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## EDITORIAL PREFACE

The essays on Shakespeare's poetics collected here, written by distinguished scholars on the occasion of his 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary, are dedicated to an exceptional scholar from the English Department, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, Professor Veselin Kostić. All of the essayists in this volume tell stories of the ways in which Shakespeare is understood by them today. They are joined by Professor Kostić, whose distinguished voice can be heard in the interview he graciously bestowed to this very special edition of BELLS.

The contributors do not tell a unified story but outline intellectual trajectories. They demonstrate a reverence for the achievements of this great writer and a desire to study the boundaries in Shakespearean studies, while telling their stories in the form of criticism. And they have brought much insight to these boundaries! As a result, each has told a unique story, if not always directly connected to Shakespeare's poetry. Thus the papers address historical or ideological aspects of Shakespeare's plays; the translation of Shakespeare's poetry; Shakespeare and emotions; Shakespeare in the theatre; Shakespeare in scholarship.

Irrespective of their focus, each of these essays complies with Stephen J. Greenblatt's suggestion that literature is effective insofar as it is pleasurable. The essays collected here are effective in their ability to delight! For we, "certainly cannot hope to write convincingly about Shakespeare without coming to terms with what Prospero at the end of *The Tempest* claims was his whole 'project': 'to please'".<sup>1</sup> Ever mindful of the divergent sensibilities of early 17<sup>th</sup> century London and contemporary audiences, the authors of

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<sup>1</sup> Stephan J. Greenblatt. *Learning to Curse*, New York: Routledge, p. 9.

these essays have performed their tasks on various levels: they historicize pleasure, explore its shifts and changes, and try to understand its project.

## **Shakespearean Literary and Cultural Studies**

Svetozar Rapajić in “Shakespeare in Music Theatre: *West Side Story*” considers the similarity between dramatic poetry and music, an approach forwarded by T.S. Eliot and supported by music dramatists such as Verdi who drew inspiration from Shakespeare’s plays. American music theatre has also acknowledged this relationship, Rapajić argues, considering in particular Bernstein’s *West Side Story*. This musical, the epitome of American music theatre, sets the story of *Romeo and Juliet* in mid-20th century New York, where ethnic rivalry culminates in tragedy. Rapajić argues that, “the different adaptations of Shakespeare’s works, involving changes to the time period and setting of the narrative and the social class of the characters as well as the various interpretations of staging are proof that his writing affords possibilities for new discoveries, and is at once versatile and universal”.

Jelisaveta Milojević’s essay, “Untying the Knot: Shakespeare’s Sonnets 27 and 144 in Serbian Translations” discusses just that. These two sonnets were chosen for analysis because of their astonishing polysemy and consequent translation issues. Professor Milojević’s own translations are also presented. General questions are considered, such as: Why translate that which has already been translated; Can a person with no knowledge of the source language translate poetry with the assistance of a prose translation done by someone who does know the language; Where are the limits of poetic license in versification; Are the critic and translator to be the same person; Why is translation criticism necessary? The importance of such criticism is defended in the essay.

Dubravka Đurić’s paper, “Svetislav Stefanović’s Interpretation of William Shakespeare and World Literature” addresses Svetislav Stefanović’s reading of Shakespeare’s works as literary classics. In his analysis, Stefanović compares Shakespeare’s writing with the *Bible* and Greek and Roman classics, as well as work by Goethe and Dostoyevsky. Đurić argues that Stefanović’s interpretation of Shakespeare is performative because in demonstrating the classic qualities of Shakespeare’s works and their place in the canon of world literature, he symbolically included modern Serbian literature, too.

Zorica Bečanović Nikolić's paper entitled, "Shakespeare Studies, Philosophy and World Literature" considers two new books of Shakespearean criticism: *The Demonic: Literature and Experience* by Ewan Fernie and *Free Will: Art and Power on Shakespeare's Stage* by Richard Wilson, both published in 2013, and both remarkable for encompassing Shakespeare studies, philosophy, and world literature within their respective critical scopes. In *The Demonic* Shakespeare is, along with Milton, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, Kierkegaard, and other authors, considered in the context of demonic transgression, paradoxically close to the mystical knowledge of what is beyond self-experience. The author considers this book to be an audacious retreat from current literary criticism insofar as it insists on responding to crucial ontological and ethical questions through a passionate spiritual engagement with art, literature, and philosophy. In Wilson's *Free Will*, the focus is on Shakespeare's demystification of the ruse of power, based on both truthful experience and the careful performance of nonentity, which produced a specific form of early modern creative autonomy.

In her essay, "Nothing of Woman: The Feminine Void of Matter in Shakespeare," Danica Igrutinović looks at how the metaphysics of Renaissance Neoplatonism could be taken to explain some of Shakespeare's characters. Drawing on the Neoplatonic concept of matter, her paper attempts to elaborate the figure that Philippa Berry has termed, "Shakespeare's tragic O's" by showing its connection to multiple images of matter as the maternal/infernal void. Igrutinović suggests that in Shakespeare's darker plays, "the 'O' as feminine prime matter can figure as a locus for the encounter with primordial matter, the womb/tomb that (en)matters and thus kills, the 'hell' and 'nothing' that can indicate both unformed matter and the vaginal orifice, and the nothing—the 0—out of which everything is made.

Goran Stanivuković's article "Earliest Shakespeare: Bombast and Authenticity" explores bombast as one of the defining features of Shakespeare's style of writing in the earliest, pre-1594, phase of his career as a dramatist. Bombast is considered as both a logical and rhetorical instrument of knowing. At the cognitive level of text, improbability, which is the key feature of bombast, plays an important role in 'earliest' Shakespeare because it captures competing currents of thought that structure dramatic plots as they were outlined by Elizabethan practices of playwriting, and moves the action forward. This article suggests that, "'earliest' Shakespeare is under the spell of Christopher Marlowe's bombastic blankverse, but [that] he also looks beyond Marlowe, turning bombast into a tool of opening up new possibilities for drama

performed within the specific context of London's burgeoning theatre scene in the 1590s".

In her article, "The Stage as Purgatory: Shakespearean Moral Dilemmas," Vesna Lopičić discusses Trevor Nunn's 2011 production of Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, with the aim to answer the question of why Hamlet's friends are kept in Purgatory and repeatedly exposed to decisive events from their earthly lives. Based on Stephen Greenblatt's study *Hamlet in Purgatory* and Gareth Leyshon's B.Th. Dissertation *The Purpose of Purgatory: Expiation or Maturation*, the author proposes that, "the purpose of their detention is maturation, meaning the ability to make morally right choices when faced with Shakespearean moral dilemmas".

In "Vision in Shakespeare's Tragic Plays: Perception, Deception, Delusion," Nataša Šofranac underscores the importance of visual effects in theatrical performances but also in the reading of Shakespeare's works. She claims that the visual element is important in understanding Shakespeare's characters as well as the way they see and experience other characters, the world, and themselves. Šofranac argues that, "[S]ometimes because of distorted vision, sometimes because of malevolent input that works on their minds, or just because of inherent subjectivity of perception, the appearance of persons and things was substantially different from reality and that causes a tragic course of events and ultimate catastrophe". Flawed vision, the author concludes, was very much the tragic flaw of Shakespeare's heroes.

