a legitimacy for it. It means *owning* it: “Hades and those below know to whom the deed belongs” (542). Fantastic formulation of the unity of agent and action. Tragic life is that which is condensed in a single act, wrote Lukács in *Soul and Form*, and *Antigone* is the perfect example.

5.

From one extreme case to its opposite. Macbeth, at a banquet, surrounded by the Scottish nobles; he’s about to sit down, when Banquo’s ghost appears:

MACBETH [to the ghost]
Thou canst not say, I did it. (Shakespeare 1972, III.iv.49)

“I say [...] I did it”: “Thou canst not say, I did it”. Earlier, when Macbeth has just killed Duncan, Lady Macbeth realizes he’s still holding the dagger, and tells him to take it back and smear with blood the drunken guards who will be accused of the murder:

MACBETH
I’ll go no more:
I am afraid to think what I have done;
Look on’t again I dare not. (II.ii.49-51)

“I am afraid to think what I have done”. Instead of being brought into the sphere of language, Macbeth’s is a “deed without a name”, as the witches will mumble (IV.i.49). Unsayable – yet always pressing to come out. Just before the murder:

MACBETH
If it were done, when ’tis done, then ’twere well
It were done quickly: [...]. (I.vii.1-2)

The future murder is everywhere here, but hidden in that microscopic “it”: the neuter pronoun, as if to distance it from all that is human. Nothing’s happened yet, but the verb “to do” appears as a past participle, like a sinister toll – “done”, “done”, “done” – that has each time a slightly different sense (“finished”, “executed”, “acted”). Subjunctive, indicative, conditional, subjunctive again: the modes that demarcate the actual from the possible are here so jumbled together that the border between the real and the imaginary is wholly destabilized. And all in three seconds! Thirteen monosyllables, the only slight slowdown coming with that “quickly” (whose meaning is of course the opposite of “slow”). And then, the change of pace:

If it were done, when ’tis done, then ’twere well
 It were done quickly: if th’assassination
 [...] (I.vii.1-2)

It’s like a bomb: moral enormity, turned into sound. Theories of tragedy are always uneasy when they have to explain the pleasure we take in them: they’re so horrible, these stories, why do we enjoy them so much? Passages like this suggest a possible answer: we don’t enjoy the ‘what’, but the ‘how’: the pleasure of linguistic creativity, of complexity – of *poetry*. What can we do with words – what can Shakespeare do, anyway?

But... “If it were done, when ’tis done, then ’twere well. / It were done quickly”. When you hear it, it’s not that easy. A couple of scenes earlier, Lady Macbeth reflects on about her husband’s personality:

thou’dst have, great Glamis,
 That which cries, “Thus thou must do”, if thou have it;
 And that which rather thou dost fear to do,
 Than wishest should be undone. (I.v.22-25)

Imagine this in the theater, where words exist for a second, then vanish. Hegel’s theory of tragic conflict required the perfect *clarity* of the clashing positions – as was indeed the case in *Antigone*.

Passages like this show how incredibly *opaque* tragic language can be. Why?

6.

Let me take a step back. Shakespeare's tragic 'poetry' doesn't occur just anywhere in his plays: typically, it's to be found in soliloquies, which are usually reserved to the protagonist. This choice destroys the balance dialogue had created, as can be seen in the histograms of Figures 2-3 that show the distributions of words in *Antigone* and in *Macbeth*.

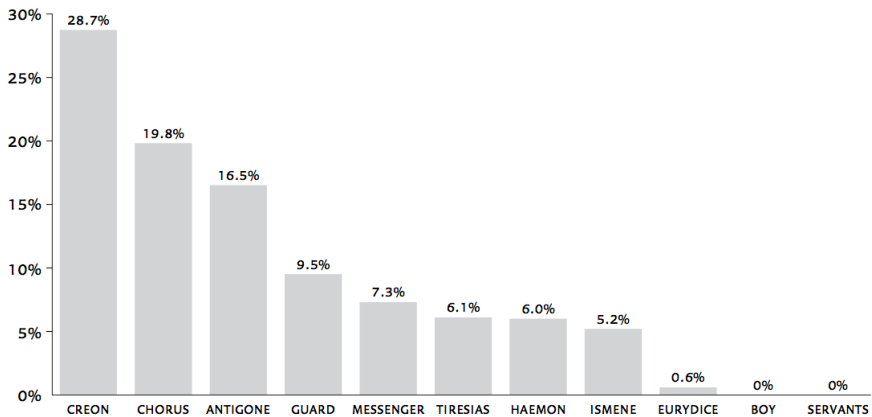


Fig. 2: *Antigone*, characters' percentage of word-space.

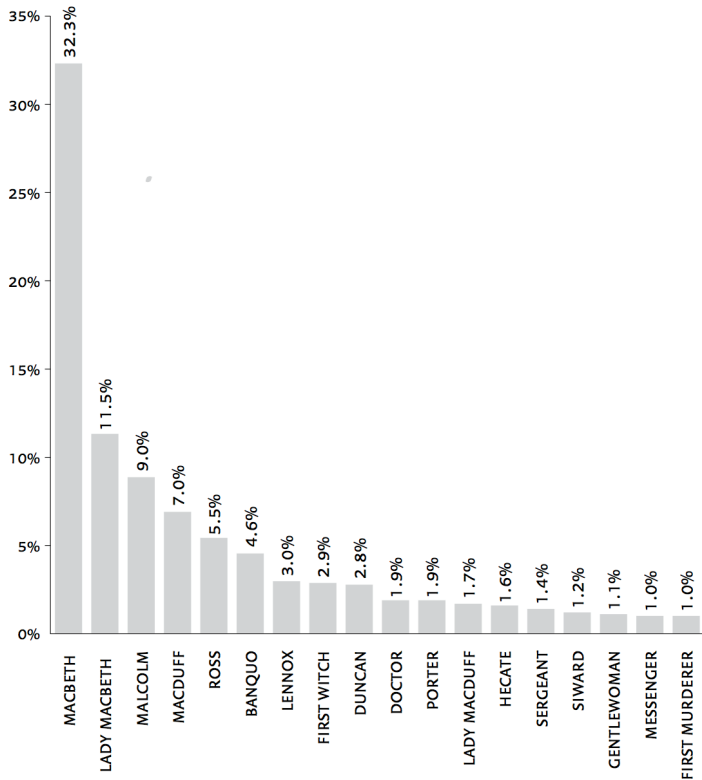


Fig. 3: *Macbeth*, characters' percentage of word-space.

In the transition from one play to the other – from *polis* to court, one is tempted to say – Sophocles' counterpoint to power is replaced by an almost superhuman ruler, made even more charismatic by the poetry he utters. A dark fascination with power envelops the stage – dark, in more than one way. Here is Macbeth, trying to understand why – or perhaps *whether* – he wants to kill Duncan:

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th' other –
Enter Lady Macbeth.

How now! what news? (I.vii.25-28)

The “intent” is a horse, “ambition” is a knight, Macbeth is a sort of centaur; more or less one understands, but really only more or less: is ambition a knight that vaults – or a spur that pricks? And what is it that “falls” in the fourth line? For some interpreters, it’s the ambition-knight; for others, the intent-horse. And as both ambition and intent are so clumsy, why proceed at all? There’s something profoundly elusive here, and now that Lady Macbeth has entered the scene it will forever remain so. We’ll never know why Macbeth kills Duncan. Othello, in Desdemona’s room, about to murder her:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul –
 Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars:
 It is the cause. (Shakespeare 2006, V.ii.1-3)

For some, the cause is Desdemona’s supposed adultery; for others, the desire to avoid future betrayals or prevent the damnation of her soul. Plus, what really torments Othello seems to be *the mere existence of a cause*: not what Desdemona supposedly has done – but the sheer force of causality in human life. Causality *is* a force in tragedy – especially here, as Iago causes Othello to act in an almost mechanical way, while what causes *Iago* to act remains a mystery – so these words evoke something profound, but they do so in an arcane fashion. It is often said that Verdi’s *Otello* is more logical than Shakespeare’s and it’s true, Iago is given a great aria – “Credo in un Dio crudel” – that explains what Shakespeare does not. But Shakespeare is Shakespeare *precisely because he doesn’t explain*. Why?

7.

The next step along this path was taken by a playwright who would have been the Shakespeare of the democratic age, had he not died of typhus at twenty-four. In Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* – the one great tragedy about revolution – language acquires an extraordinary and sinister power:

SAINT-JUST
 We will conclude simply and quickly: since everyone was created under the same conditions [...] no one may enjoy privileges, neither

individuals nor larger classes. Each part of this proposition, in realizing itself, has killed its human beings. The 14th of July, the 10th of August, the 31st of May are its punctuation marks. (Büchner 2012, II.vii)

Murder by words. “Each part of this proposition [...] has killed its human beings”. Jacobinism, wrote François Furet in *Penser la Révolution française*, “radicalized the revolution by making it coincide with its discourse, [...] and then brought to power the purest instance of such discourse” (Furet 1978, 98, my translation). Exactly. And while Saint-Just still believes he’s in control of his words, a later scene shows the other side of the story. Danton and his group arrive at the Conciergerie and another prisoner greets them:

MERCIER

The galleries applaud and the Romans rub their hands, but they don’t hear that each of these words is the death rattle of a victim. Try following your rhetoric to the point where it becomes flesh and blood. Look around you: all this you have spoken: here is a visual translation of your words. These wretches, their hangmen, and the guillotine, are your speeches come to life. (Büchner 2012, III.iii)

“All this you have spoken”: language as a magnificent but uncontrollable force. Alienated. This reaches its apex in two night scenes, one with Danton and one with Robespierre, the play’s great antagonists. (Brief parenthesis: *Danton’s Death* is the great tragedy about a revolution, yes, but the conflict is not between revolution and *ancien régime*, it is *within the revolution itself*.) Danton, at the window; he cannot sleep (“Macbeth shall sleep no more” [Shakespeare 1972, II.ii.42]): “September! Who cried this word? [...] As I came to the window something shrieked and cried in all the streets: September!” (Büchner 2012, II.v). September is the massacre of the Paris prisoners in 1792, which Danton, who was minister of justice, allowed to happen. His wife wakes up, “You are dreaming, Danton [...] It was just a child crying in the night [...] you are trembling, Danton...”. “What does that word want from me [...] Why does it stretch out its bloody hands towards me?”. Robespierre, also at the window: “Why can’t I get rid of this thought? With its bloody finger it keeps pointing towards the same

spot" (I.vi). His thoughts are not really *his* any more – "I can't tell which part of me is deceiving the other" – and he ends up repeating the words of the tyrant Philipp in Schiller: "Ich bin allein", "I am alone". "We are all crazy", says Danton at a certain point; there are several scenes of madness in the play, and there will be even more in *Woyzeck* two years later. "We are all puppets", Danton again, "moved around by unknown forces". "What appeared to be most manifest", writes Hannah Arendt about the French revolution, "was that none of its actors could control the course of events, that this course took a direction which had little if anything to do with [their] willful aims and purposes". The result was "a feeling of awe and wonder at the power of history itself" (Arendt 1990, 51).

"Awe and wonder": an echo of Aristotle's "pity and terror" in the *Poetics*. If a historical event had the potential to revive the kind of conflict of *Antigone*, the French revolution must have been it; and Büchner – who co-authored a subversive pamphlet, lived with a rope ladder at his window for fear of being arrested, and, with *Woyzeck*, wrote the first worker's tragedy – was perfect for the task. But in his most inspired moments his revolutionaries echo the great tragic tyrants and feel, like Macbeth, that what they've done is – also – a crime. "I felt republican virtue tremble in the depth of my heart", wrote Robespierre to his brother, as he witnessed the fate of Louis XVI. Büchner's linguistic intensity, and Shakespeare's before him, express the disorientation of great historical ruptures, and wonderfully heighten it – but enfolding it in an inscrutable enigma. Antigone's clarity was a sign of mastery: she did exactly what she meant to do, being fully aware of what the consequences would be. Shakespeare's and Büchner's metaphors, with their breathtaking power, raise the emotional temperature of tragic heroes, and thus precipitate action – but as a leap into the dark. 'Poetry' blinds.

Unfathomable poetry, or agonistic clarity? What is a democratic culture most in need of?

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Come Die with Me: A Riddle in *King Lear*

Massimo Stella

This article explores a case of methodological criticism that has been neglected by Shakespearean scholars and, amongst them, philologists and critics who have studied and edited *King Lear*: namely, the mythic and linguistic model of Shakespeare's *King Lear* between Freud (*The Theme of the Three Caskets*) and Lévi-Strauss (*The Structural Study of Myth*), in the re-reading of the eminent French classicist Clémence Ramnoux.

Keywords: Theory of poetic language, Myth, Ramnoux, Freud, *King Lear*

Myth and Ludic Language: A Methodological Premise

As I was looking for a connection between the fields of psychoanalysis and mythology or history of religions, I realised that I had found it in a specific and unexpected object, one which may be difficult but nonetheless fruitful to investigate. That object is wordplay. Psychoanalysts know well that wordplay is one of the main tools to explore the unconscious or at least preconscious strata of the mind, and that is also true of misinterpretations, puns, and dreams. These phenomena occur as if an unexpressed and inexpressible desire and the shadow of its pseudo-satisfaction insidiously disintegrated a clear utterance and used its very elements, its words or its syllables, to shape a new expression, which is a compromise between the expressed and the unexpressed. The interpretation of a dream or of its account, that is to say the process whereby a dream is translated into a revelatory utterance, relies on a set of associations: a single word or even a syllable leads to an image that evokes a phantasmal and illusory projection, which conceals the unexpressed and the most unexpected elements of the account. This process takes place within ambiguous areas of the soul, in which words are replaced by images and images are then again replaced by words. [...]. The puns which can authentically uncover those hidden elements continue to hold a strong appeal for us: they produce a “poetic” effect. [...]. Throughout the course of their history,

the Greeks employed puns in religious contexts: they created compromise expressions capable of leading from legend to thought as well as restoring wonder to the most elevated thought. This suggests that we are dealing with a “mental regime” rather than with “cultural stratifications”. (Ramnoux 2020f, 419)¹

For that reason, the nature of myths and legends (or fairy tales) is intrinsically linguistic. A myth is not merely a sequence of actions carried out by one agent in a specific space and at a specific time; in other words, it is not what we call a *récit*. The *récit* is merely its narrative frame, which tends towards *mimesis*. Beyond or within that frame there is also language, with its devices and its wordplay, a kind of language that is not *langue*, but rather *parole*, in that it relies on the concrete and idiosyncratic act of playing with the rules of the *langue*. The *parole* of the *jeu de mots* certainly produces images which are not fantastic (‘invented’) but rather phantasmal, that is to say experiential (i.e. related to corporeal and psychic experiences): the *parole* draws on the Imaginary rather than on imagination (and it simultaneously creates it). For that reason, those who wish to analyse a myth should try to analyse its linguistic structure, in that myth cannot be considered a mere ‘subject matter’, or a ‘theme’, or a ‘set of themes’, but it is rather a logic. Myth and Thought are thus contemporary to each other because they are ‘mental systems’ rather than cultural and historical elements: that explains why philosophers, from Plato to Nietzsche and Heidegger, have always focused on myth. Philology has a lot to learn from psychoanalysis and Saussure’s theory of language so as not to become a mere scholarly exercise. That was the idea of Clémence Ramnoux, a prominent scholar in the field of ancient philosophy who carefully investigated ancient philosophy using the tools of philology, (structural) anthropology and Freudian psychoanalysis, and also ventured into the fields of history of religions and comparative mythology. Ramnoux examined pre-Socratic and Orphic thought, which is always in verse and aims at creating myths, and constantly looked for foundational ‘logophanies’ or verbal expressions which may originate possible and possibly coexisting ‘ideational

¹ All translations are mine.

constellations'. She used the same approach in her studies on tragedy and comedy. One of the most remarkable examples of her methodology, that is of how she read myths and of the idea that myths contain conceptualisations and have a 'poetic function', is surprisingly not offered by a study on Greek tragedy or on ancient philosophers, but rather by an essay on Shakespeare, whose works she could brilliantly interpret. The essay, a true masterpiece of comparative methodology, is entitled "Mythe, conte et tragédie. Une interprétation freudienne du *Roi Lear*"; it deals with Shakespeare's *King Lear* and it appeared in 1967 in *Revue d'esthétique*. It was later included in the collection *Études présocratiques*, published in 1970, in that it was recognised as having much in common with the studies on the function of myth in Greek philosophical poetry contained in that volume. Ramnoux's essay, though, should also be included in the tradition of *Shakespeare studies*, and it should finally be recognised as one of the most prominent studies in that field by virtue of its brilliant analysis of Shakespeare's theatrical text and of its wide-ranging critical perspective.

The Mythical Riddle: Re-reading Freud

Modern men in Western Europe seem to be trying to destructure themselves, animated by an impulse to re-emerge from ancient stratifications, so as to rebuild themselves in a different way. Hence the fascination for the early philosophers of ancient Greece. (Ramnoux 2020b, 228)

Clémence Ramnoux recognises that psychoanalysis played a prominent role among the human sciences in the twentieth century; in other words, she understands that (Freudian) psychoanalysis, beyond its aims and its specific objects of study (neurosis, the unconscious, the way impulses work, therapy...), offers a global *vision* of both individual and collective human experience. It is a *way* of considering and a *method* of understanding the processes through which the structure of an individual and the cultural memory, language, art, and religious beliefs of communities are

formed. Psychoanalysis is the most relevant symptom of the new *episteme* of the twentieth century, the symptom of the fact that men were trying to “destructure” themselves so as to reconstruct and project themselves beyond their time, rediscovering an Antiquity which is not classical antiquity but rather the (primitive) ‘Immemorial’. Ramnoux also recognises that anthropology and psychoanalysis are equally interested in researching and recovering that past. Through psychoanalysis and anthropology, myths and fables (or ‘legends’) become available once again and they also become extremely effective in the epistemic world of the twentieth century by re-emerging as *active* forms of thought. Similarly, poetic language ceases to be perceived as a mere *objet d’art*, and starts to be regarded as an invention which stemmed from involuntary and collective memory. Ramnoux’s special interest in Freud’s essay on *The Theme of the Three Caskets* is due exactly to the way in which Freud reads the poetic language of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* as a mythical structure by analysing a cluster of narrative elements that are typical of a fable: how does the tragic poet work with a legendary tradition and brings to light its underlying myth? And what is the meaning of its re-emerging? Ramnoux especially focused on one question: is the object which we consider to be the ‘work’ of an ‘author’ really the work of an author or is it rather the ‘work’ of language, created on the basis of a core idea and of a general experience of humankind? What is the relationship between *tragedy*, that is to say poetry, *myth*, that is to say experiential memory, and *story* (a legend, a fairy tale), that is to say the narrative expression of a memorised experience? And what relevant discoveries can be made by looking at that persistent relationship between *tragedy*, *myth*, and *story*?

It is widely known that, in *The Theme of the Three Caskets*, Freud argues that a mythical scenario underlies the plot of *King Lear*, as is suggested by the hero’s choice before the three sister goddesses of destiny – the three Parcae or Moirai, the goddesses with the cosmic spindle, or the Norns or the Valkyrie of Norse mythology. Freud’s remarkable hypothesis has enjoyed a peculiar state of ‘isolation’ caused by its fame and uniqueness: although it had a wide reception in Shakespeare’s criticism, especially in feminist

criticism², it was generally read either focusing on its content, or in a cultural or ideological key, but never as a pure *fait de langage*. What critics found controversial in that essay was Freud's association of Cordelia with the Moira of Death.

It is undoubtedly true that Freud's style in that work – as was often the case in his essays on literature – is narrative and descriptive, and that the structure of his argument is episodic and rhapsodic, as if the author were trying to conceal the logical structure of his thesis. That choice, though, can hardly be a coincidence: he is telling without revealing. It is exactly on that deliberate reticence that Ramnoux focuses in analysing Freud's text and trying to extract its *linguistic* essence. She also offers an accurate reading of the female figure identified with death without giving an ideological or feminist reading of the text.

Before moving on to Ramnoux's remarkable work, we will focus on Freud.

Two scenes from Shakespeare, one from a comedy and the other from a tragedy, have lately given me occasion for posing and solving a small problem. (Freud 1958, 291)

This is how Freud begins his essay. The understatement "posing and solving a small problem" conveys the idea of a scholar allowing himself a distraction from his usual field of study so as to satisfy a marginal curiosity. He then immediately compares two scenes, that of the choice of the three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice* and that of the division of the kingdom among the king's daughters in *King Lear*. Why does Freud associate them despite the fact that they seem to have nothing in common? In *The Merchant of Venice*, three suitors are required to choose one of three caskets to win the hand of a woman. Freud argues that "das Orakel der Kästchenwahl", the "oracle", that is to say the "riddle", of the three caskets, was not invented by Shakespeare, but it is rather a traditional motif (interestingly, the word "oracle" implicitly produces a semantic shift). It is worth reminding that riddles underlie the most important heuristic device of neurotic complexes,

² For a useful overview, see McLuskie 1985 and Thompson 1991.

namely the *myth* of Oedipus (the riddle of the Sphinx about the ages of man, Oedipus who solves the riddle; the riddle of incest: a son will kill his father and lie with his mother). Freud then states that Shakespeare borrowed the traditional motif of the choice of three caskets from *Gesta Romanorum*, a collection of stories upon which he drew when he wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, but, in that source, the situation is the opposite of the one depicted in the play, in that it is a girl who has to choose among three caskets to win the hand of a suitor. How can that inversion (a maid chooses one of three caskets to win the hand of a suitor / three suitors choose among three caskets to win the hand of a maid) be explained? Freud suggests that one of the laws of dreams should be applied to myth, namely the law of displacement and transference: the three caskets represent three women, in that the casket stands for the female body. Hence, the original formulation of a man choosing among three caskets, which can be inverted, actually represents a man choosing among three women. Moving on to analyse the aforementioned scene in *King Lear*, Freud asks himself and his readers: "Is not this once more the scene of a choice between three women?" (293). Indeed, it represents the division of the kingdom between Lear's three daughters according to how much each of them loves him. That reading finally leads to the primary equivalence between the three women and the three Moirai and hence also to the association of Cordelia with Death. Yet, at that point, readers of Freud's article may wonder why the author should need to turn to the motif of the caskets to reach the rather obvious conclusion that the division of the kingdom between Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia is indeed a choice between three women. How does the symbol of the casket influence *King Lear*, considering that no casket is mentioned in the play? Why is its 'latency' important? And why is the identification between the three women and the three Moirai necessary?

Ramnoux draws on Freud's text and explains his theories. She argues that Freud's aim is that of identifying "the original myth" ("le mythe originel"), which is not to be conceived of as an "archaic nucleus" ("noyau archaïque"), i.e. the most ancient features of the myth that can be philologically reconstructed by examining the sources, but rather as a "fundamental formulation". That

“fundamental formulation” is based on the expression “Three Parcae”, “Three Norns”, which is neither a symbol, nor an image, nor a tale, but rather “un élément de vocabulaire”, “a vocabulary entry”, that is to say a phrase conveying an idea (Ramnoux 2020d, 252). More specifically, it is “un élément de vocabulaire entrant dans la composition de plusieurs ensembles”, “a vocabulary entry which is involved in the creation of various ensembles”, ensembles which are the different narrative variants of the primary phrase/idea.

Those variants form a very heterogeneous corpus, so much so that Freud’s analysis may be dismissed as “savage comparativism” (“comparatisme sauvage” [253]) by scholars who fail to realise that he was not focusing on the cultural homogeneity of that corpus (nor was he trying to find a common source), but rather on its *linguistic* homogeneity. Among those variants, the tale of Cinderella and her sisters, the myth of Psyche, the bride of Eros who is envied by her cruel sisters, and Paris’ choice between three sister goddesses are especially relevant. Ramnoux then explains that Freud aims to “assimiler le dissemblable pour raison de structure, préluant ainsi sans le savoir à une science contemporaine des mythes”, “associate different elements because of their structure, thus unwittingly anticipating the contemporary study of myth”. Ramnoux is here clearly alluding to Lévi-Strauss’s article, *La structure des mythes*, published nine years earlier (1958) in *Anthropologie structurale*, which focuses on the myth of Oedipus. The word *structure* is crucial for Ramnoux: the primary phrase/idea only has meaning within a system, a structure, just as is the case with any semantic or non-semantic item of language (in Saussure’s sense of place of enunciation).

That is the reason why the signifier “casket” gives meaning, by difference, to the signifier “goddess/woman”: the three caskets can be associated with three female goddesses of destiny by virtue of the principle that meaning is created and conveyed by and through another element. In other words, the meanings linked with the element of “three Parcae or Norns” are conveyed by something else, that is to say they are displaced to the signifier “casket”. That process takes the form of a *riddle*.

Ramnoux argues that, in order to associate the three women with the three caskets, Freud relies on the tools of psychoanalysis, namely on the interpretive technique of *Traumdeutung*, which is unsurprisingly based on language and its workings. It is indeed widely known that three processes at work in dreams, namely condensation, displacement, and representation, also take place in language and are especially akin to metaphoric transformation and metonymic association. Metaphor and metonymy would later be identified by structural linguists as the main structural elements of the poetic function. It is also worth emphasising that the language of dreams is *involuntary*, it alludes to experiences that have not been processed by the mind, that is to say *latent* experiences. The “original”, the “primary”, the “fundamental” – however one may wish to call it – thus has to do with that latent element and with its re-emergence.

Ramnoux then goes on to reconstruct a plausible structural model of Freud’s intricate and reticent discussion and, in doing so, she brilliantly clarifies not so much the ‘content’ of Freud’s essay but rather the *wordplay* which Freud detects in Shakespeare’s works.

Freud links the opposition man/woman with the numerical opposition one/three: one woman for three men (*The Merchant of Venice*), one man for three women (*King Lear*). Indeed, if the signifier “woman” is changed into the signifier “casket”, in other words if the three women are equated to the three caskets, it is easy to see that two of them are “empty”/“deceiving” (“opposition plein/vide ou encore vrai/trompeur”, says Ramnoux [254]) and that only one contains the image of a woman. Hence, there is only one woman (who takes three different forms) for one man, and, similarly, only one of the three men is the chosen one. The two correspondences “1 woman: 3 men” and “1 man: 3 women” are thus the inverted formulation of the same ‘phrase’. One and three are the other sides of the same coin. The oppositions between full and empty casket and between truthful and deceiving also mirror the antithesis between *Cordelia*, who tells the *truth*, and her *lying sisters* (= leaden casket / gold and silver caskets).

Ramnoux uses the metaphor of knitting to state that “le canevas trame 1/3 sur chaîne de homme/femme”, “on the tapestry, 1/3 are

woven on the warp of man/woman", while the other couples of opposites only play a role in shaping, that is to say "embroidering" ("broder" [254]), the variants. The couples of opposite traits involved in the creation of the different variants are: *young/old* (the young suitors and old King Lear); *shiny/dull* (the golden and silver caskets, and the leaden casket); *loquacious/silent* (the two suitors who glorify the golden and silver caskets, and Bassanio who chooses the humble leaden casket without heeding his rivals' eloquence; Cordelia's two eloquent and lying sisters, and Cordelia's silence and sincerity).

In addition to these couples of nominal opposites, there are also two verbal opposites, namely: *choosing/excluding*; *choosing/being taken*. The two suitors in *The Merchant of Venice* choose but are excluded from the 'competition'; Portia is won (taken) by Bassanio but she is the one who actually chooses (whereas Bassanio chooses but he is in fact taken). Free choice can indeed evolve into a situation in which one is captured, 'taken'. That twist is a key issue in Freud's analysis in that it alludes to death.

Ramnoux then raises an important question: how is the theme of marriage in *The Merchant of Venice* related to the situation in *King Lear*? The fact that the male character in *King Lear* is a "vieillard paternel", an "old father", or rather an "old man who is also a father" (the expression "vieillard paternel" lays more emphasis on old age than on fatherhood), means that he cannot play the role of groom and sexual partner. For that reason, the scene of marriage is turned into a "scène d'héritage". Another couple of opposites is thus formed, namely that of "*marriage/inheritance*" ("*mariage/héritage*" [260]). Yet, Ramnoux points out that the scene of inheritance is highly eroticised by Freud, who rightly draws attention to the fact that the old man demands a profession of love from his three daughters, and his request for love is overwhelming: the greatest part of his kingdom will be given to the daughter who declares that she loves him the most. However, the daughter who truly loves him the most and who the king loves the most refuses to take part in that game, and hence she is not chosen as the winner, but rather excluded from the game and from the inheritance. What is the meaning of that exclusion and of that reversal? Why is the motif of inheritance eroticised?

The signifier “casket” has an implicit influence on the characterisation of the three sisters and daughters. Freud states that the third sister takes on the same characteristics as the leaden casket: she is pale, humble, and silent. These are underworld traits (which, according to Freud, Cordelia shares with Cinderella and Psyche)³, and so is the fairy-tale motif of the exclusion and isolation of the last-born child⁴. Ramnoux then clarifies one of the numerous passages that Freud had left implicit in his article. The association of woman and casket in *King Lear* triggers a series of “transformations” (“conversions” [257]):

1° On a figurative level: *beautiful women* become *women so ugly that people fear them*, or remain beautiful but deplorably cold.

2° On an emotional level: *lovable women* become *fearsome women*. The most desirable qualities become the most terrifying ones.

3° On a narrative level: the verbal action implied in the story is also changed into its opposite. The implicit predicate “if only I could choose one among the most beautiful women in the world!” is turned into: “fearsome women are taking me and dragging me away, as has been decided by fate”. The man here clearly has a passive role, but the active subject is not the *living woman* but rather *Death*. One last couple of opposites is thus implied in Freud’s analysis: on the one hand there is the grace and erotic allure of the woman, on the other, the goddess of Death. (257)

Ramnoux points out that choice turns into *fate* and fate is deadly. The old man is thus “taken”, ensnared, and the exclusion of the third daughter and sister is the negative opposite of that fatal capture. The ambiguity of the signifier “casket”, that is to say the caskets’ external appearance, which can be golden, silver, and leaden, becomes a source of anxiety: what was once desirable

³ On Cinderella’s underworld traits, see Ginzburg 1989.

⁴ On the underworld atmosphere and on the motif of the last-born child in the legend of King Lear and in European fairy tales, see Cocchiara’s thorough but sadly forgotten study *La leggenda di Re Lear*, which examines an extraordinary amount of material and convincingly confirms Freud’s hypothesis (Cocchiara 1932). It is also worth drawing attention to the figure of Psyche, the youngest and most beautiful of three sisters, who was so beautiful as to be feared like a goddess and ignored by suitors, who were too afraid of her.

becomes fearsome, what was once beautiful, ugly, and what was once associated with life becomes deadly.

So far, it is evident that the mechanism of the “mythe originel” operates at a purely linguistic level and it is inextricably linked with wordplay, that is to say the *riddle*. Its narrative and dramatic outcomes are peculiar but homogeneous and they stand at the crossroads between the metaphoric and the metonymic axis. The riddle, for example, shows that the truth of ‘things’ lies in words, and not vice versa. Words ‘cling to’ experiences and carry them, ‘weave’ them, and fictitiously organise them: in Freud’s terms, words are the representation of unconscious (repressed) psychic experiences; in other words, a word is the element of a repressed psychic experience which resurfaces, like a ghost (indeed, *represent* means *resurface*). The image of knitting, which Ramnoux explicitly employs, is equally significant: words are ‘knotted’ with experiences. In his XXIII seminar on Joyce (*Le Sinthome*, 1975-76), Lacan would later develop his theory of knots by studying the different ways in which the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary are knotted together.

Cordelia: “l’image poignante” and “la scène primitive”

Having so brilliantly interpreted the “code” of Freud’s language in the aforementioned study, Ramnoux focuses on the key issue of Cordelia. Ramnoux is surprised at Freud’s depreciation of the figure of the “daughter” which runs parallel to his depreciation of the role of the father. Why does Freud empty parental relations of value and reduce them to non-semantic traits? The daughter is replaced by the *Verderberin*, the Destroyer:

The fact that the relation between father and daughter is simply erased is even more surprising. The daughter has become the destroyer. Why? How is that substitution operated? And how should we interpret it? (Ramnoux 2020d, 261)

Ramnoux does not try to give an ideological interpretation of the fact that the figure of the daughter has been “erased”, she rather tries to understand it. Parental relationships, which are basic and

fundamental for anthropologists (Ramnoux is here implicitly alluding to Lévi-Strauss's *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*), are instead secondary social structures for the psychoanalyst. It seems that, according to Freud, the main themes of *King Lear* are not patriarchy, the exchange of material goods, inheritance, and generational succession⁵. The true meaning of the tragedy lies somewhere else, namely in the alteration of the traditional family relationships and of the very taboo that regulates them, that is to say incest. There is thus something much more powerful than the fascination/horror towards incest and than power/inheritance.

Ramnoux points out that Freud denies Lear's incestuous fixation with Cordelia: "Cordelia n'entre même pas avec lui dans la relation d'Antigone à Œdipe" (256). This matter will be further explored later. Yet, as has been pointed out above, the relationship between Lear and Cordelia is undoubtedly eroticised. Lear's question leaves no doubts: if it does not imply incest, then what is its meaning? What is the libidinal drive directed towards in *King Lear*, and how?