In "To do a great right, do a little wrong': *The Merchant of Venice* and its Ethical Challenges," Danijela Kambasković discusses the discrepancy between Portia's words and her actions when Bassanio urges her to break the law in order to thwart Shylock. She initially refuses on the grounds that to do wrong is always immoral, but despite her words, her actions show her ready and willing to do the opposite. The author effectively illustrates the connection between Portia's situation and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as how it relates to the principle of equity, "an open-handed, individualised approach to justice when hard legal questions exceed the scope of the law". However, the incongruity between Portia's words and her actions, Kambasković argues, is of a more complicated nature, and suggests, "the presence in the play of a different, non-Aristotelian ethical framework: that of Nicolò Machiavelli's post-Epicurean teleological utilitarianism". Shakespeare's moral considerations in *The Merchant of Venice* explore the crucial question of whether expediency is more appropriate in real life than principles not defined by expediency, and observes that to apply



this question to the main themes of *The Merchant of Venice*, i.e., to the themes of cultural and religious difference, stereotyping, discrimination, scapegoating, gender equality, and bias, holds particular didactic value in the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom.

In her article entitled, “‘A fortnight hold we this solemnity’: The Elizabethan Annual Cycle in Shakespeare’s Major Comedies,” Milica Spremić Končar takes as a starting point François Laroque’s book-length study, *Shakespeare’s Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*, which analyzes festivity and its literary and imaginary representation in Shakespeare’s England. He argues that the Elizabethan year is essentially simple and logical as it is divided into two halves. The first half starts on the winter solstice of 24 December and ends on the summer solstice of 24 June, including the twelve days of Christmas celebrations and a group of moveable feasts such as Easter and Whitsun, which Laroque calls the ritualistic half of the year. The second half, which begins on 25 June and ends on 24 December, is marked by a lack of important religious festivals, the presence of a few fixed festivals, and more working days than holidays, which is thus known as the secular half of the year. Drawing on Laroque’s insights, Milica Spremić Končar argues that Shakespeare’s major comedies—*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*—bring to life the secular half of the Elizabethan year in such a way that each play seems to evoke a particular period and its associated activities.

Milena Kostić’s essay, “‘I am for other than for dancing measures’: Shakespeare’s Spiritual Quest in *As You Like It*” analyzes the spiritual quest Shakespeare undertook in *As You Like It*. Her analysis, grounded in the critical insights of Ted Hughes, Northrop Frye, and Riane Eisler, focuses in particular on Melancholy Jaques. Milena Kostić argues that his, “decision to devote himself to a solitary life in search of the causes for the existence of the hostility and rivalry between brothers reflects Shakespeare’s professional decision to dedicate himself to the resolution of this issue throughout his writing career”.

## **New Voices: Literary and Cultural Studies**

We have included three “new” critical voices to open a venue in support of Ph.D. candidates. Future developments belong to the generations to come!

We have classified, for the purposes of this volume, most of the papers submitted by these authors as Non-Shakespearean. Their texts reflect current trends and ask us to see the causes and effects of the actions of the characters of the works they selected; all of them are committed to contemporary critical perspectives on literature, culture, and society.

Vladimir Bogićević deals with the American novel in his essay, “In search of the Unpresentable: ‘Detectives of Sublime’ in (Post)modern American Novel.” He considers some of the representative American novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, Barth’s *Lost in The Funhouse*, DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and Morrison’s *Beloved*, using Nabokov’s *Lolita* as a reference text, to arrive at a cross-section of sorts of the narrative strategies employed. Bogićević applies the theory of Lyotard, Baudrillard, Ricoeur, and Hutcheon, together with some of Derrida’s philosophical postulates in order to demonstrate that all of these texts are unified by the quest for the modern expression of the *unpresentable*, in which different types of *marginal perspectives* play a specific role.

Irina Kovačević departs from a similar literary domain with her contribution to Nabokov scholarship and Postmodernism in her text, “Popular Culture in its Postmodern Context: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*.” She explores the relationship of elements of popular culture to postmodern literature and where they intersect in this novel. She also addresses and elaborates the concept of postmodern identity, together with aspects of the consumerism and consumptionism that characterize it.

Stefan Pajović’s work, “Instructing the Individual in Democracy in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*,” concludes our Non-Shakespearean section with its magic word, “democracy.” Pajović carefully studies this motif in Whitman’s magnificent collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*, concluding that Whitman’s poems focus on the individual. As democracy is the safeguard of the individual, the art it produces is of critical importance. Whitman frequently represents democracy in his verse through the metaphor of the maritime journey.

Let us believe that the art of Shakespeare will remain, alongside new voices, a fixture on the scholarly stages of the future. At present, may we express in conclusion our hope that readers of this celebratory edition of BELLS will agree that each of the essays included merits being read through to the end. And perhaps more than that: being read with relish, in the same way that they were read by the members of the Editorial Board, reviewers,

proofreaders from the English and other departments, and many others who collaborated in its production. On this pleasurable note, our letter to Shakespeare and Pofessor Kostić comes to a close!

*Belgrade, December 2014*

*The Editors*



***Belgrade BELLS  
Interview***

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INTERVIEW: VESELIN KOSTIĆ

## **THE EVERLASTING COMPANION OF OUR EXPERIENCE by Radojka Vukčević**

**BELLS:** It is an honor to interview you, dear Professor Kostić. This year we are celebrating the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth and the 85th anniversary of our English Department—founded by a Shakespearean scholar. What do you make of this timing? What does Shakespeare mean to us now?

It is difficult to say whether the coincidence of these anniversaries has a symbolic meaning, but it was certainly a fortunate circumstance that the English Department was founded by a such a distinguished expert in Shakespearean studies as Dr. Vladeta Popović, because that fact lent additional significance to the new Department and helped to attract students, who were not very numerous at the beginning. Shakespeare was made the subject of a special course in the programme of the final years of English Studies and has remained one of the major fields of studies in the Department to the present day.

**BELLS: You have made significant, voluminous contributions to Shakespeare studies in both the former Yugoslavia and beyond. Which aspect of Shakespeare's works have you found most rewarding (teaching, translating, analysis, etc.)?**

One is hesitant to evaluate one's own work, but I can say which aspect of my work I found most enjoyable – it was definitely teaching. What I did in the other fields was in a sense ancillary to it. My studies of and comments on the Serbian translations of Shakespeare were intended to provide linguistic and other guidance that might help translators avoid the mistakes of their predecessors and get closer to the meaning and implications of Shakespeare's text. My interpretations of Shakespeare's works, on the other hand, were chiefly a corollary of my teaching and were written in the hope that they would enable students and lovers of Shakespeare to appreciate more fully the beauties of his poetic world.

**BELLS: Which theory or scholarship on Shakespeare's works has most influenced your own work?**

During my long academic career I saw the rise and eclipse of numerous schools of Shakespearean criticism. There can be no doubt that the more able proponents of each of them brought at least something valuable to our understanding of the Great Bard. Nevertheless, I cannot say that I was an ardent or constant supporter of any of these critical approaches. What I found objectionable in the majority of the modern varieties of Shakespearean criticism was their tendency to concentrate on a single aspect of Shakespeare's works – the aspect which supported, or could be made to support, the basic tenets of the particular school of criticism they sought to promote – and to neglect the elements which did not fit into its theoretic template. I felt that such a synecdochical approach could throw fresh and concentrated light on a particular aspect of Shakespeare's dramas, but that it left many other valuable features of their rich texture out of the field of critical enquiry. I therefore tried to use another approach, which is not original or particularly modern, and which might be termed "integrated" or "contextual". It seeks to interpret Shakespeare's works in their varying historical and cultural contexts – in the context of their own time, in their journey through time, and in the context of the present time.