According to Freud, the original myth is not the story of Paris [his choice between three goddesses], which, as has been pointed out above, is a childhood fantasy of the male ego. And yet, the image of three goddesses exposed to his desire [the desire of Paris and of men in general] half-reveals the model that is being researched. (256)

Ramnoux argues that the image of the choice between three goddesses is a "poignant image": that expression, as used by Ramnoux, means a *traumatic*, violent image, a dreadful and painful image which carries with it a fundamental but annihilating psychic experience. It is an image which has the power of bringing to light unbearable repressed material in a covert form. How?

The idea of original myth has become familiar. It would be useful, though, to recognise its images and its contexts. Freud gave us some relevant examples of images: *three great ladies* of enigmatic and stern appearance, ready to be metamorphosed into *three beautiful* and

⁵ For a radically different reading, see two among the most famous interpretations of *King Lear*: Dollimore 1984 and Greenblatt 1990.

erotically appealing *young maids*; or *three cruel witches* or *the brazen virgin who carries the corpse of the dead hero*, a situation which can be altered into that of *the old man who carries the body of the dead daughter*, or into that of the old lady who has *on her lap the corpse of the dead hero*. The association originated by these inversions leads to the *Pietà* by Michelangelo. The core of the myth thus consists in a malleable image that can be transformed by way of conversion and according to the different modalities that the process of conversion takes on. (263)

The original myth and the traumatic image (“l’image poignante”) are located at a middle point, so to speak, between the two extremes of erotic fantasy, on the one hand, and the terrible “lesson” (“leçon” [259]), namely the scene of trauma, on the other.

Instead of a young man who has to choose between the gifts of three goddesses (power, knowledge, and love), *King Lear* shows “un vieillard concupiscent en face de trois belles jeunes femmes”, “a lusty old man standing before three beautiful women” (259). Ramnoux then mentions (and translates) the crucial passage in *The Theme of the Three Caskets* in which Freud states that Lear is not only an old man but also one who is close to dying but not ready to renounce the love of women. Ramnoux thus explains:

The love of women is here something completely different from raw sexual drive (either general or directed towards a specific object). It rather indicates attachment to life due to fear of death, which is imminent. Just as a kid clings to his mother for fear of falling into the void or into darkness, so the man clings to the warmth of female love. He refuses to see that the last embrace and the breast that will last be offered are those of earth and of his tomb. (262)

Freud explicitly states: “Cordelia ist der Tod. [...]. Es ist die Todesgöttin”, “Cordelia is Death. [...]. She is the Death-goddess who, like the Valkyrie [...], carries away the dead hero from the battlefield” (301). According to Ramnoux, the fact that Lear angrily excludes her from the inheritance must thus be interpreted in this light:

If Cordelia = Death and if her father has excluded her from the inheritance, this means that the old man refuses death. In doing so, he

violates one of the laws of nature and rebels against the last of the Three. (265)

Lear's *libido* is thus *libido vivendi* rather than incestuous love for his daughter. As a consequence, Lear's exclusion of Cordelia is a signifier which conveys his ancestral fear, his horror and rejection of death. It is the old man who treats the figure of the young woman with sacred horror: it is the dying man who invests her of an underworldly and fearsome aura. Ramnoux wonders whether that is a "*primitive scene*" ("*scène primitive*"), an *Urszene*:

Would it be possible to associate the idea of original myth as it appears in Freud's text [*The Theme of The Three Caskets*] with the more widely known notion of *primitive scene*? That association appears legitimate in that it is an image which the playwright unveils while it is being staged. Freud links the primitive scene to a childhood memory, or even to a memory formed before speech is developed, namely the image of the sexual act in the form in which it is stored in the memory of a child who was faced with it without being able to defend himself. Can the three female figures not be related to the image of female faces who lean over the crib? Does Freud himself not associate the three women, including the youngest one, with the figure of the mother? This would be a perfectly Freudian explanation, which would account for the enigmatic and protean form of a regained mother who is invested of a magic and majestic aura, which the mother ordinarily involved in the family routine has generally lost. It would also explain the fascination linked with the recurrence of childhood visions that had been repressed before the acquisition of the faculty of speech. Behind a smiling face is hidden a graver one, behind a young face there is an older one, just like in Da Vinci's painting *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*. (264)

As is evident, that extract is somehow different from the rest of Ramnoux's text and that can be perceived in her writing, which reveals a powerful female perspective. The implicit identification of the mother with the bride and the daughter, of the maid with the matron, of the old woman with the young lady, of the smiling woman with the grave and majestic one (in other words the ambiguity and protean nature of the female figure) is probably *un souvenir de berceau*, so to speak, a 'memory from the crib' which was formed before the development of speech and which re-emerges in

speech in the form of verbo-visual re-elaborations and perturbing speech events. Is Ramnoux alluding to the idea of eternal feminine, *das Ewig-Weibliche* (which was particularly important to Goethe)? No, she is not referring to an allegory or a fictional and abstract stereotype. On the contrary, she is referring to *a concrete and involuntary memory*, to “a regained mother” (“une mère retrouvée”), who resurfaces from the past, from a distant time in which the child was in the crib. By mentioning Da Vinci’s *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, Ramnoux also covertly hints at Freud’s essay *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci*, *Leonardo da Vinci: A Memory of His Childhood*, which focuses on the interpretation of Da Vinci’s painting. Ramnoux’s suggestion is clear: *The Theme of the Three Caskets*, published in 1913, is strongly linked to *Leonardo da Vinci: A Memory of his Childhood*, published in 1910. In that essay, one of the most adventurous and complex works written by Freud, the author tries to interpret an oneiric riddle that concerns Leonardo da Vinci: the artist remembered, or thought he remembered, that, while he was still in the cradle, a kite put its tail into his mouth and the tail repeatedly hit his lips. In analysing that oneiric and enigmatic episode, Freud argues that the image of a motherly female figure emerges from the artist’s childhood memory into his adult mind: the ghost of the figure which once hovered around his cradle reappears in one of his most famous paintings. *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* is the representation of a trinity or of a female element which is three and one: the fact that the child is destined to die is hinted at by the sacrificial lamb which he embraces. Everything, including death, is contained in the smile and the embrace represented by the painter. Ramnoux does not challenge but rather rewrites, through the lens of her female perspective, Freud’s theory of an all-encompassing motherly and triadic element: or better, she does not so much rewrite it as rebalance its emotional component and its emphasis on drives. Freud’s version is frightening and violent:

We might argue that what is being represented here are the three inevitable relations that a man has with a woman – the woman who bears him, the woman who is his mate and the woman who destroys him; or that they are the three forms taken by the figure of the mother

in the course of a man's life – the mother herself, the beloved one who is chosen after her pattern, and lastly the Mother Earth who receives him once more. (Freud 1958, 301)

Ramnoux supports Freud's thesis but dissolves its phobic rigidity and frees it from its (male) object fixation. It may convincingly be argued that she does so for the sake of Cordelia. In the epigraph of her essay, Ramnoux quotes lines 94-103, which are spoken by Cordelia in Act I, scene i:

Good my Lord,
 You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I
 Return those duties back as are right fit,
 Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
 Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
 They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed,
 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
 Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
 Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
 To love my father all.
 (Shakespeare 1989, I.i.94-103)

Cordelia's words, quoted in the epigraph, suggest that Ramnoux's discussion of Shakespeare's and Freud's *King Lear* focuses on her and that is due to the fact that Cordelia refuses to exaggerate and display her love for her father and especially to falsely satisfy his unreasonable request for love (indeed, that satisfaction cannot but be illusory). The fact that Lear's request is excessive is emphasised by the words "No" and "Nothing" uttered by Cordelia: if it were not for Cordelia's "No", we would not be able to understand the nature of the (instinctual) ghost which exerts a considerable influence on Lear and his behaviour, namely fear of death, which is here experienced not so much by a father as by a *man*, or rather by *all human beings*. Cordelia's "No" sheds light on Lear's phobic "No" to the universal destiny of all human beings and on his consequent desperate and excessive need of love which signals his *voluptas vivendi*. Lear's "No" stems from excess, Cordelia's "No" is instead a sign of measure. If that is true, then how should the final scene of the old man carrying the body of his dead daughter be interpreted

("le vieux père porte au tombeau le cadavre de son enfant" [Ramnoux 2020d, 264-65])? That episode is the inversion of the scene of a *Pietà*: as has been pointed out above, Ramnoux clearly alludes to Michelangelo's *Pietà*. In Michelangelo's masterpiece, it is a woman, a mother, who holds on her laps the dead body of her young son. The Son of Man, born of a Woman, dies. If the same pattern were reproduced in *King Lear*, Cordelia, a virgin daughter, would carry in her arms the body of her old father in the way a mother would do. The image of the *Pietà* is somehow 'contained' in that primary scene which Ramnoux recognises when she focuses on the bodies and faces of the three Parcae: she identifies *la grand-mère*, *la mère*, and *l'enfant* destined to an untimely death, the three figures in *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, which, according to Freud, were represented by Leonardo as a sudden memory of his own childhood and perhaps as an involuntary memory which lies at the core of human experience more in general. The original pair, mourning Mother and sacrificed Son, is turned into the symmetrical one of foolish Father and hanged Daughter, the mourning Mother is changed into the Father who has squandered his life.

Lear and Moses: The Father, Anger, and Mortality

Ramnoux is one of those scholars who are truly capable of opening up new perspectives. The last paragraph of her discussion of Freud's reading of *King Lear* focuses on the relation between the idea of the "mythe originel", such as that of the three caskets in Shakespeare's play, and religion. The "mythe originel", that is to say the primary or original myth, is structurally linked to the essence and experience of the sacred on two distinct but intertwined levels. Both the original myth and the sacred somehow make the repressed resurface; they both contain wisdom (*sagesse*) which has nothing to do with morality but which rather reveals the truth of a trauma. Ramnoux states that, to fully grasp what *King Lear* represents according to Freud, it is necessary to analyse Freud's last work, *Moses and Monotheism*, which is also his last

discussion on the role of religion⁶. Freud seems to have found the figure of Moses intriguing but also enigmatic for much of his life: the first essay which he wrote on that character was *The Moses of Michelangelo*, published in 1914. He then continued to reflect on the figure of Moses, which led to his publication of *Moses and Monotheism* in 1938. Scholars generally argue that the two works are utterly independent of each other, but Ramnoux thinks that they are instead closely related. By examining Michelangelo's *Moses*, Freud faces the embodied image of his own ghost, namely the figure of a hero and a founding and law-making father, an extremely virile figure, whose manliness is symbolised by his thick and magnificent beard (which reminds of Samson's hair), a man caught in the act of containing his anger toward the idolatrous "rabble" (this is the word Freud uses). The sculpture represents the famous episode of the golden calf. Michelangelo had a revolutionary idea: he decided not to portray Moses' anger (as is well-known, Moses threw the tablets of the Law on the ground, enraged at the foolish idolatry of his people), but rather his effort to restrain it. Why was Freud so fascinated with that choice? The law of Moses established that his people should believe in a religion *without magic and without the promise of immortality*, one without *illusions*. It is also a religion which compels men to come to terms with their condition and especially with the inevitability of death: a religion *without immortality*! That is exactly what psychoanalysis does too (Freud is thus a Moses-like figure). Just like psychoanalysis, the law of Moses exposes the deceptiveness of desire and the original trauma of mortality. Moses' attempt to restrain his anger is thus a sign that he is *renouncing his drives*: drive renunciation is not an attempt to pursue an alleged moral good, but it rather stems from the tragic awareness that human beings are moved only by drives that must be controlled. Similarly, the renunciation of magic and idols is a sign of the awareness of the phantasmatic processes that underlie compulsions and drives.

⁶ Ramnoux alludes to Freud's reading of Moses in her article on *King Lear*, but she also focuses specifically on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* in a very complex work entitled "Sur une page de Moïse et le Monothéisme", which appeared in *La Psychanalyse* 3 (1957): see Ramnoux 2020c.

Wrath is the drive that characterises the figure of the hero (most famously Achilles) and of the father: it is the emotion associated with the Father and the symbol of his majesty. By renouncing wrath, Moses unveils the true nature of human beings, and, by forbidding his people to indulge in the illusion of mortality (a prohibition which Christians would later not accept), he obliges men to face their ancestral fear, namely the terror of disappearing from the world, the anguish of the void, the “crisis of presence”⁷. The sacred thus unearths the original trauma, and so does myth. Freud narrates (*Moses and Monotheism* is indeed a novel, as Freud himself admitted) that the reason why the Jews killed Moses is that they did not want to see what the prophet was trying to show and, above all, they forgot it and refused to see what they could not bear.

Freud considered Lear to be a figure antithetical to Moses⁸:

What is Lear’s main passion? One may answer that he is passionate about himself, he is characterised by a kind of overwhelming exhibitionism which triggers the indecent “striptease” with which the tragedy opens. It is at that point that an apocalyptic voluptuousness sets in, causing him to fall from his high throne to the ground. [...] Seized by rage and stirred by affection, he loses his balance and falls to the ground in an awkward tumble. That is where Lear’s fault and tragic fall lie. (Fusini 2010, 275)

Unlike Moses, Lear is indeed a Father dominated by wrath. Unlike Moses, who, in Freud’s reading of Michelangelo’s sculpture, forced himself to sit and remain silent after having leapt to his feet with the intention of hurling the tablets of the Law to the ground, Lear allows himself to be ‘uprooted and carried away’ by the violent storm of his anger, which is due to his ‘love for himself’. Anger is the drive *par excellence*, the “Trieb”, and, according to Seneca’s *De Ira*, it is also *the* most significant theatrical emotion. Lear also has something in common with Yahweh, the jealous and vengeful god

⁷ I am here borrowing Ernesto de Martino’s expression.

⁸ According to Piero Boitani, instead, “Lear is at the same time Job and Christ accomplishing Job’s destiny”, while “Cordelia is a Daughter just as Jesus is a Son in the Gospels” (Boitani 2009, 41, 53). Beyond the different paradigms and perspectives that may guide readers, it is undoubtedly true that in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* some traits of God the Father of the Old Testament are present.

(Exodus 20:5), the wrathful god whom Moses himself dissuaded from destroying Israel. Lear's famous line is significant in this respect: "Come not between the Dragon and his wrath" (Shakespeare 1989, I.i.121), and so are his enraged outburst: "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!" (III.ii.1) and his equally famous self-diagnosis of "*Hysterica passio*" (II.iv.55). The tragedy thus displays the explosion of that dragon-like, monstrous, and uncontrollable wrath which destroys and then swallows up everything, leaving a trail of death and desolation, and which is triggered by Cordelia's "No", by the imperative to renunciation that reveals the *deadly* nature of the blind *lust* for living. Love for life is deadly. Interestingly, that sentence can be regarded as a condensed version of Freud's entire *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*⁹. The motif of the three caskets, which was rewritten and inverted in *King Lear*, brings to light that painful truth, a sacred, religious but also *repulsive* truth:

Freud established a remarkable dichotomy in the field of religion [...]. His dichotomy opposes religion involving magic to religion without magic and religion that promises immortality to religion that does not promise it. The former two encourage men to follow the path of their desire, while the latter two, of which Mosaic religion is the model, lead men to the truth and hence help them to accept the laws of their condition. [...]. Let us now return to the last or the youngest of the three Parcae. (Ramnoux 2020d, 270)

As for the *work* of myth, which parallels that of religion:

On the one hand, myth is a phantasmal representation of desire or foolish hope; but on the other hand it opens up a new dimension, that of eternal wisdom. Myths can be read in different ways but the best reading is the straightforward one. The original form is the best one. The reversed ones with their multiple combinations of narratives variants represent, on the contrary, [Paris'] foolish hope or [Lear's] foolish rejection [of Cordelia]. A slight correction is here required: the traumatic image which must resurface from the narration even though the narration *speaks* without having the possibility of *showing*, the scene

⁹ It is Freud that Fusini echoes in entitling her above-referenced work on Shakespeare's theatre *Di vita si muore*.

that re-emerges from the secret depths of the imagination is a plastic image. It can be painted white or black, made to represent old age or youth [...]. Nothing prevents it from leading to phantasmatic compensation or, on the contrary, to wisdom. It all depends on how it is elaborated. (267)

The Mythopoetic Role of the Writer: The "tragédie oubliée de la psyché"

"It all depends on how [myth] is elaborated", writes Ramnoux; in other words, it all depends on the poet and on his *words*, but especially on the poet-playwright. Unlike other poets, the poet-playwright not only tells, but also has the chance of *showing* as he "puts on stage" (*en montant en scène*) a specific image.

Just as in ancient mysteries, in which what is *said* can be distinguished from what is *shown*, [in plays], too, the thing that is shown and its innermost imaginary aspects hit man where his defences are lowest. Shakespeare staged a *re-elaborated* version of what Freud called the original myth, one that is capable of capturing men with its violent and almost unnatural quality. That version raises a question: what crime did Lear commit to be punished with carrying the body of his dead daughter to the tomb? The context is that of a covering, a disguise aimed at introducing and justifying the culminating scene, the tragic climax, a disguise which conceals the answer. That context requires a careful analysis aimed at digging below its surface, just as one digs behind the facade of a dream. Since the poet chose to represent the sisters as young and attractive and the hero as an old man, the relationship between them cannot but be that of father and daughters. The poet also chose not to develop the theme of eroticism and incest and hence the plot takes the form of a story of inheritance which contrasts with the majesty and grandeur of the elements at play. Such discrepancies encourage the spectator to look further afield for the interpretive key to the play. (264-65)

Using her insight as a scholar of ancient Greek theatre, Ramnoux encourages her readers to analyse *King Lear* as if it represented a scene from a mystery rite, such as, for instance, a scene from the Eleusinian Mysteries, in which the ritual objects – that is to say the 'images' – shown to the person about to be initiated were only shown and not 'said'. In other words, the dramatic text with its plot,

its characters, its symbolic scenes (the *con-text*, as Ramnoux calls it) is a 'transposition', a metaphor of the traumatic experience whose memory the poet tries to evoke in the spectator's mind. The entire text is a metaphor. Thus, as has been briefly mentioned above, the themes of patriarchy, inheritance, family, and power are the subjects of the story, they are *that which is said*, but not *that which is shown*. Ramnoux, though, does not underestimate the importance of *that which is said*: the themes of sovereignty, kinship, and family are indeed pivotal and thoroughly explored in her research on mythical and pre-Socratic theogonies and on the tragedy of the fifth century. Ramnoux's education was heavily influenced by Dumézil and she explored the notion of kingship in ancient Greece and in Celtic mythology. Her interest in *King Lear* and in Freud's interpretation of the play may even have been reinforced by her studies on Irish culture, which date back to the 1940s and 1950s and were then gathered in *Le grand roi d'Irlande*, her last volume, which was published in Perpignan in 1989 (Ramnoux 1989).

[In *King Lear*], Shakespeare was able to evoke an apocalyptic atmosphere by representing the end of a kingdom and of a royal dynasty. It is a catastrophe that extends from the social sphere to the Universe and that the myths of Western Europe constantly associate with the avarice of a King who clings to his kingdom even when his magic is no longer working. [...]. The Irish legend of King Bress is a relevant example: his avarice causes the decline of his realm and that is due to the fact that he has lost his magic and his fertility. In the cycle called "The Cycle of Kings", the figure of a usurper appears towards the end of the dynasty: he is destined to be sacrificed during a magical battle and replaced by a "son of promise". Disorder, famine, and anarchy are caused by these fallen kings or usurpers, as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* famously shows. (Ramnoux 2020d, 263)

A few pages before the passage that has just been quoted, Ramnoux points out that the expression associated with King Lear, "a lusty old man standing before three beautiful women", can also be rewritten as "un jeune premier en face de trois vieilles sorcières", "a bold young man standing before three old witches", a phrase which may aptly describe the famous scene in *Macbeth*:

That situation is common in Welsh folklore or in the Goidelic folklore of Scotland and Ireland, and Shakespeare was certainly familiar with that corpus of stories. [In that folklore], the *three beautiful women* and their “inverted” counterparts, namely *the three old witches*, play a pivotal role in the selection of the next candidate for the throne, as is demonstrated by the three witches in *Macbeth*. (259)

By analysing the mythical ‘device’ in Shakespeare’s plays, Ramnoux thus enables us to glimpse a connection between *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, to see one through the other. She also offers interesting insights into how Lear’s kingship should be read: are we supposed to focus on the magic or on the political aspect? Focusing on the political aspect would lead us to the constitutional debate on the crown. The magical aspect – which emerges also in the inverted situation in *Macbeth* – is instead much more *poignant*, as Ramnoux would say: the magical priest-king is an apotropaic figure who averts the “crisis of presence”, the crisis of natural rhythms and cycles. The priest-king is the last bulwark of the community against collective death. Lear, though, cannot fulfil that role in that his attachment to life goes beyond the limits of his own power and fecundity. If analysed from the perspective of magical kingship, *King Lear* is thus a play about facing death.

What is most important, though, is that all these transformations, all these images and points of view were created by the poet, William Shakespeare. How does the poet work with the mythical device? Does he use it consciously or unconsciously? How does he shape “la tragédie oubliée de la psyché” (Ramnoux 2020e, 284)¹⁰?

The poet’s work can be compared to the construction of a dream: it takes place in the twilight of the semi-conscious but preserves a facade of rationality which dreams can more easily drop. The dramatic text also conceals uncomfortable truths and weaves veils that help the man-

¹⁰ I prefer not to translate this brilliant expression used by Ramnoux in another essay, “Mythe et Philosophie” (Ramnoux 2020e), which appeared in *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 66 (1968). Above all, I will not translate the word *psyché*, which, in this context, means soul, mind, and unconscious, and it carries those three meanings simultaneously. The semantic polysemy is here impossible to render in another language.

child to assimilate crude lessons. More precisely, the poet draws on the legend that had previously fulfilled the same function and brings it closer to the myth. At the same time, though, he tears those veils with the blade of revealing words written for those who can understand them, and demolishes the facades through shocking and enigmatic visions. The poet is a figure that lies somewhere between the demiurge of dreams and the seer-interpreter and is sometimes closer to the former and sometimes to the latter. At least, that is what happens when a literary work stirs the reader's imagination and prompts them to think, thus deserving the banal title of "profound work". (Ramnoux 2020d, 265)

It is difficult to find a more brilliant and more accurate description of what the philological *esprit géométrique* weakly calls 'the problem of sources'. The sources on which a poet draws, at least a poet of the stature of Shakespeare and Aeschylus, are the 'memories from the cradle', namely his own memories (the memories of the man-child) and those of his entire community. Indeed, the "deep mines of the mental soil", to borrow Proust's words in *Du côté de chez Swann*, are those of the subject as well as of the entire community. When *that* kind of poet reads the work of another poet or writer, he thus plunges it deep into the flow of tradition and experience. In all his studies on art and literature as well as in his essays on anthropology and sociology, Freud himself explores subjective psychic experience and phylogenetic transmission simultaneously, without ever focusing exclusively on one or the other, as the poet does. For that reason, *The Theme of the Three Caskets* should not be regarded as an essay *on* Shakespeare or a psychoanalytic interpretation *of* Shakespeare, but rather as an attempt to trace the poet's steps, to study his techniques in working with images and words. In a passage in *The Theme of the Three Caskets* – a passage that has been accurately analysed by Ramnoux – Freud explicitly states that he is interested in studying the poet's reuse of the mythemes examined and argues:

We get an impression that a reduction of the theme to the original myth is being carried out in [Shakespeare's] work, so that we once more have a sense of the moving significance which had been weakened by the distortion. It is by means of this reduction of the distortion, this partial

return to the original, that the dramatist achieves his more profound effect upon us. (Freud 1958, 300)

Commenting on those lines, Ramnoux asks: do Freud and Shakespeare “not do the exact same thing, after all? They both try to find a simple, traumatic, and universally human meaning by digging below the distortion of oneiric riddles or enigmas [in Freud’s case] or of traditional legends [in Shakespeare’s case]” (Ramnoux 2020d, 251). Drawing on Freud’s and Frazer’s theories, T. S. Eliot called this operation “mythical method” and argued that it was used not only in Joyce’s *Ulysses* but also in his own *Waste Land* and by *modern poets* more in general¹¹. Eliot knew very well that “the mythical method” is actually an immemorial technique used by poets of all time, and not just by *modern poets*:

For the artist is, in an *impersonal* sense, the most conscious of men; he is therefore the most and the least civilized and civilizable; he is the most competent to understand both civilized and primitive. (Eliot 1919, 1036, emphasis mine)

That is what Eliot wrote in his review of a collection of Indian-American shamanic songs, *The Path of the Rainbow* (published in 1918 and edited by George William Cronyn), which appeared in *The Athenaeum* in 1919. The *parole* of the poet is thus the *builder* of myths in that, in oral as well as in literate cultures, it is linked with tradition and ensures that tradition exists in a community. Thus, there would be no *langue* of the myth without the poet’s *parole*, as Ramnoux clearly explains. In that regard, her idea is utterly antithetical to that of Lévi-Strauss. In one of his most important works, *The Structural Study of Myth*, published in *The Journal of American Folklore* in 1955, Lévi-Strauss stated:

From that point of view [myth] should be put in the whole gamut of linguistic expressions at the end opposite to that of poetry, in spite of all which have been made to prove the contrary. Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious

¹¹ I am here obviously referring to Eliot’s famous review of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*”, which appeared in *The Dial* in November 1923.

distortions; whereas the mythical value of the myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation. [...]. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells. (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 430)¹²

On the contrary, Ramnoux believes that the *langue* of myth described by Lévi-Strauss, without the contribution of the poet's *parole*, is a *langue sans sagesse*, that is to say a language deprived of its experiential, psychic, and traumatic nature, a 'neutralised language' if not one made only of empty words¹³.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Echoes of the Oedipus Myth in Shakespeare's King Lear

So far we have focused on Ramnoux who reads Freud who reads Shakespeare. Let us now go back to *King Lear* itself and try to trace in the poet's words the structural elements of the "original myth" represented in the tragedy. There are three relevant passages: the use of a verb in I.i.42; a sentence spoken by the Fool in I.iv.169-70; and a sentence uttered by Lear in V.iii.20. These must be regarded and interpreted as elements that make up an oneiric riddle or wordplay.

As soon as he appears on stage, Lear announces his intention of dividing the kingdom. His speech appears to be lucid at first but, after a few lines, it becomes confused. "[W]e have divided / In three our kingdom" (Shakespeare 1989, I.i.36-37), says Lear, but the

¹² That study was first published in English and then translated into French by Lévi-Strauss himself under the title *La structure des mythes*. It appeared in *Anthropologie structurale*, published by Plon in 1958. This is probably Lévi-Strauss's most famous essay. The French version of the extract reads: "À cet égard, la place du mythe, sur l'échelle des modes d'expression linguistique, est à l'opposé de la poésie, quoi qu'on ait pu dire pour les rapprocher. La poésie est une forme de langage extrêmement difficile à traduire dans une langue étrangère, et toute traduction entraîne de multiples déformations. Au contraire, la valeur du mythe comme mythe persiste, en dépit de la pire traduction. [...]. La substance du mythe ne se trouve ni dans le style, ni dans le mode de narration, ni dans la syntaxe, mais dans l'*histoire* qui y est racontée" (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 232).

¹³ See Ramnoux's brilliant and polite comments on Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* in Ramnoux 2020g.

kingdom has not been divided yet. Is it because the division has already been made in his mind? And how has he imagined it? What is the criterion he has planned to use? As we soon find out, the criterion is not equality but proportionality. Instead of dividing his kingdom equally among his daughters, Lear decides to divide it proportionally according to the amount of love that his daughters will profess. The division is thus a sort of auction won by *the highest bidder*. Lear hopes that the third buyer will outbid the other two, but she surprisingly states that, as far as she is concerned, the auction is worth “[n]othing” (86). Everything becomes worthless. The performance put up by Lear collapses. It is a false image. That word, “nothing”, is disrupting: the game based on prices, bids, and assigning value to love is nothing but a facade erected to hide something... But what?

If we try to read the signs in this scene, we realise that the poet is presenting the audience with the fragments of a legend or a fairy tale, “the choice of the three caskets”, which acts as a veil or a mirage. The word “nothing” dissolves that mirage, it blows away the narrative veil and untangles the dense and tangled web of words spun around the frame of the figurative situation.

The void that has opened before the audience compels them to carefully examine words and images. Once the fiction has collapsed, only an image and a word-phrase (or an image of a word) remain, which cannot be annihilated in that they are non-mimetic in nature. To “crawl toward death” (40): Lear sees himself crawling towards death (or, perhaps, wishes to do so), “[u]nburthen’d” (40), freed of the heavy burdens of his kingdom and his role. That vision is shocking: the king regresses to a child-like state in which he crawls and is incapable of speaking and walking. The effect achieved is conceptual rather than visual or descriptive: a disturbing antithesis is produced. An old man crawls like a baby but he crawls towards death. The scene of the division of the kingdom veils that “darker purpose” (35), that *secret*: crawling towards death. A mytheme, namely that of the ages of men, thus involuntarily emerges from Lear’s words.

Four, two, three – by using these numbers the Sphinx mocked the wisdom of men, who could not understand her riddle until Oedipus

came. Oedipus solved the riddle but was forever hunted by guilt. As for Lear, he expects to have three supports in his old age, but his daughters are not identical, so he ends up lame. He also gives away his crown, which could have worked as an effective support, as the insolent fool who truly loves Lear later points out. (Fusini 2010, 309)

According to Athenaeus, Asclepiades of Tragilus reported the riddle of the Sphinx as follows:

*A thing there is whose voice is one;
Whose feet are four and two and three.
So mutable a thing is none
That moves in earth or sky or sea.
When on most feet this thing does go,
Its strength is weakest and its pace most slow.*¹⁴

Tetra-pous, di-pous, tri-pous... Oidi-pous, Oedipus. The mythical riddle poses the enigma of man, of that creature and its limited existence from its origin to its end, walking on four, two and three feet. The interpretation of the theme of walking, standing, and limping offered by Lévi-Strauss in his study on the myth of Oedipus is well known. It is a clever reading (despite the implications that Lévi-Strauss derives from it) which can be usefully summarised here. Standing and walking (or migration) represent autonomy from Mother Earth, movement towards the world, and conquest of knowledge, power, and exogamy. Limping is instead the (underworld) symbol of regression towards Mother Earth, towards men's earthly and material origin (and hence towards incest and parricide) (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 244-49). Oedipus is the living riddle – “the thing itself”, as we could say borrowing the words used by Lear to describe Poor Tom (Shakespeare 1989, III.iv.104) – he is the man who answers the riddle with *his own name*, without knowing what he is going towards and what he is

¹⁴ As is widely known, that riddle is not reported in the *Oedipus Rex*, although the Sphinx is mentioned three times (Sophocles 2010, lines 130, 391, 1199-200). Yet, the sources all seem to support the version that has been quoted here: see, for instance, the fragment of Euripides' *Oedipus*, fr. 540 Kannicht; Asclepiades of Tragilus, FgrHist 12 F 7a; *Antologia Palatina*, XIV, 64; the ancient commentaries on *Oedipus Rex* and on Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*; and the scholia on line 50 in Euripides' *The Phoenician Women*.

returning to, in other words, without knowing his destiny: man (Oedipus) is blind to himself. He is told so by contrasting and antagonistic voices. The soothsayer Tiresias warns him: “you have your eyesight, and you do not see how miserable you are, or where you live, or who it is who shares your household. Do you know the family you come from?” (Sophocles 2010, lines 414-16). His Mother and Bride says: “Why should a man whose life seems ruled by chance live in fear – a man who never looks ahead, who has no certain vision of his future? It’s best to live haphazardly, as best one can” (lines 976-79). Finally, Oedipus himself identifies with Fate, that is to say with his own horoscope, when he states: “I see myself as a child of Fortune – and she is generous, that mother of mine from whom I spring, and the months, my siblings, have seen me by turns both small and great” (lines 1080-83). The man and his horoscope overlap, just as, in the horoscope, the child who crawls on Mother Earth and the adult who kills and conquers overlap. Oedipus is the *homme-enfant*, the *héros-enfant par excellence*: his ‘memories from the cradle’, which have fallen into oblivion but have not been forgotten, haunt him until he disappears in the woods of Colonus.