**BELLS:** Some of the current methods of critical analysis applied to Shakespeare's works include New Historicism, cultural materialism, feminist criticism, deconstruction, and so forth. How much do they enlighten the layers of meaning in Shakespeare's opus? What are your views on New Criticism, specifically the idea that only that within a text constitutes the meaning of the text? How do you see this new approach in terms of works that have existed for centuries, continually read and re-read from the position of different contexts, epochs, literary theories, and generations of critics?

Although the champions of almost every recent trend in Shakespearean studies believed, or wanted to believe, that their approach was going to establish "a new paradigm" in Shakespearean criticism, this has not happened. Most of them have certainly shed new light on individual aspects of Shakespeare's work and made some useful contribution to our appreciation of his art, but none of them has won universal recognition and acceptance. However, if we have in mind the impression these insights or views, accumulated over time, have made, directly or indirectly, on our appreciation of Shakespeare, we can readily agree with the view that interpretation may become a part of the text.

**BELLS:** Stephen Greenblatt's achievement as a Shakespeare scholar is largely due to his critical view that literature should be studied and interpreted in terms of its cultural context. Would you agree with those who say that he has revolutionized Shakespeare studies?

Stephen Greenblatt is a very able and persuasive critic, an excellent stylist and an original thinker. He is justly regarded as one of the most important Shakespearean scholars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. He has made a great impact on Shakespearean studies, but neither has he succeeded in establishing his New Historicism as "the new paradigm". There are already signs that his approach is viewed more critically and that it will eventually take its proper place in the general depository of "revolutionary" critical schools with which the history of Shakespearean criticism abounds.

**BELLS: What do you think about Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* now, fifty years after its publication?**

I remember the enthusiasm and admiration with which many lovers of Shakespeare, myself included, hailed that excellent book. It was an interpretation of Shakespeare in perfect accord with the intellectual and political atmosphere of that time. Kott's book not only strongly influenced academic criticism of Shakespeare studies, but had a great impact on the theatrical sphere, too. There were many productions of Shakespeare's plays inspired by it, and two remarkable English ones were also seen in Belgrade – *King Lear* (1962) and *As You Like It* (1969). Today, however, we can agree with the view that almost the only relevant element of Kott's book is its title. Its content remains, as the content of so many other excellent interpretations, rather a record of the spiritual climate of a period than a lasting answer to the abiding questions raised by Shakespeare's works. Shakespeare continues to be our contemporary, but now other answers are sought and offered to the questions posed by him, different from those of yesterday and no doubt distinct from those that will be offered tomorrow. This is the real marvel of Shakespeare's art – he is, as a Shakespearean scholar has aptly put it, the everlasting companion of our experience.

**BELLS: You have witnessed turbulent times, but also the glory days when Belgrade's English Department was a center of research and scholarship, visited by prominent international scholars. Where are we now; how visible and relevant are we on the global map?**

There can be no doubt that the English Department suffered severe losses not only by the death of some of its most distinguished members, but also as a consequence of the disastrous developments of the 1990s, which made several talented students, prospective additions to the staff of the Department, as well as some of the already appointed assistants, leave the country. I am now glad to say that they have fared well abroad and that at least two of them have successful careers as professors of English literature in Canada, but I am sorry that they are not members of our Department as it had been planned. Fortunately, the Department has succeeded in attracting able and distinguished scholars from other English departments in the country, and it has also recruited a number of young

and talented graduates, who have already made a remarkable contribution to the English studies in our country.

**BELLS: What are your thoughts on recent translations of Shakespeare's works? Does it remain a useful endeavor to translate his works time and again? To what extent do new translations influence interpretations of his works?**

New renderings of Shakespeare's works should always be encouraged, especially if they are based on an awareness of the deficiencies of the previous translations and on the latest advances in textual criticism and research in the field of Elizabethan English. I do not think, however, that new translations can contribute greatly to the interpretation of Shakespeare's works, since good Shakespearean criticism has to be based not only on the literal meaning of the text, no matter how exactly it is transferred to another language, but also on various other elements which require good knowledge of the idiom of the author, such as the associative aura which a word or phrase may have had in its Elizabethan social and cultural setting, on the knowledge of the semantic losses or gains a verse from Shakespeare's plays may have had in its journey through time to the present day, and on a number of other elements which are important for a detailed and reliable interpretation and which are unavoidably lost in translation.

**BELLS: Shakespeare's works are being studied by a new generation of scholars at the Faculty of Philology. These include Zorica Bečanović-Nikolić, Milica Spremić, and Nataša Šofranac. What is your assessment of the latest research on Shakespeare in Serbia?**

I follow with great interest the work of the young generation of our Shakespearean scholars and am glad to say that I find it not only valuable in itself, but promising of even more important achievements in the future. Their criticism is, generally speaking, based on solid research, ability for subtle analysis and a good knowledge of recent trends in Shakespearean criticism. What I regard as very important in the broader sense are their efforts, particularly those of Prof. Bečanović-Nikolić to reintegrate Serbian Shakespearean studies into the broader context of Shakespearean studies, to re-establish the participation of our scholars in the international Shakespearean organizations and to renew the personal links with

distinguished Shakespearean scholars and organize their visits to our University.

**BELLS:** Shakespeare is not your only academic interest. At the beginning of your career, you took a comparative approach (of Spenser and Tasso; Spenser and Ariosto) to examine cultural relations between Yugoslavia and England. Then you turned to Shakespeare studies, to return to cultural relations in your latest book: *Britain and Serbia: contacts, connections and relations: 1700-1860 (Britanija i Srbija : kontakti, veze i odnosi: 1700-1860, Beograd: Arhipelag, 2014)*. Are you currently researching relations between Britain and Serbia or Shakespeare and his works, or both?

My work in the field of Shakespearean studies was related to my teaching. I published my books on Shakespeare not only because I admire his works, but also because I felt it my duty to provide texts that would make it easier for my students to understand and appreciate the precious heritage that he has left to us. My books dealing with cultural and other relations between our country and Britain were, on the other hand, the outcome of my wish to contribute to the existing knowledge in a field which I felt had not been sufficiently explored. The research I did in exploring these links and the work on the presentation of its results have given me the genuine pleasure that the pursuit of knowledge may afford to a dedicated scholar. At the moment, however, I have no immediate plans, and shall probably enjoy a period of leisure.

*Radojka Vukčević*  
9 November 2014

# ***Shakespeare: Literary and Cultural Studies***

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**Svetozar Rapajić\***  
University of Arts  
Faculty of Dramatic Arts  
Belgrade, Serbia

## **SHAKESPEARE IN MUSIC THEATRE: *WEST SIDE STORY***

### **Abstract**

T.S. Eliot compared Shakespeare's dramatic poetry with music. The similarity was also recognized by those music dramatists who drew inspiration from Shakespeare's plays in their operas and ballets. Some of those works are masterpieces (like Verdi's *Otello*) and are considered by George Steiner to be the only real tragedies of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are even American musical comedies that have been adapted from Shakespeare's comedies. And when the theatrical art forms using music developed into music theatre, some of the new musicals drew inspiration from his tragedies. Bernstein's *West Side Story*, in which the serious and the popular are merged, is the epitome of American music theatre. It sets the story of *Romeo and Juliet* in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century streets of New York, where ethnic rivalry culminates in tragedy. The different adaptations of Shakespeare's works, involving changes to the time period and setting of the narrative and the social class of the characters as well as the various interpretations of staging, are proof that his writing affords possibilities for new discoveries, and is at once versatile and universal.

**Key words:** dramatic poetry, opera, ballet, musical comedy, musical drama, popular art, staging

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\* E-mail address: svrapajic@gmail.com

In his famous essay *Poetry and Drama*, T.S. Eliot asserts his predilection for dramatic poetry, compares it to music, and contrasts it with prose drama:

It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action—the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express—there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action... This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity. At such moments, we touch the borders of those feelings which only music can express. (Kerman 1989: 5).

In other words, dramatic poetry enriches dramatic action and supplies it with meaning, emotion, and subconscious layers which could not be sufficiently expressed otherwise, especially not in logical, veristic prose. By reaching unspoken depths, dramatic poetry's function is similar to the effect of music: to touch the irrational, emotional side of the audience through artistically elaborated forms, rhythms, versifications, accents, dynamics, melodies, repetitions, contrasts, symbolizations, and similar elements that were integral even to ancient ritual practice.

On the other hand, all those poetic, musical, irrational, even abstract qualities have to be organically interwoven with the basic dramatic elements: action, plot, and character development. Both sides of that complex theatricality Eliot finds in Shakespeare's plays: "When Shakespeare, in one of his mature plays, introduces what might seem a purely poetic line or passage, it never interrupts the action, or is out of character, but on the contrary, in some mysterious way supports both action and character." (Eliot 1951: 34).

Consequently, it is not surprising that Shakespeare's dramatic poetry, which Eliot compares to music, became a major inspiration for opera composers. But this did not happen before the emergence of Romantic art at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Until then, the dominant form had been Baroque opera (the Italian *opera seria* that reigned over the European stage and the French *tragédie lyrique*), which had its roots in the mythology of ancient Greece, the history or pseudo-history of the decadent Roman Empire, or the legends of medieval chivalry.



The only exceptions were Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* (1692), based upon *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest* (1692), both extravagant and spectacular productions that drew on the tradition of the English masque; as they were not imitations of the European operatic model, they were labeled semi-operas.

But when the Romantics established the cult of Shakespeare, rediscovering the greatness of his works as well as admiring his immersion into the dark depths of the human soul and rejection of prescribed conventions, so akin to Romantic ideals, it was natural that Shakespeare's plays readily lent themselves to the possibilities of being transformed into Romantic operas as dramatic musical creations. The first Shakespearean opera worth mentioning is *Falstaff ossia Le tre burle*<sup>1</sup> (*Falstaff, or The Three Jokes*, 1799), an *opera buffa* by Antonio Salieri, who was a celebrated master of opera at that time, but today mostly known as being the presumed legendary rival of the great Mozart.

The great Italian Romantic opera composers were drawn to the remarkable themes and figures of British history, dynastic conflicts, and bloody civil wars, as well as Shakespeare's dramatic poetry, which was found to lend itself most favorably to musical adaptation. Thence emerged operas which enjoyed enormous success and which are still included in the opera repertoires of modern times, like *Otello ossia il Moro di Venezia* (*Othello, or the Moor of Venice*, 1816) by Gioachino Rossini, and *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (*The Capulets and the Montagues*, 1830) by Vincenzo Bellini. Also worthy of note is the almost forgotten *Giulietta e Romeo* (1825) by Nicola Vaccai. Riccardo Zandonai, a late Romantic Italian composer, today best known for his opera *Francesca da Rimini*, made a contribution to Shakespearean musical theatre that transformed *Romeo and Juliet* into the opera *Giulietta e Romeo* (1922).

Giuseppe Verdi was often inspired by great works of Romantic literature (by Friedrich Schiller, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas), and was also considerably influenced by Shakespeare. One of Verdi's best known operas is *Macbeth* (1847), and the mature genius of his later masterpieces can be seen in *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). In his book *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner, researching the possibilities for tragedy in modern times, concludes that since early Romanticism, only opera has been able to make a strong claim on the legacy of tragedy:

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<sup>1</sup> The titles are given in their original orthography, followed by the English translation in parentheses.

The Shakespeare of the romantics ... was not primarily an Elizabethan poet with medieval traditions in his art and world view. He was a master of poetic sublimity and volcanic passion, a proclaimer of romantic love and melancholy, a radical who wrote melodramas. The difference between the false picture and the true can be clearly shown in Verdi's operas. *Macbeth* dramatizes a romantic reading of Shakespeare. *Otello* and *Falstaff*, on the contrary, exhibit a transfiguring insight into the actual meaning of the two Shakespearean plays. (Steiner 1978: 155-156).

Steiner poses a question: "Could opera achieve the long-sought fusion of classic and Shakespearean drama by creating a total dramatic genre, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*?" (Steiner 1978: 286). He also gives an answer: "*Tristan und Isolde*<sup>2</sup> is nearer to complete tragedy than anything else produced during the slack of drama which separates Goethe from Ibsen. And nearly as much may be asserted of two other operas of the late nineteenth century, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and Verdi's *Otello*." (Steiner 1978: 288). Steiner's definitive conclusion is: "Verdi and Wagner are the principle tragedians of their age." (Steiner 1996: 285).

French Romantic composers also found a source of inspiration in Shakespeare's plays. Some of those operas, like *Beatrix et Benedicte* (based on *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1862) by Hector Berlioz, and *Hamlet* (1868) by Ambroise Thomas, are to this day periodically revived on stages throughout Europe. (Curiously, directors staging *Hamlet* today have the problem of how to eschew the absurdly optimistic ending of Thomas's opera.) But *Roméo et Juliette* (1867) by Charles Gounod is still performed frequently, popular among audiences, and sung by today's greatest opera stars.

The Romantic cult of Shakespeare in Germany began with Goethe (a supreme and undisputed authority on German art and the author of essays on Shakespeare and translator of *Romeo and Juliet*) and the young rebels of the *Sturm und Drang*. The complete works of Shakespeare were translated, studied enthusiastically, admired, imitated, and naturally adapted into opera. As a result, relatively successful operas began to emerge, if today almost forgotten, like *Der Widerspöntigen Zähmung* (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 1874) by Hermann Goetz and *Macbeth* (1910) by Ernest Bloch. The most successful among them was the opera by Otto Nicolai *Die lustigen*

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<sup>2</sup> By Richard Wagner.

*Weiber von Windsor* (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1849), which remains popular.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a variety of composers discovered Shakespeare's dramatic poetry to be an inspiration for modern approaches to opera; examples of such operas range from those marked by variations of neo-romanticism or eclecticism, to those influenced by popular music or jazz, to those produced by radical avant-garde or experimental music theatre. Among them are: Gian Francesco Malipiero's *Giulio Cesare* (1936); Heinrich Sutermeister's *Romeo und Julia* (1940); Frank Martin's *Der Sturm* (*The Tempest*, 1956); the radical Giselher Klebe and his *Die Ermordung des Cäsar* (*The Assassination of Caesar*, 1959), a one-act opera based on the third act of Shakespeare's tragedy; Samuel Barber's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, which, adapted and staged by Franco Zeffirelli, inaugurated the new Metropolitan Opera House in 1966; Aribert Reiman's *Lear* (1978), one of most appreciated works of modern German music theatre; Pascal Dusapin's version of *Roméo et Juliette* (1989); Stephen Oliver's *Timon of Athens* (1991). The most performed and popular modern operatic adaptation of Shakespeare was, however, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960) by Benjamin Britten, one of the most outstanding composers to emerge since the Second World War. Also, it should not be forgotten that prominent Croat composer Stjepan Šulek wrote the opera *Koriolan* (1958), considered one of the most important operas in former Yugoslavia.