“Crawling towards death” is thus an expression that is linked with fate. Lear faces the Moira (the Moirai). He appears before her and he apparently offers something to her, but, in fact, he asks for something: “to set my rest / On her kind nursery” (Shakespeare 1989, I.i.122-23). These words are clearly the expression of a fantasy of death: the ambiguity of the words “rest” and “nursery” pierce the ear. Lear surrenders himself to death and waits to die in the arms of the last Nurse and Nurturer (Cordelia). The etymological origin of the word “nursery” – *nourrire*, *nourrice* – is still present, and it contrasts with the idea of death. A remarkable line uttered by the Fool reactivates the maternal echo of the word: “When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?”, asks Lear; “e’er since thou mad’st thy daughters thy mothers”, answers the Fool (I.iv.167-69). Then he goes on to depict a grotesque and obscene *nursery scene*: “for when thou gav’st them the rod and putt’st down thine own breeches, / Then they for sudden joy did weep, / And I for sorrow sung, / That such a king should play bo-peep, / And go the fools among” (169-74). The Fool evokes a ‘cradle scene’ in which the mother or the nurses

play bo-peep or peekaboo with the child and he with them¹⁵. That childhood game is nothing else but the *Fort-da-Spiel*, as Freud explains in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It is a game which simulates the disappearance or loss of an object and then its reappearance. The main actors are the mother and the child, who is poised between fear and joy, namely fear of losing his mother and joy of finding her again. If we think about it, this is the magic trick *par excellence* in that it entails making things disappear and reappear. It is the game of being and non-being, of presence and absence. It has to do with the anguish of being alive, the anguish of seeing our mother disappear when we still walk on all four, and the anguish of disappearing as we approach death.

For that reason, Lear asks the Moira for one last deal: *fort-da*, his kingdom for her love. That is his way of dealing with Death: trying to make a deal, *that* is the “darker purpose” which he mentions on entering the stage. Behind the fairy-tale, legendary motif of the three parts of the kingdom and the three daughters of the king, there is a match between the hero and the Parca. Cordelia, though, answers, “No”, “Nothing”. At Lear’s insistence, she then explains that “nothing” is what she has to say to obtain a larger part of the kingdom and, as for her love, she has devoted just the right amount of it to her father: she has given him half, not all of it. “So young, and so untender?”, asks Lear; “So young, my Lord, and true”, answers Cordelia (I.i.105-6). But the truth is an enemy to those who seek *compromise*.

Lear will thus walk towards death in a rather crude way: he will walk on all fours, he will crawl, devoured by senile and infantile rage, having experienced neglect, madness and nothingness. His own ‘nothingness’. The annihilation of the King – that had already been discovered on an intellectual and linguistic level by Hamlet, who famously uttered: “The King is a thing. / [...] / Of nothing” (Shakespeare 2016, IV.ii.26-28) – echoes another mytheme, namely

¹⁵ For an interpretation of the game of bo-peep, see Shakespeare 1989, 43. The reader should be warned that, ever since the eighteenth century, scholars have often speculated as to how to interpret the game of bo-peep, but they tend to agree on the fact that it is not so much peekaboo but rather a sort of blind man’s bluff (although they have offered no proof of that).

the story of the old and maimed king, the disgraced, mourning, and wounded king. His destiny is shared not only by Lear, but also by Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, although Oedipus' story has a completely different outcome: Oedipus becomes a hero, he is elevated to the status of deity; Lear, on the contrary, is destined to face the grim nothingness of death¹⁶.

In analysing the line Lear utters over Cordelia's dead body – "And my poor fool is hang'd" (Shakespeare 1989, V.iii.304) – scholars have often argued that the Fool is her double. Yet, an actor's line is often a trap, it is a wink at the audience and an allusion to the art of acting itself. Cordelia disappears after pronouncing her judgement on her father's "darker purpose" and then reappears when she *must* reappear, namely when death finally comes. The breach between father and daughter has to be deep and unbridgeable and it cannot be compensated for by the presence of the Fool. The Fool is part of Lear's upside-down, carnivalesque, freakish, and lugubriously circus-like court. Cordelia is instead different, stern, righteous: above all, she does not play with words and meanings. She is *uncompromising* and sublime. Yet, it would not be wrong to say that Lear would like her to be his *fool*, his *fool-nurse*.

Lear never gives up on that wish despite everything he has gone through. He would like to be accompanied towards death in a way that reminds him of life, that keeps him attached to life until his very last breath. For that reason, the audience is shocked when Lear exclaims, like a child, "Have I caught thee?" (20). These words written by the poet tear another veil. Like a child, Lear rejoices at being locked in prison with Cordelia. It is impossible to forget his extraordinary and perturbing lines: "Come, let's away to prison; / We two alone will sing like birds i'th' cage: / [...] so we'll live, / And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh / At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues / Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them

¹⁶ For an analysis of the mythical and fairy-tale motif of the old king, which emerges in the story of *Oedipus at Colonus*, see Propp 1975. For an excellent thematic and textual comparison between *King Lear* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, see Beltrametti 2019 (in the same volume, which focuses on classical echoes of *Oedipus at Colonus* in *King Lear*, see also the articles of Carlo Maria Bajetta, Robert S. Miola, Seth L. Schein, and Silvia Bigliuzzi). On Antigone and Old Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, see Pinotti 2013.

too" (8-9, 11-14). Lear invites Cordelia to play with him, to join him in his prison, to descend to his Hades, to accompany him to his death, or rather to die with him. "Have I caught thee?": he speaks like the child who says *da*, with a questioning wonder and in a way that seems to ask for complicity (*da?*). Lear wants to die with the joy of a child: there is *Lust* in this crawling towards death, there is a death-oriented desire. The poet's *parole* shows a primary scene in which life has reversed its course. When Lear enters the stage carrying Cordelia's body, the audience faces the traumatic experience of inversion. The desire of death swallows up life. A similar situation is described by Macbeth: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" (Shakespeare 2015, V.v.18); but days never really flow forward, they rather flow backwards "[t]o the last syllable of recorded time" (20), as if time were crumbling. That image of the old man who is eager to die and who, abusing life, has survived his honest and young daughter triggers the audience's moral rejection. The audience would like to overturn it, to reconvert it into its opposite. They would like to 'break the tables of the Law' in the face of that error and of that horror. That horror/error, though, concerns them too, as the poet seems to say.

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Selected Publications in Shakespeare Studies

Bigliuzzi, Silvia, ed., *Oedipus at Colonus and King Lear: Classical and Early Modern Intersections, Skenè Studies I, 2, Verona, Skenè Theatre and Drama Studies, 2019, 450 pp.*

This collection of essays edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi aims to investigate a multifaceted universe of classical and early modern intersections between Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, then expands this network of intersections to include contemporary adaptations, remediations and rewritings. The choice of focusing exclusively on the events staged by Sophocles and its intertextual/interdiscursive echoes in Shakespeare's tragedy derives from the fact that "*OC [Oedipus at Colonus]* is the only play showing Oedipus outside Thebes, an errant exile, accompanied by his daughter Antigone, and at a later stage rejoined by Ismene" (p. 12), thus recalling Lear's condition of exile and vagabond after ceding his reign to his daughters Goneril and Regan. Sophocles shows "Oedipus' experience of liminality [...] between the condition of being 'somebody' and its negation, as well as his experience of being on the verge of life's end" (p. 13), the same liminality experienced by the Shakespearean character. What can be appreciated from the outset, however, is the fact that the editor of this volume honestly admits that intersections between *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear* remain intersections, as the two tragedies "are neither demonstrably nor categorically linked in any

intrinsic manner" (p. 18), yet they may testify to the interdiscursive circulation of Sophoclean themes and topics in early modern England.

The book is divided into four sections ("Being Classical", "Oedipus", "Oedipus and Lear", "Revisiting Oedipus and Lear"), each containing essays (seventeen in total) by scholars of classics, the early modern English period and performance studies. Part one contains only two articles – Orgel's and Bajetta's – about the notion of 'classics' in early modern England. Although choosing to include two articles about 'being classical' in early modern England and then dedicating part two to the analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus* may be debatable and confusing, the first section of essays can be considered an introductory *trait d'union* between the other parts, thus paving the way for sections two, three and four from a methodological point of view and a unifying research question. Orgel's "How to Be Classical" and Bajetta's "Elizabeth I and Sir Walter Raleigh's Classics: The Case of Sophocles" are framed within a peculiar dialogic position where the theoretical and methodological premises of the former are applied to the specific case study presented in the latter – i.e., "Elizabeth's [alleged] enjoyment of Sophocles" (p. 77). What emerges from the two first articles is a pivotal crux that meanders throughout the whole book and that concerns the linguistic barrier that prevented many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English intellectuals from reading the original Greek texts without any Latin intermediary.

Part two offers interesting and original investigations of Sophocles' text itself. "Revisiting *Oedipus at Colonus*" by Slatkin is a provocative article that presents the old Theban king "as a self-reviser, one who has been through cognitive, emotional, and ultimately ethical arcs, reinterpreting the meaning of past individual (and collective) actions and reactions, and individual (and collective) traumas" (p. 93). Actions and reactions, and individuality vs. collectiveness are antithetical yet complementary binomials considered by Slatkin. Antitheses and complementarity of opposites are also fundamental to Ugolini's article, "A Wise and Irascible Hero: Oedipus from Thebes to Colonus", the opposites being wisdom, on the one hand, and short temper, on the other. This coexistence of these two apparently opposing sides of his

personality makes Oedipus an ambiguous character. Ambiguity is also a primary focus of “Some Notes on Oedipus and Time” by Avezzù, an ambiguity linked to the passing of time and questions of agency, ranging from “doing” in *Oedipus Rex* to “being made to do” in *Oedipus at Colonus* (p. 119). The irascibility dealt with by Ugolini was closely linked to Oedipus’ remembrance of his painful past; in Avezzù this same painful past is connected with “long duration (*makros chronos*)” (p. 139), “not a merely predictable succession of days, but of a life-span corresponding to a superior design” (p. 137). “Liminality, (In)accessibility, and Negative Characterization in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*” by Lupi, perhaps methodologically the most distant article of this group, yet astonishingly interesting and thought-provoking, approaches stylistic issues to demonstrate “a parallel negative characterisation of both the hero, Oedipus, and the place where Oedipus is bound to station in the play, [...] Colonus”, through “linguistic evidence that appears to have been intentionally disseminated by Sophocles throughout the play” (p. 147). In order to accomplish his task, Lupi recurs to negative lexical items and complex syntactic structures and coherently applies stylistic evidence to demonstrate both Oedipus’ and Colonus’ negative characterisation, as well as Sophocles’ undeniable linguistic skills (especially in the section devoted to hapaxes). The last article of this section, Bierl’s “*Oedipus at Colonus* as a Reflection of the *Oresteia*: The Abomination from Thebes as an Athenian Hero in the Making”, delves into a comparison, already hinted at by Slatkin (pp. 94-97), between Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* and Aeschylus’ trilogy, i.e., the *Oresteia*. The focus of this article is again on “triggering reflections about the larger political and social situation in the audience on the level of myth and ritual” (p. 170), always in the light of a certain ambiguity and evident antitheses – which Bierl calls “polarity”, “duality” and “tensions” – such as “the quintessential dichotomy between Thebes and Athens” (p. 171) or “between the dreadful dimension of death and euphemistic names to veil it, between mythic scenarios of anger, curse, hate as well as cultic blessing and plenty” (p. 192).

Part three opens with Miola’s article about the early modern reception of Sophocles’ tragedy (“Lost and Found in Translation:

Early Modern Receptions of *Oedipus at Colonus*"), an accurate reconstruction of the play's fortune and 'Christianisation' in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, from Marliani's and Erasmus' collections of proverbs and *sententiae* to Melanchthon's Latin translations of Sophocles and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Miola's fundamental contribution bridges a historical, philological and cultural scholarly gap and systematises issues of reception, translation and adaptation of Sophocles' tragedy in early modern England. The next five articles by Murnaghan, Schein, Beltrametti, Bigliuzzi and Lucking scrutinise different points of contact between *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*, foregrounding an undeniable interdiscursive network of echoes and parallels that allow us to read Shakespeare through Sophocles and Sophocles through Shakespeare. If in her "'More sinned against than sinning': Acting and Suffering in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*" Murnaghan focuses on differences and similarities between the two plays in terms of the linguistic (wordplay, use of the passive instead of the active voice, etc.) and rhetorical representation of the two old protagonists, Schein's "Fathers Cursing Children: Anger and Justice in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*" focuses once again on binary oppositions (as seen in part two), this time analysing the tensions between Oedipus' and Lear's anger towards their children, and a sense of justice that in Sophocles' is "a justice that features a special intimacy and ultimate harmony between the human and the divine", whereas Shakespeare "affirms neither divine justice nor any emotionally satisfying or intellectually meaningful relationship between divinity and humanity" (p. 248). Both Beltrametti and Bigliuzzi deal with the notion of time in *Oedipus* and *Lear*, but from two different yet non-mutually exclusive perspectives. "Oedipus' εἶδωλον, 'Lear's shadow' (OC 110, *King Lear* 1.4.222)" by Beltrametti broadens the panorama of intersections to all Sophocles' Theban play, thus perceptively interpreting *King Lear*'s time of the narration as the early modern English version of the events occurring in the space-time between *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* as follows: "[t]he themes and even the characters of the Greek dramatist seem to inhabit the deep structures of Shakespeare's tragedy, which could almost be considered as a

reworking of the Theban plays in an Elizabethan key" (p. 268). Starting from the premise that "[p]erhaps in no other Shakespearean tragedy as in *King Lear* a sense of the complexities of time conflating origin and ending in the 'now' [...] invades the play from its very outset" (p. 292), Bigliuzzi's article ends up being the perfect 'counter melody' to Avezzù's "Some Notes on Oedipus and Time", paralleling this latter's distinction between Oedipus' time of "doing" and "being made to do" with Lear's "new beginning", the division of his reign into three which "creat[es] the time of new genealogies, but also, contrariwise, the no-time of Cordelia's symbolic death – and soon of Lear himself. It is both a genesis and its reverse" (p. 300). The final article of this third section, Lucking's "'More than two tens to a score': Disquantification in *King Lear*", although it does not consider Sophocles' *Oedipus* and its connections with Shakespeare's *Lear* at all, approaches the theme of division from a different perspective than Bigliuzzi's. Lucking's reading of *Lear* gravitates around the notion of value in a purely mathematical sense. According to Lucking, the language of commerce and mathematical imagery are both nullifying forces, since the king self-deprives of his kingdom, and elements highlight "impetus towards unification" (p. 332) when Cordelia comes back from France.

Lastly, part four comprises four essays about adaptations and rewritings of both/either *Oedipus at Colonus* and/or *King Lear*. This group of articles opens with Pasqualicchio's "Happy Endings for Old Kings: Jean-François Ducis' *Cedipe* and *Léar*" which analyses 'bridges', as the author calls them, between Ducis' *Cedipe à Colone* (1797, preceded by *Cedipe chez Admète* in 1778 and 1792) and *Le Roi Léar* (1783), the French playwright being "the only dramatist to write works inspired both by the theme of *Oedipus at Colonus* and by the story of *King Lear*" (p. 342). Spence's "Shades of *King Lear* in Beckett's Theatre and Late Work" examines Beckett's works from the 1950s and 1960s and how most are influenced by Shakespearean tragedy by reason of Beckett's well-known obsession with "the limits of language" that also "pervades *King Lear* in multiple forms" (p. 369). The story of Oedipus comes back in Dobozy's moving essay, "Sam Shepard's 'Body' of Tragedy", which compares the American playwright's 2016 *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)*,

a play which “focus[es] on the diseased body in light of its source texts – Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*” (p. 404) – with its author’s advanced ALS that led to his death the following year. Lastly, “Opening up Discoveries through Promised Endings: An Experimental Work in Progress on *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*” by Nicholson and Sidiropoulou is an informative, review-like article describing and commenting on a theatrical project “co-produced and co-directed by the authors in Verona, Italy, in Spring, 2018” (p. 414), which staged some scenes from *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*, thus creating, as the authors call it, a “particular kind of *contaminatio*” where “[d]eliberate, risk-taking hybrids and paradoxes abound” (p. 415).

Far from being the expected, predictable book about the reception of the classics in early modern England, the originality of this essay collection lies in having chosen to focus on two specific tragedies, i.e., Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, which are not inextricably correlated yet share “intersections” (to quote from the book’s title). This choice of a specific, restricted – also niche – content allows the volume’s contributors to scrutinise the full array of potentials offered by the two plays’ interdiscursive network within a wide range of coherent methodological frameworks whose application reveals that the links of this network are even tighter than as hypothesised in Bigliuzzi’s introduction.

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Gajowski, Evelyn, ed., *The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 392 pp.

The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism offers an extensive array of critical approaches to Shakespeare by some of the most distinguished international academics who chart key developments and innovations in this composite field between the end of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. The book contains twenty chapters, arranged chronologically, each providing an extensive description and history of a particular

critical practice with its underlying theoretical assumptions. Each chapter closes with useful examples of the possible application of the critical approach through a brief analysis of a Shakespearean text, thus actually showing the theory in practice. Helpful appendices at the end of the book clarify important terms, schools of thought, and provide an exhaustive annotated bibliography, making this handbook truly accessible even for those who are not familiar with the developments in critical theories.