Choreographers have also been drawn to Shakespeare's themes, characters, dramatic situations, or, more generally, poetry. Several ballets have been interpretations of Shakespeare's dramatic works by choreographers open to the multiple possibilities of interpretation who used programmatic works by great composers not originally written for ballet. For instance, British choreographer Robert Helpmann created in 1942 a fantasy on the theme of *Hamlet* to the music of Tchaikovsky with himself and Margot Fonteyn in the roles of Hamlet and Ophelia. Georges Balanchine staged a neoclassical ballet version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1962) set to the popular composition of Felix Mendelssohn, written as incidental music to accompany a spoken dramatic performance of Shakespeare's comedy. This ballet is often reinterpreted by other dance companies. But of all the ballets that are free adaptations of Shakespeare's works by choreographers and set to pre-composed music, perhaps the most interesting and most original, and that which is considered an extraordinary achievement in the history of contemporary dance, is *The Moor's Pavane* (1949), by American

choreographer José Limon, based on the fate of *Othello* and the music of Henry Purcell.

Of course, even if less numerous, there are also Shakespeare ballets not set to pre-composed music but that have scores written specifically for the choreographic staging of one of his works. Among them, the most known, most popular, and most performed is the famous ballet *Ромео и Джульетта* (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1938) by Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev. There is no ballet company or star of considerable reputation that has not included this ballet in their repertory as a proof of excellence.

It is not surprising that even the American musical, although a particular genre of musical-theatrical performance originally intended primarily to entertain, has shown some sensitivity toward Shakespearean heritage. The American musical emerged from previous examples of musical-theatrical performance as a kind of “melting-pot.” Some of those antecedents were imported from Europe, like the British ballad-opera,<sup>3</sup> French *opéra comique*,<sup>4</sup> melodrama,<sup>5</sup> Viennese operetta, or English Savoy opera.<sup>6</sup> But

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<sup>3</sup> The ballad-opera was a popular 18<sup>th</sup> century genre of English theater that was in fact a parody of grand opera, particularly Händel’s Italian baroque operas, consisting of spoken dialogue and sung arias, and ridiculing operatic clichés. The heroes and princes, the *dramatis personae* who enacted the pathetic scenes, betrayals, conspiracies, and unbelievable endings characteristic of Baroque opera, were replaced in ballad opera by thieves, beggars, and whores. The best known ballad opera is *The Beggar’s Opera* by John Gay and Christian Pepusch, later adapted by Brecht into *Die Dreigroschenoper*. The first theatre companies to tour the American British colonies performed mostly ballad operas or Shakespeare’s plays.

<sup>4</sup> The main feature of French *opéra-comique* combined spoken dialogue and arias. Not all French operas termed such are comic.

<sup>5</sup> In the Romantic melodrama, the orchestra in the pit accompanied the spoken dialogue and action on the stage, enhancing emotion, suspense, and dramatic peaks.

<sup>6</sup> The Savoy operas of William S. Gilbert (text) and Sir Arthur Sullivan (music) had an important role in the social life of the late Victorian era. They were named after the Savoy Theatre in London, which was built to house those productions. Because of their merciless cynicism, parodies of the pillars of society, and childish humour characterized by absurdity and nonsense, they remain popular in Anglo-Saxon countries.

some of the previous forms, like minstrel-shows,<sup>7</sup> extravaganzas,<sup>8</sup> revues,<sup>9</sup> or burlesques,<sup>10</sup> also had an authentic American origin, and drew largely on American topics and sometimes even showcased American music.

Gradually, those different traditions in America evolved into a type of operetta, and in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new term began to be used: the *musical*. But this new term was in fact a shortened form of *musical comedy*. This indicates that the musical in its early days was comedic; eschewed or at most glossed over references to serious social or other problems; involved a simplified dramaturgy devoid of intellectualism and packed full of stereotypes, and included catchy musical numbers. Exceptions to those conventions were very rare. Consequently, great literature was unpopular material unless it was the subject of travesty or ridicule, like the parodies of *Hamlet* in minstrel shows or in one of the first fabulous *Ziegfeld Follies* in 1916.<sup>11</sup>

Unexpected developments occurred during the thirties, the years of the Great Depression and anxiety caused by premonitions of the impending war. Musicals increasingly addressed the complex problems

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<sup>7</sup> These shows drew on stereotypes of Negro humour and songs, and were played by white performers who had their faces blackened with burnt cork and dressed in exaggerated versions of Negro costume. The shows depicted Negroes as humourous, benevolent, naïve, or even dim-witted, singing and joking merrily on the cotton fields under the care of their white masters. There was no unifying plot, and the performance consisted of jokes, songs, amusing talents, acrobatics, magic acts, and parodies (of *Hamlet*, among others). The shows were extremely popular in the 1840's but lost their appeal after the Civil War.

<sup>8</sup> Visually striking, immensely popular theatre performances with loose plot lines combining spectacular production elements, dance, sophisticated stage machinery, elaborate scenery and costumes, sometimes with an erotic flair. These shows ruled the American stage from the period following the Civil War through the First World War. Storylines drew on the magical, which made it possible for the momentary transposition of action to distant exotic places or historical periods. The stage adaptation of the *Wizard of Oz* was originally produced as an extravaganza.

<sup>9</sup> A popular multi-act theatrical entertainment that was frequently satirical, combining music, dance, and sketches.

<sup>10</sup> The first American examples of theatre burlesque including songs and dances were based on scenes of daily life in New York and familiar family characters in humourous but recognizable situations, not unlike the TV sitcoms of today.

<sup>11</sup> The legendary Florenz Ziegfeld was for decades the king of Broadway. He produced annually a series of admired theatrical revues, the *Follies*, which were incredibly opulent and spectacular and epitomized the wildest American dreams; despite that, he spent his last years, during the Great Depression, bankrupt and almost homeless. His extravagant lifestyle and demise has been the subject of numerous books and movies.

of the contemporary world, becoming political and radically satirical, ridiculing even sacred pillars of American society (like the function of the president, democratic institutions, the sanctity of the family), sometimes caustically or brashly. In this period, the writers of musicals, and the audience also, became more concerned with the literary and musical value of new productions. Sometimes even literary classics were adapted to the musical stage. Therefore, the term *book musical*, which earlier referred to a musical with a particularly ambitious libretto, came to mean a musical based on storytelling and great literary works.

Even some of Shakespeare's works served as a source of inspiration for some musicals of this kind, of which some were quite successful. Among them were *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938), created by the legendary musical composer Richard Rogers and with a book by the then renowned playwright George Abbott, based on *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Swingin' the Dream* (1939) by Jimmy van Heusen, based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The fact that writers considered Shakespeare's comedies amenable to musical adaptation shows the prevalence at that time of the conception of the musical as a comedy. Also, it is noteworthy that the titles of Shakespeare's works were not used. This reservation may be explained by the anticipation of criticism that the great classics had been reduced to light entertainment.<sup>12</sup> However, the musical *The Boys of Syracuse* was created "in a witty and erudite manner that recognized the sophistication of the potential audience. Above all it proved that highbrow drama could be translated into stylish musical comedy, and laid the groundwork for Cole Porter's *Kiss me, Kate* a decade later and *West Side Story* in 1957, among others." (Riddle 2003: 69).

*Kiss me, Kate* (1948), with music and lyrics by Cole Porter and a book by Hollywood and Broadway hit-makers Samuel and Bella Spewack, is one of the highlights in the history of the American musical. It was a bold update of *The Taming of the Shrew*, set in the world of a contemporary

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<sup>12</sup> A parallel may be drawn with *Faust* by Charles Gounod, one of the most popular and most performed Romantic French operas. It was frequently produced in Germany, but not under the original title. For the Germans, Goethe and especially his *Faust* are considered almost sacred: it would be akin to blasphemy to simplify or sentimentalize Goethe's philosophical masterpiece by concentrating on the love story. Therefore in German-speaking countries, Gounaud's *Faust* is performed under the title *Margarethe*, indicating that it is of less worth than the work of the great Goethe. This also means that the feminine principle of love, so important in this opera, is worth less than the masculine principle of thought.

American theater company producing and performing a musical version of Shakespeare's comedy, so that scenes involving Shakespeare's characters alternate with those depicting backstage intrigue. This play-within-a-play created an explicitly comic parallelism between the life of Shakespeare's characters and the private lives and off-stage battles of the principal actors who play them. The parallel plot is spiced up by the inadvertent intrusion of two clumsy mobsters seeking to collect a debt owed by the lead actor. Their cabaret number, "Brush up Your Shakespeare" is a parody recommending the everyday lessons that can be learned from Shakespeare's characters: it is so brilliantly witty and charming that despite its outrageousness it remains popular to this day.

The real transformation of the American musical gradually took place during and after the Second World War. It was caused by a general change of sensibility, better educated audiences that made more sophisticated demands concerning artistic and social relevance, plotlines, and music, and also by the contribution made by artists emigrating from occupied Europe who brought experience and forged a connection between European avant-garde movements and American popular art. The more ambitious of these new musicals addressed topics once anathema to the entertainment industry: contemporary and historical social problems; psychoanalysis; the atrocities of war; some of the old wounds and resentments of American society like racism and inequality, and sometimes even issues of aesthetic or philosophical import.

More sophisticated demands also led to the rise of the book musical inspired by great classical or contemporary literature by, for example, Cervantes, Voltaire, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edmond Rostand, Mark Twain, Bernard Shaw, John Millington Synge, Maxwell Anderson, T.S. Eliot, Sholem Aleichem, Thornton Wilder, Lillian Hellman, Alan Paton. And, of course, Shakespeare. Therefore the whole concept of the musical was changed. The term *musical*, which was used earlier as a shortened form of *musical comedy*, implying a humorous story involving laughable characters and a happy ending, gained a new meaning. *Musical* was thence understood to mean a *musical play*, which could even denote musical adaptations of serious dramatic genres, including tragedy.

If we look back at the list of Shakespearean operas and ballets, it may be seen that *Romeo and Juliet* was the tragedy most often chosen for musical adaptation. This phenomenon may be explained by the words of T.S. Eliot:

I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order. It seems to me that Shakespeare achieved this at least in certain scenes—even rather early, for there is the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet*—and that this was what he was striving towards in his late plays. (Eliot 1951: 35).

When the genre of the American musical was expanded to include tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* was the first of Shakespeare's tragedies to be adapted into a musical. *West Side Story* (1957) was a milestone in the development of the genre, and was considered by many to be the greatest musical ever written, definitively raising the profile of musical theatre or at least the standards according to which the musical was to be judged. It was at once a musical play (as opposed to the concept of the musical comedy), a book musical (based on a literary classic, with a clear narrative structure), and a dance musical—because of the primacy of choreography that advanced the plot and developed conflict among characters in a break from convention, according to which dance was a decorative element, a visual interlude between scenes.

*West Side Story* was conceived and realized by a talented creative team. The music was composed by Leonard Bernstein, one of the music geniuses of the post-war era, who was an equally successful conductor, composer of serious works and of musicals, music theoretician, and music lecturer. Prior to *West Side Story*, he had already written several successful musicals. The libretto was written by Arthur Laurents, a successful Broadway playwright, and the lyrics were by composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, regarded as the most important and celebrated figure in contemporary American musical theater. The dances were staged by Jerome Robbins, one of the greatest modern choreographers, who also directed the first production of *West Side Story* and later co-directed the film adaptation.

It was Robbins who had come up with the original idea. He discussed it in 1949 with Bernstein, who was immediately taken by it. Their intention was to create a modern musical of artistic value, with depth, emotion, and social relevance, which would rise above the mediocrity of so many Broadway musicals of the time. The initial idea was to adapt Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into a musical, then titled *East Side Story*, and to set the classic tale of love and hate in the East Side of modern-day New York City, highlighting the outcome of racial prejudice, which brings a tragic end to



the love story between a Jewish girl and a Catholic boy. But Robbins and Bernstein soon abandoned the project, seemingly for good.

Some years later (1957), the concept was revisited under the impetus of the recent social phenomenon of juvenile delinquent gangs and the widespread conflict between the native-born and recently-arrived immigrant population. In those years, some New York neighbourhoods, especially the West Side, were flooded by immigrants from Puerto Rico. This sparked tension and hostility towards the newcomers, especially among the youth who felt threatened by racial and socioeconomic otherness. In this new musical, Shakespeare's feudal hatred between two aristocratic families was replaced by the cultural and ethnic clashes between two disadvantaged lower-class juvenile gangs fighting over territory. On one side is a gang of American-born teenagers, the Jets, mostly of European origin and "Caucasian" in the vocabulary of today (Tony-Romeo is a "Polack"), who consider themselves the only true Americans and therefore the only ones to have a legitimate claim to assert their rights. They have animosity towards the Puerto Ricans, blaming them for being trespassers who do not belong in America and who aspire to the advantages reserved for native-born Americans. Set in opposition against them is the gang of Puerto Ricans (Latinos), the Sharks, who feel permanently humiliated and fight for their turf in this hostile environment. Both gangs are determined to eliminate the other. ("Every one of you hates every one of us, and we hate you right back!")

The basic plot of *West Side Story* follows Shakespeare's quite closely, in spite of the change of period, location, and social class. Thus Renaissance Verona becomes the contemporary West Side. Riff, the leader of Jets, is the equivalent of Mercutio; Bernardo, leader of Sharks, replaces Tybalt. Tony (Romeo) works at a local candy-store and is Riff's blood brother. Maria (Juliet) is Bernardo's sister, and had been brought from Puerto Rico to marry Chino, who is the equivalent of Count Paris. Anita, Bernardo's girl, replaces Juliet's Nurse. The elderly candy-store owner, Doc, who is to Tony a well-meaning fatherly figure and voice of reason, has his counterpart in Shakespeare's Friar Lawrence. The authority structure, represented in *Romeo and Juliet* by Prince Escalus, is, like everything else in *West Side Story*, presented at its lowest level: by the arrogant and ineffectual local policemen and by a clumsy social worker who makes ridiculous attempts to promote what is today termed inter-cultural dialogue—unsuccessfully, of course.

Although parallel to Shakespeare's play, the plot in *West Side Story* approaches realist authenticity and is updated to a contemporary setting. There is no secret wedding. Maria works at a bridal shop, and the lovers enact a mock wedding ceremony, knowing it is not real but feeling it to be. The final showdown of the two gangs, which ends with the murders of Riff and Bernardo, is not accidental or spontaneous. The Jets and the Sharks plan (a rumble) to settle accounts once for all, like in the football hooliganism of today. Also, there is no plague, no quarantine of the town which prevents Romeo from being informed of Juliet's feigned death, no drug, no poison, and no suicide.