As the editor, Gajowski, indicates in the introduction, the book traces the evolution of theoretical developments that evolved in response to “traditional liberal humanism” (p. 3), with the object of reaching conclusions or making assumptions as to how we characterize Shakespeare studies today, but also to clarify affinities and tensions among these approaches. It will be interesting to note, for instance, that many of the most recent trends owe much to the preceding – and apparently discarded – critical approaches. The other implicit question which emerges from this collection of articles is, of course, that of the role of the critic: how much of the critic’s own subjectivity enters a critical analysis? Is it right that it should? Is it possible, or even useful, to concentrate solely on the object of study?

The first part of this collection of essays is labelled “Foundational Studies” and includes close reading, genre and character studies, approaches which had seemed to be dismissed but, as these articles show, have rather been renovated and refreshed. Genre studies, for instance, which traditionally dealt with the formal properties or stylistic norms of a text, are shown to include now the study of the fluid nature of genre, adopting historicist and feminist perspectives. The first “challenges to traditional liberal humanism” appear in the second section, which covers the 1970s and 1980s; in this section the fundamental elements of this approach – the nature of the subject, of reality and language – are questioned, by opposing, instead, the idea of a constructed, rather than essential, human being. This portion of the book includes Marxist, new historicist, cultural materialist, feminist and psychoanalytic studies, and examines the impact of the pioneering works of scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Coppélia Kahn and others. What links

these approaches is essentially the idea of a decentred human subject together with an opposition to hierarchy; in the case of Marxism and cultural materialism, notably, the assumption that the human subject is exclusively upper class, in the case of feminism solely male. Marxism, particularly, as the essays which follow show, plants the roots for the blossoming of new historicism, cultural materialism and presentism which we will come to. The interesting article on feminist studies, which recommends a resistance to homogenization and, as with many articles in this book, suggests a plurality which denies the possibility that a single prescriptive approach may resolve any critical interpretation, offers as its case study an analysis of Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and the “doctrinal fetishization of her chastity” (McCall, p. 112), a critique classified as “presentist-feminist”, a title which emphasizes the intersectionality of critical approaches constantly at play. The article concluding this section traces psychoanalytic approaches to Shakespeare beginning with Freud but expanding into the works of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott; the adaptability of these developing concepts is shown in an interesting reading of *As You Like It* which proposes the lens of sadomasochism for an interpretation of the play and particularly for the character of Rosalind.

The question of ‘otherness’ which had emerged in postmodern critical practices reaches its apex with the development of critical race, postcolonial and queer studies, which form the third section of the book, “Matter of Difference”. As the editor puts it: “Even as cultural materialist studies and feminist studies challenge the premises of traditional liberal humanism on the basis of class difference and gender difference, respectively, so in turn critical race studies, postcolonial studies and queer studies destabilize the challengers themselves” (p. 7), and prioritize the voices of people of colour, colonized people and all those with diverse sexual orientations. The chapter on postcolonial studies, for example, focuses on how Shakespeare has been used as an instrument of domination and draws from theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, thus giving the reader, as most of these chapters do, a clear picture of the ‘state of the art’ but at the same time opening up possible paths for the future of

Shakespeare studies which must take into account issues of political nature which inform colonialism, ethnicity, hybridity economics and the like. In the approach to queer studies, surprisingly, the play taken into consideration is *Much Ado About Nothing*, a traditionally 'straight' play in which what is highlighted is the dramatization of homosociality, desire and gender roles.

In part four of this collection, we reach "Millennial Directions", where the practices appear more innovative, though most still evolve out of those we have seen at the close of the twentieth century. Apart from computational studies, which involve the use of analytical-digital tools in order to process large quantities of data through specific algorithms, and have been successfully applied to Shakespearean texts allowing the detection of linguistic patterns or style which have contributed significantly to the determination of Shakespeare's canon chronology, the other theories proposed can be seen to rise from concerns which originate from outside of the academic world and therefore "emphasize the inevitable embeddedness of the text in its political, social, and economic context" (Gajowski, p. 9). Ecocritical studies, which in their simplest terms involve the treatment of nature, are explored through their major orientations which include environmental history, but also ecofeminism and posthuman theory. The latter two will appear in the concluding part of this book, but it is useful to clarify here what is intended: ecofeminist studies analyse the modes by which relationships between humans and other-than humans affect social injustices whereas posthumanism aims at decentring the human from its superior position with respect to other forms of nature. Ecocriticism, then, not only accentuates the problems related to natural calamities but also invites audience and readers to take action. The chosen play to which the theory is applied is *Coriolanus*, which dramatizes, among others, problems over food shortages, famine, struggle for water, and generally can be read through the lens of ecology. Another critical branch contained in this section is that of spiritual studies, which investigates the concept of spirituality or theology comparing current spiritual-critical practices to those of earlier scholars and delving into the possibility of recognizing Shakespeare's own position through his use of the Bible and other spiritual sources.

Presentist and global studies close this penultimate section, and the former is traced back to cultural materialism and the work of Terence Hawkes. Presentism, perhaps more evidently – or more challengingly – leads us back to our initial question concerning the role and the function of the critic, in that it maintains that the positionality of the critic cannot, but mostly, should not, be circumvented. The role of Shakespeare, then, should be considered in the here and now, and the only way to ‘make meaning’ with Shakespeare is to view him in the current political and social times. Rather than being opposed to a historicist perspective, it supplements it, extending it to the moment in which the critic is writing; in fact, the examined text in this article focuses on Shakespeare’s much discussed contribution to *Sir Thomas More* seen in the framework of Brexit and of the refugee emergency. Global studies, broadly speaking, encompass issues which go beyond the national, adopting an interdisciplinary methodology which tackles questions related to politics, economics, ecology and generally spans across geographic and cultural spaces. The subjects include race and gender studies, and of course postcolonial issues, but unlike the latter they move beyond the customary criticism of Western hegemony and the reactions of previously colonized countries, moving towards the effect of Shakespeare reception in a global context. Films and performances throughout the world are studied in order to construct, or reveal, “Shakespeare as a cosmopolitan brand” (Gajowski, p. 12).

Finally, in the last articles, attention is turned to “Twenty-First-Century Directions”, namely, disability, ecofeminist, posthumanist and cognitive ethology studies. Disability studies revise previous assumptions on disability, most famously those which considered physical disability as a sign of guilt or moral evil, as in the case of Richard III, and consider how analyses of Shakespearean texts can question those notions. The chosen play to illustrate the theory is, apparently paradoxically, one which does not present disabled characters, *Romeo and Juliet*. The choice is determined by the fact that it offers deep understanding into ideologies of ability, and at the same time “asks us to understand disability as a problem of agency, expressed in the body’s lapses” (Williams, p. 275). The theory derived from cognitive ethology closes this selection of

contributions. Possibly partly overlapping with posthumanism in its critical application, the theory studies animal behaviour from an evolutionary point of view and through it examines human psychological processes as inherited characteristics shaped by natural selection. Human behaviour, from this point of view, is therefore the result of traits we have absorbed from our predecessors, attitudes adopted in order to deal with dangers and the natural environment. Its critical application to Shakespeare studies is exemplified through an analysis of *Hamlet* which aims at putting the theory into practice through an investigation of mechanisms of memory and of mimicry and the automatic responses to language and events. The author of the last essay, Dionne, concludes: "In his most profoundly self-reflexive play, Shakespeare explores the thin line that separates the human from its imagined primate original. And in the graveyard [...] it is hard not to see the 'prating' and 'ranting' of its two central heroes behaving like hooting monkeys throwing handfuls of dirt in their rhetorical pantomimes" (p. 316).

One aspect which is less apparent in this collection of essays is language-based critical analysis (though computational studies go in that direction), a rapidly growing field in Shakespeare studies which may, in the future, enhance a 'return to the text' in its more specific nature. In the last decades, in fact, as we have seen, literary criticism has mostly derived from the social and cultural climate of the time, and this prompts readers to interrogate themselves over what new paths will be taken by Shakespearean criticism, whether the trend will continue and if new theories in "accents yet unknown" rising outside of academia will sooner or later be applied to Shakespeare, which inevitably remains a touchstone for the 'testing' of any literary critical theory.

In conclusion, this book offers multi- and inter-disciplinary critical approaches and is an essential compendium for researchers and scholars, or indeed for anyone involved in Shakespeare studies. Its exhaustiveness and accessibility are probably its greatest asset. At the same time, as mentioned before, it poses important questions on the functions of critical theory: some authors seem to privilege an approach through the lens of contemporaneity whilst others find it more fruitful to interpret the

Shakespearean text in the light of its own time. Mostly, the different contributions imply that these methodologies, together with others exposed here, have become inextricably linked.

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Hartley, Andrew James and Holland, Peter, eds, *Shakespeare and Geek Culture, The Arden Shakespeare*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 336 pp.

This edited collection of essays, whose seeds were sown at the homonymous 2017 Shakespeare Association of America seminar led by Andrew James Hartley and Peter Holland, takes its cue from previous studies on Shakespeare and current popular culture. Approximately twenty years ago, Douglas M. Lanier, who was later to contribute a riveting book chapter to *Shakespeare and Geek Culture*, accepted Holland's invitation to write precisely one of such studies for the Oxford Shakespeare Topics series. It is on Lanier's definition of his object of study as "what is often dismissed as Shakespearian kitsch" (*Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 3) that Holland, in his turn, seems to elaborate in an attempt to clarify the scope of "Shakespeare geek culture", which, he writes in the final essay of the collection, "takes pleasure in the kitsch, the ephemeral, the obsessive, the fringe, the enjoyable pointless manifestations of that cultural engagement with Shakespeare [...] which we used to be told were irrelevant to scholarship" (p. 303). Building upon Lanier's and others' investigations of 'Shakespop', the nineteen contributors have joined forces to explore "the interplay between Shakespeare and geek culture in its disparate forms" (Hartley and Holland, p. 9), hence paying due attention to "aspects of popular culture with which much Shakespeare criticism, the main stream, has not yet concerned itself" (Holland, p. 303).

Drawing upon several fields of study (media, film, game, adaptation and fan studies, among others), this rather heterogenous volume comprises eighteen chapters which are loosely grouped into four sections ("Geek Culture and Fiction", "Geek Culture and the Shakespeare Sandbox", "Pastimes, Gaming

and Shakespeare”, “Film, Theatre and Geek Culture”) and “enact various forms of cultural studies” (Hartley and Holland, p. 9) within the common framework established by the editors’ introductory reflections. Most essays specifically focus on predominantly post-1990s Shakespeare-related cultural products, including fantasy novels (Pivetti), graphic novels and comic books (Leverett; Martinez; Lanier; Sasser), ‘choose your own adventure’ books (Pope), films (Botelho; Flaherty), fan texts (O’Neill; Fazel and Geddes), video games (Bushnell) and board games (Dickson). In successfully combining different disciplinary approaches to a remarkable variety of objects of study, the book usefully works towards mapping Shakespeare’s pervasive presence in contemporary popular culture.

Not all chapters, however, revolve around specific instances of adapted or appropriated Shakespeare. Several essays discuss far-reaching topics and issues, such as cultural ownership and adaptation (Hartley), the position of the humanities professor in educational culture (Kozusko) and the gender bias against complex female characters that equally affects much Shakespeare criticism and geek culture (McCall). Laying greater emphasis on the Shakespearean canon (the plays rather than the poems, to be sure), some contributions attempt to highlight how the unfamiliar lens of the geek might be used to reconsider familiar texts and problems. At the end of part one, for example, in an effort to reveal “what science fiction affords the study of Shakespeare”, Andrew Tumminia contrasts Shakespeare’s histories (especially *2 Henry VI*) with a few episodes of the animated series *Adventure Time* (2010-18) on the basis of their different displacement of “the problems of the present” (pp. 82-83). In part four, James D. Mardock intriguingly suggests that we imagine early modern “dramatic characters as having had their own fan bases” and evaluate “the influence of hardcore fans, of geeks, alongside that of the companies, poets and censors”, with a view to “expand[ing] the range of answers to certain questions” in the history of early modern theatre (p. 291). If Mardock anachronistically yet perceptively frames *King Lear* as “the ‘gritty reboot’ of the Lear legend” (p. 290), another notable contribution that similarly turns to one of Shakespeare’s plays and interprets it in a new light is Matt Kozusko’s “On Eating Paper and

Drinking Ink”, which juxtaposes the “character” of “the Shakespeare professor” (“the otiose academic who populates stories about the failures of higher education today”) with Holofernes (“one of Shakespeare’s most fantastic geeks” [p. 170]) in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (“a celebration of *otium* and geek-level obsession with rhetoric and verbal dexterity and poetry” [p. 178]). Kozusko’s essay truly offers us “a moment of self-reflection such as we rarely allow ourselves”, thus clearly exemplifying how the volume is also concerned “with the geekiness of Shakespeare scholarship itself” (Hartley and Holland, p. 3), for, the editors point out, “we academics are geeks/nerds” to some extent (p. 8).

Chapter after chapter, this essay collection makes a convincing case for the careful study of the crossroads between Shakespeare and geek culture while providing a valuable example of how those interconnections may be rewardingly examined from a vast array of perspectives. Drawing attention to the “increasing centrality to the internet-driven culture of the twenty-first century” (p. 10) of what the various contributing authors broadly define as “geek culture”, the book successfully demonstrates the mutual relevance of the “two apparently separate entities” juxtaposed in the title (p. 1). As shown by the wide range of products and practices analysed throughout the volume, “Shakespeare is a common ingredient in geek culture used to elevate and complicate it and that relationship is reciprocal”, for “geek culture, in turn, makes Shakespeare relatable to a broader audience” (McCall, p. 227). Shakespeare has not ceased to serve as “a jumping-off point, a locus of creativity, a wealth of material” which can be “easily used and adapted to match new media and new audiences” (Dickson, pp. 200-1), also because he “adds a degree of respectability through [...] his cultural capital, thus amplifying the new works’ promotability” (Martinez, p. 65). In this light, it does not seem unreasonable to share the editors’ hope that their common endeavour “represents the first unified salvo of what will be a new sub-movement within Shakespeare studies” (Hartley and Holland, p. 9).

Shakespeareans who wish to continue the admirable work of this essay collection may well resume from one pivotal though difficult-to-answer question that the volume ultimately leaves open – a bit too open, some might believe, even for such an exploratory

study – namely, what is ‘geek culture’ (and, conversely, what isn’t)? Because of the current semantic instability of the word “geek”, the editors begin by acknowledging the possibility of identifying a geek based on “*how they like*” (“That *how* is exuberant, all-encompassing, gloriously, unreasonably detail-oriented, ungoverned in its pursuit of what seems interesting; it’s about love, and it reminds us of the fanatical roots of fandom”) as well as on “*what they like*” (p. 8), i.e., “their subcultural interests” comprising “those subjects falling under the umbrella of science fiction and fantasy” (p. 4). However, we are left with a moving target throughout the book until Holland eventually requests, in his solo essay, that we “accept the broad and expanding semantic field within which each of the chapters [...] found their place” for lack of “one agreed definition” (p. 295). In fact, a few contributions do push the definition of the term “geek”. Perhaps, not every reader of this volume will find M. Tyler Sasser’s tentative inclusion of “scouting culture” in “a larger American geek culture” (p. 207) wholly convincing. Regardless of whether one is willing to treat scouts as geeks or not, however, Sasser’s “The Bard of *Boys’ Life*: Shakespeare and the Construction of American Boyhood” remains a highly informative essay which has the merit of foregrounding the ideological implications carried by “the appearance of Shakespeare, even when those appearances are seemingly simple and innocuous” (p. 221). Difficult though it is to pinpoint the shifting meaning of words such as “geek” and its cognates, future studies picking up from where the collection leaves off may well follow its lead in attempting to answer the definition issue.

On the whole, the critical enquiry into the multifarious intersections of Shakespeare and geek culture promises to be a fruitful endeavour, for which the collection of essays edited by Hartley and Holland provides a convenient starting point. The main strength of this newly born “sub-movement” appears to be its considerable potential for enriching our collective understanding of contemporary Shakespeares and Shakespeareans, as well as of Shakespeare’s oeuvre and early modern theatre as viewed from the original standpoints of the geek. Of course, if this concerted effort is commendable, it is not because of the fascinating, but very unlikely, possibility that the word “geek” was invented by

Shakespeare in *Cymbeline*, V.iv (Holland, pp. 304-5) – the occurrence is considered a transmission error for “gecke” by the OED and is used by Holland as a deliberate, tongue-in-cheek reference in the title of his essay – but because geek culture has become crucial to present-day popular culture and Shakespeare continues to enjoy immense prestige within it.

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Hatchuel, Sarah and Vienne-Guerrin, Nathalie, eds, *The Merchant of Venice: A Critical Reader, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 320 pp.*

Not only is *The Merchant of Venice* one of the most famous of Shakespeare’s plays, it is also one of the most controversial and problematic. Significantly, perhaps, the title page of the first Quarto does not refer to a comedy, but to a more neutral “Historie of the Merchant of Venice”, even though, technically speaking, the play belongs rightfully to the comic genre. Its problematic nature resides in the rather awkward concept of ‘harmony’ that is reached at the end of the play, and that has elicited endless critical debate ever since. Famously, the play also attracted Freud’s attention, who devoted an essay to the ancient and recurrent motif of the lovers’ choice (“Das Motiv der Kästchenwahl”, 1913).

The ongoing debate as well as the state of the art is thoroughly documented in this recent critical reader edited by Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, where eight essays plus a comprehensive introduction by the two editors address the most relevant issues now at stake with *The Merchant*. The rationale behind this fortunate Arden Early Modern Drama Guides series, reaching with this the twenty-fourth volume (with “[f]urther titles [...] in preparation”), follows from the premise, stated by the series editors, that the need is now deeply felt to “bridge the gap between accounts of previous critical developments and performative history and an acquaintance with new research initiatives” (p. ix). This principle informs the structure of all volumes of the series, which open with a sweeping introduction foregrounding the matter, and follow with three structural chapters devoted to a

recognition of the classical critical work on the subject (here by John Drakakis), to the play in performance (Jay L. Halio), and to the state of the art, which centres on the vicissitudes of the play, in general terms, throughout the new millennium (Shaul Bassi). Then, new life is breathed into the play by the “New Directions” session (Sabine Schülting; Janice Valls-Russell; Gary Watt; Douglas M. Lanier), which deals with the thorniest sides of the dramatic matter.

Naturally enough, the problem now with the Shakespeare industry is to account for what happened in the past and for the ever-growing net of performative and critical directions that accrete mercilessly every single day. In a way, the traditional paper, or print, publication seems inadequate to keep pace with a market that not only stretches in multiple directions, but that constantly “articulate[s] new meanings and readings of the play that mainstream criticism from the Anglosphere may not have thematized” (Bassi, p. 103). Perhaps the day is near when entrusting one’s own speculative efforts on Shakespeare to paper and ink will appear romantically obsolete. If so, this Arden series fights strenuously against the passing of time. Its explicit two-faced-Janus approach, with an eye on the past and the other on contemporaneity, reaches a practical balance between the needs of the scholar and those of the student, as the conclusive chapter by Lieke Stelling devoted to learning and teaching resources on *The Merchant* in the classroom attests.

Comprehensive as it may be, however, no carefully contrived structural scaffold will ever dissipate all the vicious elusiveness of *The Merchant* for the last time. Given the fact that a play is always on the move, and no ‘truest’ form of it exists, and that performance is only one manifestation of the multiple possibilities of a text, *The Merchant* dodged interpreters from its first appearance while typically transferring the burden of interpretation to stage directors. How are we to evaluate the trial scene, and the odd “credit clauses” (Watt, p. 147) that lead to it? Shylock may be a comic character, or a tragic one; he can be a red-bearded Jew, or find his place in the Venetian Christian community. He can elicit anger and scorn or appear as a pitiful victim of the Christian prejudice. More generally, placing a Jew at centre stage has signified a different thing at every turn of history, to the point that

“[t]he stimulus given to the study of Shakespeare [...] was intensified in the case of *The Merchant of Venice* as a result of the Holocaust during the Second World War” (Drakakis, p. 30). The chapters devoted here to *The Merchant* in performance and on screen are particularly illuminating, in that they re-contextualize the unsurprisingly prolific afterlife of the play and account for the drastic, at times dramatic transformations of Shylock, the “Venetian usurer”. In nineteenth-century Italy, for instance, *Shylock* was deemed a much more eligible title than *Il mercante di Venezia*, and supplanted the latter for a huge time span, a sign of the unbeatable preponderance of the Jew and of the alternating shift of focus on the scene.

This said, a thundering absence is however to be felt in this reader, especially in light of its attention to the performative element, and this absence is the radio. True, our attitude towards the radio has changed over the decades. Formerly, it was welcomed as a new arrival whose great achievements were conjunctive, popular and didactic; then it turned into a wartime leftover, going through a sunset boulevard and a lost battle against TV. Then again, a renaissance of radio drama ensued, pale and inhibited as it may have been. An analysis that thoroughly includes the silent film tradition in fact misses a crucial element of comparison if the radio is obliterated: I’m thinking for instance of Flaminio Bollini’s 1960 Radio Rai *Il mercante di Venezia* with Tino Carraro, or Emma Harding’s 2018 BBC version of the play set in a 2008 debt-ridden city of London. In Italy, for instance, the treatment of sounds in the first talkies was largely derivative from the radio’s long-time expertise in the field. In Portia’s words: I remember it well, and I remember it worthy of thy praise...

In spite of this lapse of attention towards the merely audible, however, *The Merchant* emerges throughout this valuable book as an inexhaustible play that will never stop talking to the readers’ ears. *The Merchant*, and the vehement flood of responses it elicited, will always accompany those seeking a clue for the rise and spread of anti-Semitism and xenophobia across modern, and early modern, Europe.

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Shapiro, James, *Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us about Our Past and Future*, New York, Penguin, 2020, 320 pp.

James Shapiro's important book was published in early March 2020, just before a dysfunctionally divided America closed down in the onrush of a global pandemic. As I write this, fourteen months later, America remains divided in ways Shapiro does not imagine and could not have predicted.

The book opens and closes with a detailed, critically and politically astute account of the controversial 2017 New York Public Theatre modern-dress production of *Julius Caesar*, which imagined Caesar as a Donald Trump look-alike: sitting in a gold-plated bathtub, casually grabbing a woman's crotch, mock-mimicking a disabled reporter. These were physical additions to the script. The only verbal addition was Casca's description of the blind loyalty of Caesar's supporters, who would have forgiven him "[i]f Caesar had stabbed their mothers *on Fifth Avenue*" (gesturing toward the real Fifth Avenue, not far from the theatre [p. xxiii]). But the equation of Caesar with Trump illuminated, and made real for New York audiences in 2017, Shakespeare's portrayal of a populist authoritarian: his arrogance, his proprietary pronouns, his susceptibility to flattery. I have never been gripped by a performance of *Julius Caesar*, and never had any desire to direct it. But Shapiro's insider account of this production – from the auditorium, in repeated viewings, and from backstage, in his capacity as Shakespeare Scholar in Residence at the Public Theatre – made me wish I, and many more people, could have seen it.

Unfortunately, the production became infamous when a right-wing media storm caricatured it as a liberal fantasy encouraging someone to assassinate President Trump. Shapiro chronicles and analyzes, in the best traditions of journalism, the unfolding of that deliberate misrepresentation of the production. The faux outrage could only have persuaded people unfamiliar with Shakespeare's tragedy. Any reader of this journal knows that Caesar is assassinated half-way through the play, and that the attempt to kill "the spirit [...] of Caesar" (p. 106) massively backfires, leading to

the death of all the conspirators and the triumph of authoritarianism. As the director Oskar Eustis told the first night audience, before the performance began, “like drama, democracy depends on the conflict of different points of view”, and *Julius Caesar* “warns about what happens when you try to preserve democracy by nondemocratic means” (pp. xxvii-xxviii).

But Shapiro does not emphasize what, in retrospect, is the most striking sentence of Eustis’s curtain speech: “the danger of a large crowd of people, manipulated by their emotions, taken over by leaders who urge them to do things that not only are against their interests, but destroy their very institutions that are there to serve and protect them” (p. xxviii). That is exactly what happened on January 6, 2021, when a mob of Trump supporters violently attacked the United States Capitol in an attempt to stop the certification of an election won by Trump’s opponent.

Shapiro’s focus on this one production previews the structure of his book: in each chapter, he tells a compelling story about a particular incident in America’s long fascination with Shakespeare, and supports his analysis by digging deep into archives that other scholars have only skimmed. For instance, his chapter on the award-winning film *Shakespeare in Love* is much more thoroughly researched, more illuminating, and more skeptical than the account of that most popular of all Hollywood Shakespeare films found in the 2020 biography, *Tom Stoppard: A Life*, written by the prize-winning Oxford biographer, Hermione Lee.

Shapiro begins with a fascinating juxtaposition of the American President John Quincy Adams and the British actress Fanny Kemble, on tour in America. Though Adams and Kemble have often been quoted by Shakespeareans, Shapiro situates their clashing perspectives on Othello and Desdemona in the larger perspective of conflicting early American attitudes toward race, slavery, and miscegenation. The next chapter begins with the young, girlish Ulysses S. Grant rehearsing the role of Desdemona in an army production of *Othello* planned just before the Mexican-American War and the birth of the Anglo-Saxon myth of America’s “manifest destiny” to become a transcontinental imperial nation. Shapiro contrasts these masculine myths with the wildly successful transvestite performances of Romeo by Charlotte Cushman, the

greatest American actress of the nineteenth century, and so far as I am aware America's first gay celebrity.

There follow fascinating chapters on the Astor Place riots and class warfare (1849), the competing interpretations of Shakespeare by President Abraham Lincoln and the actor who assassinated him (1865), the post-war debates about women and marriage encapsulated in *Kiss Me, Kate*, the Broadway musical adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* (1948), and the politics of sexuality in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). The only disappointing chapter focuses on the 1916 "community drama" *Caliban by the Yellow Sands* (p. 122), which enlisted seven thousand local performers in New York and Boston to bring to life a mediocre script by an unimportant writer. I understand why, in the years between 2017 and 2020, Shapiro wanted to focus on the issue of immigration. But his account of Henry Cabot Lodge's xenophobic Shakespeare-worship is much more interesting than anything he can find to say about Percy MacKaye's "masque".

Like any Shakespeare scholar who reads this book, I want to quibble with some of Shapiro's omissions and choices. But the book's most important weakness is its concluding confidence that "[t]he future of Shakespeare in America, like the future of the nation itself, would appear secure" (p. 220). The January 6 insurrection (so presciently foreseen by Oskar Eustis in 2017), Trump's 'Big Lie' that the election was fraudulent, and his supporters' continuing rejection of the legitimacy of Trump's defeat threaten the future of the nation more than any crisis since the Confederate insurrection of 1861.

In all the other episodes that Shapiro analyzes, from 1833 to 2017, both sides of an American debate regard Shakespeare as a source of authority and justification. But Trump and his supporters are simply not interested in Shakespeare. Trump does not read books or go to the theatre. Shakespeare is simply part of what Trumpists regard as a despicable, impotent, unjustifiably privileged elite. And on the other side of the political divide, English departments in American colleges and universities are increasingly uncomfortable with Shakespeare's entanglement in the racism and colonialism of the Anglo-Saxon empire. How can Shakespeare continue to be a political asset in an America where

students and their teachers are being urged to “decolonize your bookshelf”? Two years after Shapiro finished writing his excellent book, his confidence in Shakespeare’s cultural invulnerability seems distinctly old-fashioned.

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Webster, John, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Karen Britland, New Mermaids, Methuen Drama, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 216 pp.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*’s famous Echo scene, the protagonist’s husband, Antonio, visits a ruined abbey, where (unbeknownst to him) the murdered Duchess lies buried. Moved by the melancholy spectacle of its broken tombs, he begins to moralise upon the transience of earthly splendour: “but all things have their end – / Churches and cities, which have diseases like to men, / Must have like death that we have” (V.iii.17-19). Playing on this motif, the commendatory verses that Webster’s fellow dramatists, Thomas Middleton and John Ford, contributed to the first Quarto insist that the play itself constitutes a different kind of “monument” – one that guarantees its author the “lasting fame” that no mere marble can ensure (p. 8). But, to anyone concerned with the fragile state of literary studies today, Antonio’s lines must have an uneasy resonance. The institution of English literature as a subject of academic enquiry has a relatively brief history, one originally bound up with Victorian ideology of Empire: here, its adherents insisted, were cultural monuments fit to match those of ancient Greece and Rome and deserving of the same reverential attention. As it happens, Karen Britland’s new edition of *Malfi* belongs to a series whose own history parallels that of the discipline whose needs it is meant to address. The original Mermaid editions made readily available, for the first time, collections of plays by some of Shakespeare’s most prominent contemporaries: under the editorship of Havelock Ellis, the series was launched in 1887, just as English literature was becoming established as a recognised

discipline at British universities¹. Regularly reissued by a succession of publishers until the early 1960s, Ellis's texts were then replaced by the single play *New Mermaids* which, under various imprints and through a succession of editions, have remained a staple of undergraduate drama courses until the present day.

The Duchess of Malfi, in a pioneering edition by Elizabeth M. Brennan, was amongst the first to appear in the new series (1964): republished in 1983, and in a "fully revised" third edition a decade later, it was replaced by Brian Gibbons' excellent fourth edition in 2001, itself revised in 2014. The increasing pace of re-publication no doubt reflects a gathering anxiety on the part of the current publisher (Methuen Drama/Bloomsbury) about the undergraduate market at which the *New Mermaids* have been directed. In a neoliberal environment that nourishes an increasing instrumental notion of education, enrolments in English (and in the humanities more generally) have been falling at universities across the world; many departments have been 'downsized' (resulting in shrunken curricula) and some have been threatened with complete closure. In an attempt to prop up the subject, both schools and universities have felt themselves pushed towards a crude notion of 'relevance' that has not only reduced the teaching of pre-twentieth-century literature, but is encouraging a presentist tendency in the treatment of those works that continue to be taught.

This tendency is evident in the determinedly contemporary accent of Britland's updated *Malfi*. It is telling that of the twenty-seven items in its annotated list of "Further Reading", twenty-one belong to the present century, and none were published before 1985. Britland's account of the play's stage history is similarly biased towards the twenty-first century, much of it devoted to 'adaptations' and 'reworkings' at the expense of more faithful versions, such as those at the Almeida Theatre (2019-20), at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre (2018), and at the

¹ The subject was first included in the curriculum at King's College, London, in 1840, and first included in examinations nineteen years later. By 1871 it was linked to the teaching of Classics at the University of Otago in distant New Zealand. At Oxford, the School of English was founded in 1894; and in 1910 the establishment of the King Edward Professorship marked its growing importance at the University of Cambridge.

London Globe's Sam Wanamaker Playhouse (2014) – all of which are ignored, even though the latter, performed in seventeenth-century costume in a replica of a Jacobean theatre, is perhaps the only production of the play readily available in an on-screen performance.

This tilt towards the contemporary is, if anything, even more pronounced in the editor's critical account of the play. Britland is especially sympathetic to current feminist readings inspired by the #MeToo movement, which present it as an exposé of "toxic masculinity" (p. xix), and "the corrupting effect of unchecked male power" (p. xx). It is true that, as its title reminds us, *The Duchess of Malfi* belongs to a group of early seventeenth-century tragedies whose action is centred upon a female protagonist, a development that not only reflected the increasing importance of the female audience in early modern theatres, but responded to a larger debate about the legitimacy of female power – the supposedly 'unnatural' phenomenon that John Knox (contemplating the reigns of Mary Queen of Scots and her cousin Elizabeth I) infamously dubbed "the Monstrous Regiment of Women". But while that debate may seem to anticipate aspects of modern feminism, this does not make *Malfi* in itself a feminist play. Indeed, as Webster's own dedicatory epistle and the witty encomia of his fellow playwrights make clear, his tragedy is more concerned with the tyranny of power and the corruptions of 'worldly greatness' than in issues of gender per se: while the Duchess is the play's nominal protagonist, she does in fact share that pre-eminence with Bosola, who is not only given the same number of lines, but assumes the central role after her death at the end of Act IV; and this structural balance reflects the way in which the Duchess and her murderer are shown to be victims of the same perverted social hierarchy.

Even more problematic than Britland's effort to fit the play to twenty-first-century feminist beliefs is her determination to align it with the current vogue for "ecocriticism and the environmental humanities" (p. xxiii). *Malfi*, she declares, is "a play that insists on human actors' [...] embeddedness in the natural world" (p. xxiii), "asking what, if anything, differentiates humankind from beasts" (p. viii), its "[a]nimalistic similes" not only "underlining [...] the ways in which corrupt humans become like beasts, but also

drawing attention to the porous nature of human identity and to the networks of dependency that create intricate ecologies of connection" (p. xxv). For her, the tyrannical Aragonian brothers are to be seen presiding over "an ecosystem of parasites" (p. xxv). At the centre of such arguments, of course, lie those figures of wolfish behaviour that are brought to grotesque life in Duke Ferdinand's "lycanthropia", when he is spotted with a dead man's leg upon his shoulder, howling to the world that he is a wolf (V.ii). But the horror of this description has nothing to do with human "embeddedness" in nature: to the contrary, it represents the most shocking violation of the natural order that it is possible to imagine, belonging as it does to a culture that imagined humankind as utterly separate from the animal domain. Moreover – in a play obsessed with monuments of greatness, and whose closing speech once again reflects on the ephemerality of earthly fame – it is surely important that the Duke's madness has drawn him to a churchyard where, like other similarly afflicted madmen, he pillages the burial places of the dead.