But there is hatred and revenge. The greatest departure from the original tale is the denouement. After the murder of Bernardo, Tony is hiding in Doc's basement (and not exiled to another city), waiting for Maria and planning to run away with her. Maria sends Anita to the candy-store to deliver a message to Tony about their escape. But on her arrival at the Jets' hangout, Anita is treated like an enemy whore as they savagely taunt and try to rape her. Anita is saved by Doc and, overcome with rage, delivers a different message, saying that Chino (Maria's Puerto Rican fiancé) had avenged Bernardo's death and Maria's betrayal by shooting her dead: Chino killed Maria. Wild with grief, Tony abandons his hiding place and exposes himself to Chino's gunfire. Unlike Juliet, Maria survives and, in despair and angry over Tony's death, blames both rival gangs for having killed Tony through their mutual hatred. This accusation is implicitly directed at society as a whole ("You all killed him!").

Brooks Atkinson, for decades a leading Broadway critic, claimed that *West Side Story* was a revolutionary work that changed the course of the musical: "Instead of glamour, it offered the poverty-stricken life of Puerto Rican street-gangs, and it did not conclude with romance and cliché of living happily ever after. It concluded with the violent death of the chief male character." (Atkinson 1971: 446). In his review, Atkinson also described this musical as, "a profoundly moving show that is as ugly as the city jungles and also pathetic, tender, forgiving. *West Side Story* is an incandescent piece of work that finds odd bits of reality amidst the rubbish of the streets." (Lewis 2002: 86).

In his book *Broadway Musicals*, David H. Lewis expressed the deep impact made by this musical drama, or musical tragedy: "*West Side Story* mined the darker realities of street life with sizzling theatricality—with a thunderbolt of a score that rode jazz and latin rhythms like a half-mad

symphony forever on the verge of exploding. And it moved us with the eloquent lament of its young protagonists vowing in the end to help make the world a more tolerant place.” (Lewis 2002: 84). In spite of this, or precisely because of it, “plans to produce it at the World’s Fair in Brussels and in the Soviet Union collapsed because of opposition from some high American government quarters to present to a foreign audience so sordid and realistic a portrait of American life.” (Ewen 1970: 557).<sup>13</sup>

It is standard practice in the American film industry to make motion picture adaptations of musical theater’s greatest hits. After a successful run on Broadway and nationwide tour, film producers released *West Side Story* (1961), which became one of the highest grossing productions in the history of the American film musical. It was largely if not entirely based on the theater version. But it was also acclaimed as a major cinematic achievement. In the same year, the film garnered ten Academy Awards, including best motion picture of the year. Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins<sup>14</sup> shared the Oscar for Best Director, and Rita Moreno (Anita) and George Chakiris (Bernardo) won Best Supporting Actress and Actor, respectively.

Bernstein was sometimes criticized for merging both serious and popular styles within the same work. On the other hand, Kenneth Tynan, one of the most respected theatre critics of the time, described Bernstein’s and Sondheim’s songs, “as smooth and savage as a cobra; it sounds as if Puccini and Stravinsky had gone on a roller coaster ride”. (Lewis 2002: 86). And weren’t Shakespeare’s plays also at once popular and serious?

Peter Brook, perhaps the wisest pioneer of the modern theatrical phenomenon, in the classification of theater forms presented in his famous book *The Empty Space*, finds Shakespeare to have provided a model of a theater in which, “through the unreconciled opposition of Rough and Holy, through an atonal screech of absolutely unsympathetic keys ... we get the disturbing and the unforgettable impressions of his plays.” (Brook 1968: 86). He also adds that “the greatest of rough theatres” was the “Elizabethan one”. (Brook 1968: 68). *West Side Story* was undeniable proof confirming Brooks’ ideas about the possible development of the musical:

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<sup>13</sup> However, when *West Side Story* was performed in Belgrade in 1968, it was produced with the support of the American embassy.

<sup>14</sup> The name of Jerome Robbins was often omitted, because he was fired during the shooting of the film. The producers considered his perfectionist demands a waste of time, and therefore of money. Fortunately, he had already staged the dances and musical numbers.

It is the American musical on the rare occasions when it fulfils its promise,... that is the real meeting place of the American arts. It is to Broadway that American poets, choreographers and composers turn. A choreographer like Jerome Robbins is an interesting example, moving from the pure and abstract theatres of Balanchine and Martha Graham towards the roughness of the popular show. (Brook 1968: 68).

If we return to the reflections of T.S. Eliot, we may discover some curious and surprising ideas. Like George Steiner, who saw the potential in reviving ancient tragedy in late 19<sup>th</sup> century opera, Eliot, a very subtle and refined poet and intellectual, found a connection between Elizabethan theatre and modern musical entertainment. For him such reconciliation, in which a poet would transmute the form of music-hall comedy into a work of art, could be definitive proof that, “fine art is the refinement, not the antithesis of popular art ... The Elizabethan drama was aimed at a public which wanted entertainment of a crude sort, but would stand a good deal of poetry; our problem should be to take a form of entertainment, and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art. Perhaps the music-hall comedian is the best material.” (Rampal 1996: 167,168).

*West Side Story*, a milestone, “reached the summit of musical theatre history ... and there it still stands”. (Lewis 2002: 86). After the international success of the stage musical and its film adaptation, ultimate recognition came when it entered the regular repertory of distinguished opera houses, like the Volksoper in Vienna in 1968. Also, the most celebrated opera singers and conductors recorded its arias, and the most renowned orchestras performed suites from Bernstein’s musical score (among others, also the Philharmonic Orchestra of Belgrade). *West Side Story* was also performed in Belgrade in 1968 at the Contemporary Theater (now the Theater on Terazije Square).

The year 1968 was marked by the culmination of hippie culture and widespread youth rebellion. The hippie movement found a means of expression in the musical with the introduction of a new genre, the rock musical, which quickly became successful and commercially profitable. The best example is the hit show *Hair* by Rado-Ragni-Macdermot. But in fact it was the musical *Your Own Thing* by Hal Hester and Danny Apolinar, produced in 1968 and premiered off-Broadway, which “officially rose the curtain on the new rock musical”. (Lewis 2002: 97). It happens that it was a very loose and rather silly rock adaptation of the *Twelfth Night*. The story

involves Viola, who pretends to be a boy in order to join an all-male rock group, Olivia, who falls in love with this handsome “dude,” and Viola’s twin brother, who, in the end, looking like his sister Viola in drag, wins Olivia’s heart and body.

Much more successful was the rock musical *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Galt MacDermot, the composer of this musical that opened after the international success of *Hair*, phenomenal in terms of its artistic and social influence as well as its marketing strategies and commercial profit, found inspiration in Shakespeare. His rock musical *Two Gentlemen of Verona* was updated to the contemporary era, to the milieu of hippie tribes. It was presented for the first time in 1971 under the open sky at the New York Shakespeare Festival before it was moved to Broadway. Despite some negative reviews, this production won the 1972 Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Book and was generally loved by the audience, so enjoyed a long run on Broadway.

The profusion of all of the forms and genres of musical theater that have been inspired by Shakespeare’s plays is the best proof of Eliot’s claim that Shakespeare’s dramatic poetry is closely related to music, and that each enriches the other. But it must not be overlooked that Shakespeare’s plays were written primarily for the stage, i.e., the outlet for human expression of body, sound, and movement using corporal, verbal, vocal, and visual means, mediated by the emotions, nerves, intelligence, and understanding of individual interpreters, all executed at the moment of live performance. That also means that productions of Shakespeare’s works necessarily lend themselves to multiple interpretations, myriad staging possibilities, and unlimited investigation of layers and meanings. A good example of this may be seen in the diverse settings used in the various stage and screen musical adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. This is especially apparent in the staging of the ball scene set at the Capulets’ house.