Britland is not, of course, entirely indifferent to the play's historical contexts; her useful account of Webster's sources allows her to touch on readings that have explored the ways in which the action reflects Webster's social, political, and religious preoccupations. She offers a brief discussion of ways in which the play may reflect the doctrines of the religious reformer John Calvin; and, in the course of this, she mentions Webster's recent elegy for the deceased Protestant hero, Prince Henry. She fails, however, to notice the playwright's return to elegiac celebration of the Prince ten years later in *Monuments of Honour* – just as she ignores the way in which the Echo scene itself seems to have been inspired by a passage in George Wither's *Prince Henry's Obsequies* (1612). Yet such details are crucial to an understanding not only of the play's religious politics, but of the idea of true greatness celebrated in the play's concluding couplet: "Integrity of life is fame's best friend, / Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end" (V.v).

By all of this, I do not mean to say that Britland's *Duchess of Malfi* is a bad edition: it is perhaps too easy to complain of what is missing from the introduction, given that this is at least one third shorter than its immediate predecessor – something that no doubt

answers to the growing conviction that students no longer respond well to lengthy introductions. After all, Britland partly compensates for this by supplying explanatory footnotes that are fuller and often more illuminating than those in any previous Mermaid. Furthermore, she is meticulous in her efforts to preserve what she calls “the play’s blank verse”, resisting what she sees as frequently mistaken efforts to “chang[e] Webster’s idiosyncratic and unmetrical lines to prose” (p. xxxiv). A “Lineation Appendix” carefully details her alterations to the verse layout of the first Quarto. Even here, though, there is room for doubt, since that reference to “the play’s blank verse” begs an important question about what exactly constitutes “the play” – especially since Webster (at least in III.iv) was at pains to distance himself from the printed version in a marginal note that announced: “The author disclaims this ditty to be his”. We have no way of knowing exactly how the poet’s own manuscript differentiated verse from prose; and Britland’s line-divisions typically overlook Webster’s apparent fondness for ‘amphibious lines’ (those that simultaneously complete one pentameter and begin another), as well as an habitual attachment to iambic rhythms that can make it hard to determine whether some passages were meant as prose, or simply as irregular verse.

In the end, it is difficult to believe that the General Editors’ decision to replace Brian Gibbons’ excellent 2001 edition with this new *Duchess* will justify the substantial efforts or the cost involved. For the shrinking numbers of students still gripped by a passion for literature, the excitement and wonder of a play like *The Duchess of Malfi* must lie not in any seeming anticipation of their own concerns, but in its capacity to open their minds to a world that, while recognisably ancestral to their own, is nevertheless disconcertingly unfamiliar. The past, as L. P. Hartley taught us long ago, is a foreign country: that is why we want to go there.

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Abstracts

Henry James, George Santayana, H. D., W. H. Auden: Four Versions of Shakespeare Out of Context

ROBERT L. CASERIO

Shakespeare scholar James Shapiro's *Shakespeare in a Divided America*, a study of Shakespeare's impact in the U.S. since the 1830s, issues in Shapiro's sympathetic account of a 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* in New York. That production staged the play in terms of up-to-date conflict between Trump-allied Republicans and Clinton-allied Democrats. Shapiro's attachment of Shakespeare to current events is a sterling example of a prevailing mode of literary criticism, which ties the worth and relevance of literary art to its historical contexts, whether those contexts be present-day or historically past. But an alternative to the dominant critical mode is discoverable in meditations on Shakespeare by Henry James, George Santayana, H. D., and W. H. Auden. Although each author solicits contextual and historical dimensions of Shakespeare, each foregrounds Shakespeare's withdrawal from those dimensions. Perhaps these writers' emphasis on a de-contextualizing, de-historicizing component in Shakespeare – amounting to a retreat to what James calls “the blessed fictive world” – ought not to be overlooked or undervalued by literary and cultural criticism.

Keywords: Contextual literary criticism, Fictive world, Literature and religion, James Shapiro, Henry James, George Santayana, H. D., W. H. Auden

Emerson's Shakespeare and the Myth of Discovery; or, Appropriating Shakespeare for America

PAOLA COLAIACOMO

Taking its cue from a contribution of mine to a past issue of this journal ("Persona Pratica e Persona Poetica", *Memoria di Shakespeare* 2, "On Biography", ed. Rosy Colombo and Gary Taylor, 2015, pp. 1-23), this article takes a step further, tracing Emerson's complex relationship with Shakespeare, mainly through his two essays "The Poet" (1844) and "Shakspeare; or, the Poet" (1850). The act of reading is here dramatized: hence the structure in four 'acts' of a composition arranged as an imaginary two-voiced *fugue*. Quotations from Emerson's essays (in italics) are contrapuntually interwoven with my own reflections on texts whose freshness and directness of approach are astounding. Emerson has not developed his theme by singling out any play or character in particular: his "Shakspeare" looks naturally American, before any of the plays exists. His words have fallen out of heaven directly on American soil, and are staring at America's "incomparable materials": waiting, "like the enchanted princess in fairy tales", for the "destined human deliverer" who will be doing justice to them. In what looks like a new act of 'discovery', Emerson does, for American letters, what the early settlers of his own time were doing for the American continent.

Keywords: America, Homer, Influencer, Materials, Medium, Originality, Representative/Representation

A Nakedness Rejected: Inverting Paradigms of Sovereignty between Breaking Bad and Macbeth

GIANNA FUSCO

The present essay traces the intertextual relationship between *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* looking at two main areas of structural correspondence. The first one consists in issues of rhythm, pace, and textual overlapping, with regard to which specific attention is given to scenes from the TV series that echo moments in the Shakespearean tragedy. The second area of analysis is constituted by the focus both works bring on the question of sovereign power. Through the lens offered by Agamben's theory of the perturbing

similarities between the structural positioning of the sovereign and the *homo sacer* at the margin of the law, the article looks at Macbeth's and Walter White's respective parables as attempts to attain sovereign power, while at the same time rejecting the inevitable implications such positioning brings with it.

Keywords: *Breaking Bad*, *Macbeth*, Walter White, Power, Sovereignty, Rhythm, Diegesis, Sleep

Faltering in the Fight: Pierre and Hamlet

DAVID GREVEN

Melville's 1852 novel *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* foregrounds its intertextual link to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This essay focuses on several subjects: incest, framed as an all-encompassing allegory for the problems within and posed by the family; sexual ambivalence, which both the tragedy and the novel thematize in the hero's horror at the thought of adult genitality; and an episode that links *Hamlet* to *Pierre* and combines concerns with authorship and dismemberment, the reference to the myth of the amputated Giant Enceladus. *Pierre* is notable for being the most sustained depiction of female sexuality in Melville's work. The titular hero's possible half-sister Isabel can be considered a version of Shakespeare's Ophelia, just as the character of Mary Glendinning, *Pierre*'s mother, revises *Hamlet*'s mother Gertrude. Melville's transformation of Shakespeare's female portraits is fascinatingly problematic. He uses the precursor text to imagine forms of subversive female power but also reifies images of the woman as, respectively, narcissistic and siren-like, a doom to men. At the same time, Melville reimagines Milton's Eve, specifically the moment where she ponders her own reflection in a pool. The novel's most resistant element is its *Hamlet*-like depiction of masculinity as "faltering in the fight" compromised and embattled. Melville's Shakespearean and ekphrastic uses of the Enceladus myth allow him to develop an allegorical register for his mutually illuminating explorations of the failure of the artist and the failure of American masculinity.

Keywords: Melville, Milton, Female sexuality, Masculinity, Narcissism, Incest

"Hamlet Wavered for All of Us": Notes on Emily Dickinson as a Reader of Shakespeare

BARBARA LANATI

In New England, Shakespeare's work was welcomed with alternating success. It was censored at first for several reasons: the Puritan law found his stories too sensuous and indecorous and his language was considered foreign to the New World. Even Emerson, despite his wide culture, objected to the fact that his contemporaries should consider Shakespeare immortal, claiming that he embodied a past that needed to be left behind. If Shakespeare was frowned upon by the supercilious older generations, troubled by his moral and linguistic ambiguity, Emily Dickinson and her young contemporaries devotedly admired his work and read about it. The environment Emily Dickinson grew up in refined her taste vis-à-vis her readings and led her to an idea of drama as a possible and less intimidating double for real life. Drawing on hidden and more overt allusions, this essay explores the ways in which Shakespeare's dramatic voice offered her the opportunity of interweaving fancy and daily life, imagination and real events.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Poems, Letters, Allusions to Shakespeare, Shakespeare in New England

Murder by Words

FRANCO MORETTI

The title of this essay comes from Hölderlin's "Remarks on *Antigone*", and the realization that in tragedy the most significant – and dangerous – acts are the words a character utters. After briefly discussing how wars and civil wars have offered the tragic imagination some of its typical materials, the essay examines two extreme cases – Sophocles' *Antigone* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* – that make certain aspects of tragic form particularly clear. In their antithetical ways, Sophocles' dialogues and Shakespeare's soliloquies illustrate the way words accompany the course of action, especially near the turning-points of Antigone's and Macbeth's existence. A brief coda on Büchner's *Danton's Death* will suggest a possible nexus between tragic form and the modern perception of history.

Keywords: Tragedy, Civil war, Stichomythia, Poetry, Hegel

Shakespeare in Washington: From House of Cards to Capitol Hill

CARLO PAGETTI

In the twentieth century Shakespeare became a sort of incubator of mass culture and its formulaic genres. The history of Richard III enjoyed a popularity of its own: this Machiavellian dark lord was explored in an American context by Al Pacino in the movie *Looking for Richard* (1996), where one of the main characters, Buckingham, was acted by Kevin Spacey. Together with director Sam Mendes, Spacey, in the role of Richard Gloucester, made of *Richard III* the main performance in their ambitious Bridge Project (2011).

The experience achieved by Spacey was crucial in the creation of the TV Netflix series *House of Cards*, conceived by Beau Willimon, whose pilot, directed by David Fincher, and aired on February 1, 2013, introduced the viewers to the deeds and misdeeds of the ambitious, scornful, ruthless American politician Frank Underwood, resolved to destroy enemies and friends in order to become President of the United States, explicitly a contemporary Richard Gloucester, also partly Iago, and partly Macbeth, supported by his wife Claire, interpreted by Robin Wright, a power-hungry Lady Macbeth.

Keywords: *House of Cards*, Kevin Spacey, *Richard III*, American Presidents

"You Dare to Compare Yourself to Shakespeare?": Philip Roth, American Bard

PAOLO SIMONETTI

Philip Roth's writing has been consistently inspired and influenced by Shakespeare's theater on multiple levels. This essay aims to investigate Roth's Shakespearean imagination by tracing the evolution of characters, themes, symbolism, and motifs derived from the Bard's plays, focusing in particular on *Operation Shylock* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Throughout his career, Roth's negotiations with Shakespeare were often antagonistic and competitive, but, as time passed, allusions to the Bard in his novels became more accurate, while Roth's writing took on a strong performative vein. In

his most accomplished works, Roth ‘invented’ (or reinvented) the character of “the author” – the writer, the playwright, the artist – and set a pseudo-autobiographic alter-ego on the stage of contemporary America. For a writer who continually performed the character of “the author” in his texts as well as outside (in interviews, essays etc.), it is only natural to model his public persona on the English playwright, eventually impersonating the role of “American bard”.

Keywords: Philip Roth, Bard, American literature, Shylock, Falstaff

Come Die with Me: A Riddle in King Lear

MASSIMO STELLA

This article explores a case of methodological criticism that has been neglected by Shakespearean scholars and, amongst them, philologists and critics who have studied and edited *King Lear*: namely, the mythic and linguistic model of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* between Freud (*The Theme of the Three Caskets*) and Lévi-Strauss (*The Structural Study of Myth*), in the re-reading of the eminent French classicist Clémence Ramnoux.

Keywords: Theory of poetic language, Myth, Ramnoux, Freud, *King Lear*

“He Isn’t Exactly My Brother”: Shakespearean Illogic in *The Palm Beach Story*

LISA STERNLIEB

Although Stanley Cavell disparaged *The Palm Beach Story*, this article argues that the film epitomizes a Cavellian comedy of remarriage. More than any of the screwball comedies in Cavell’s classic study, *The Palm Beach Story* borrows its madcap plot twists from Shakespearean comedies. While Preston Sturges pays homage to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Comedy of Errors*, he also exposes the illogic of plots built on interchangeable characters. Both Shakespeare and Sturges rely on impersonation and disguise, but while Shakespeare uses them to unite his men and women in matrimony, Sturges uses them to distinguish between the authentic experience and the performance of love.

Keywords: Preston Sturges, Stanley Cavell, Twins, Cross-dressing, Cuckoldry, Hunting, Aristophanes

The Guise of Friendship: Orson Welles and the Soliloquy on Film

JEEWON YOO

This essay discusses how Orson Welles uses the soliloquy to explore modes of social isolation in Shakespeare's plays. In Welles's Shakespeare films, the soliloquizer does not withdraw from the scene of social interaction. Other characters can, and often do, overhear the speech, though they do not respond to it. The Wellesian soliloquy is neither a monologue nor a conversation, and its performers run the risk of being ignored even when they wish to be heard. Through readings of Welles's *Othello* and *Chimes at Midnight*, the essay shows how Welles uses the filmed soliloquy to represent the sovereign and the black man as socially isolated figures. The essay also examines how Welles translates the language of the soliloquy into a film's visual style. Like a soliloquy, the expressionist distortions of the film world reflect the interiority of the characters, but these shifts in scale, color, and time go unacknowledged by other characters in the film and are only noticed by the viewer. This soliloquized style, the essay goes on to suggest, is a general feature of Welles's films, which offers the viewer a temporary intimacy with the film world.

Keywords: Soliloquy, Social isolation, Sovereignty, Blackness

Orson Welles's Caesars

JANE WILKINSON

This essay examines Welles's multiple, unstable versions of *Julius Caesar*: a work in progress in which the director-illustrator-actor-designer never ceased returning to and rethinking Shakespeare's play and his own earlier conceptions, adaptations, research and creations, remediating them for new contexts, channels and audiences. Welles's drawings integrate the words of the *Everybody's Shakespeare* adaptations (1934), telling the Caesar story differently and gesturing towards possible future realizations. In New York, in 1937, his Mercury Theatre *Caesar* plays on associations with contemporary events through its casting, set design, music and lighting

(inspired by the scenography and ‘cathedrals of light’ of the Nuremberg rallies). The orchestration of sound effects and voices in phonograph recordings and of music, narrative and acting in radio broadcasts translates the visual and kinetic vocabulary of his previous engagements into a choreography of sound. Juxtaposing the radio actors’ voices and the narration of Plutarch by a CBS news reporter brings different styles, tones and temporalities into uneasy contact. Placing Welles’s work in the context of earlier U.S. reception of *Julius Caesar*, I examine its dialectical relation with Shakespeare’s words and imagery and focus on the metatheatrical – or metacommunicative – aspects of his creations: spectacles of power for American audiences of the 1930s and early 1940s.

Keywords: Orson Welles, *Julius Caesar*, *Everybody’s Shakespeare*, Death of a Dictator, *Mercury Theatre on the Air*, Spectacles of power

Henry James and the Better Part of Discretion

ARNAUD ZIMMERN

This article begins with the realization that American students today experience Shakespeare’s dramas in one of two predominant ways, both of which are informed by a scholarly *ethos* of discretion. One invokes the imperative to set aside any foolhardy desire to pin down the biography of the Bard, unknowable as it is. The other insists on travelling abroad to get to know, if not the man himself, then at least his *umwelt*, breathe the air he breathed, walk the streets he walked, and dive deeper into ever-frustrated intimacy. Both approaches promote a form of discretion that has little to do with *withholding* what we *do* know and everything to do with disclosing what we *might* know despite all the things we know we *cannot* know. The trials and opportunities, the acts of courage and cowardice which such discretion imposes upon readers were well-known to Henry James. Scholars have paid due attention to his introduction to *The Tempest* or his famous short story “The Birthplace”. But one must also revisit “The Jolly Corner” through the lens of that champion of discretion, Sir John Falstaff, to better glimpse James’s critique of a trending pusillanimity.

Keywords: Sir John Falstaff, The Jolly Corner, The Birthplace, Discretion, Discreteness

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Vita di Emily Dickinson: L'alfabeto dell'estasi (Feltrinelli, 1998), was short-listed for the Giovanni Comisso Literary Prize.

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