In most performances of Prokofiev’s ballet (including Nureyev’s choreography at the Teatro a la Scala in Milan), the nobility of Renaissance Verona is represented as a class of knightly warriors, filled with dignity, self-esteem, and aristocratic pride, for whom family feuds are practically sacred, connected to ancestral duty and the honor-bound fight over their families’ names. Everything on stage is dark, almost bloody red and brown. Only Juliet is in white.

Contrary to the common adaptation of this ballet according to which the dramatic conflict revolves around families of the same aristocratic class,

the choreography by Angelin Preljocaj, a star of modern French ballet, sets the action in the dystopian distant future, in which only two classes exist: that of masters and slaves, who live in subterranean caves and who are forbidden to ascend to the earth's surface. Romeo and his friends trespass into the world of the masters, which is alienated and mechanic, almost inhuman and devoid of real feelings. Accordingly, the colour scheme is grey and black. Again, only Juliet wears white. In this staging, hate is fuelled by the totalitarian system, which rigidly prohibits any form of connection, particularly that of love among those from opposite classes.

In the performance of Gounod's opera produced at the Salzburg festival and directed by Barthlet Sher, the aristocracy lives in a world of exaggerated debauchery and egoism. Their ideal is maximal artificial embellishment, and the transformation of life into maximal and selfish enjoyment. Their lives transpire as if in an eternal colourful carnival, in which there are no scruples and everything is permitted if it brings pleasure. In this superficial environment, which partly connotes the decadence of the 18<sup>th</sup> century French nobility of the *ancien régime*, Juliet begins as a young girl who expects from life only joy, but in course of the action is transformed into a tragic heroine. Here also Romeo and Juliet are the only ones capable of true feelings and therefore they must perish.

Of the few films based on this Shakespearean tragedy, the *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Baz Luhrmann is especially remarkable. It is mentioned here because the music plays a very important part in it. This film retained Shakespeare's original verses and character names, but the story is set in the contemporary Latino gang culture of California. Two families, which are at the head of two rival corporate dynasties, vie for turf and excessive commercial power. The lifestyle of the magnates and the style of the film (similar to Luhrmann's other films) is glitzy and garish, with every frame showcasing the bizarre, similar to the mock neo-baroque aesthetics of music videos. At the extravagant party at the Capulets' mansion, Mercutio is dressed as a virile black drag queen, Juliet as an angel, and Tybalt as the devil, while Sir Capulet himself, elderly, fat, and robust (Paul Sorvino, known for his roles in gangster films) is wearing a short toga and a laurel crown. The first meeting of Romeo and Juliet does not take place in the dance hall, but in the toilet in the basement. The thunderclap of love at first sight happens when they see one another through the giant aquarium decorating the luxurious bathroom. Vulgarity is juxtaposed with poetry. Here again Romeo and Juliet discover a pure emotion that does not belong

to this cruel and excessive world, and which leads them to their tragic end.

These illustrations can lead to certain conclusions. Shakespeare's tragic story of Romeo and Juliet has proven amenable to all sorts of musical theatre and its different forms, genres, and styles. The adaptations can be set in the original time and place of Renaissance Verona but can just as well be transposed to other settings, like New York immigrant neighbourhoods, or the California world of questionable wealth and luxury. The opposing families (or clans regarded as families) may belong to the same class, to nobility, or, if not, one or both families may belong to the working class or criminal underworld, and the conflict between them may be caused by aristocratic honour, class or ethnic distinctions, or the excessive modern obsession with profit. But in all these replacements, intolerance essentially emerges somewhere between the reigning world of hate and the impossible world of love. True love can be tolerated only in a dream, in the utopian "Somewhere," as sung in *West Side Story*.

It may be concluded that the large number of staged productions of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry are the best indicator of the plays' wealth. The various concepts of multiple directors with different sensibilities and stylistic affinities have been based on different, sometimes contradictory and even hidden, layers of meaning and visions. Any particular stage reading of Shakespeare's work may be simultaneously understood emotionally or rationally, politically or metaphysically, traditionally or experimentally, through the lens of Romanticism or absurdism, and so on. Updating place and time, like to Victorian England, Medieval Japan (viz. Kurosawa's movies), the world of today, or even the fictitious future or a geographically and temporally undefined environment, has always (or almost always, if successfully and not superficially or arbitrarily executed) been possible and revelatory of new readings of Shakespeare's work, or of what might be read between the lines. And the scope of those possibilities is unforeseeable, endless, and inexhaustible. This proves the versatility and universality of Shakespeare's dramatic work, which cannot be found in such abundance in the work of any other dramatic author.

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Светозар Рапајић

ШЕКСПИР У МУЗИЧКОМ ПОЗОРИШТУ:  
*ПРИЧА СА ЗАПАДНЕ СТРАНЕ*

**Сажетак**

Т.С Елиот је упоредио Шекспирову драмску поезију са музиком. Та сличност је препозната и од оних стваралаца музичке драматургије који су за своје опере и балете инспирацију налазили у Шекспировим драмама. Нека од тих музичко-сценских дела су ремек-дела (као што је Вердијев *Отело*), а Џорџ Стејнер их сматра јединим правим трагедијама касног деветнаестог века. Чак и неке америчке музичке комедије су настале адаптацијама Шекспирових комедија. А када су позоришни облици у којима се драмска радња изражава музиком прерасли у модерну музичку драму, неки од нових мјузикала су настали на основу инспирације Шекспировим трагедијама. Бернстејнова *Прича са западне стране* (извођена у Београду под насловом *Прича из западног кварта*), у којој је извршено прожимање високе и популарне уметности, представља врхунац америчког музичког позоришта Она ситуира причу *Ромеа и Јулије* у амбијент улица Њујорка половине двадесетог века, у којима етнички конфликт кулминира трагедијом. Различите адаптације Шекспирових драма, промене историјског времена, места и класног статуса ликова, при којима основна прича увек функционише, као и различите редитељске значењске, стилске и жанровске интерпретације, говоре о томе колико је Шекспирово дело богато и отворено за истраживања и откривања нових слојева, и истовремено многозначно и универзално, више него и код једног другог драмског аутора.

**Кључне речи:** драмска поезија, опера, балет, музичка комедија, музичка драма, популарна уметност, режијска поставка



**Jelisaveta Milojević\***

University of Belgrade

Faculty of Philology

Belgrade, Serbia

## **UNTYING THE KNOT: SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS 27 AND 144 IN SERBIAN TRANSLATIONS**

### **Abstract**

This paper deals with the Serbian translations of Shakespeare's Sonnets 27 and 144. These sonnets have been chosen because of their striking polysemy and consequent translation issues. Analysis of the original is considered and different translations are compared and assessed. My translations are also presented, being published for the first time in this volume of the BELLS journal. General questions are put forward and answered: Why the sonnets, again? Why translate that which has already been translated? Can a person with no knowledge of the source language translate poetry with the assistance of a prose translation done by someone who does know that language? Where are the limits of poetic license in versification? Are the critic and translator to be the same person? Is it possible to criticise a translation even if one has no sovereign control over the source language? Why is translation criticism necessary? As the importance of such criticism is defended in this paper, presented to the readers as a form of *apologia* and for the purposes of illustration is a side-by-side analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnets 27 and 144 and their respective Serbian translations, including my own.

**Key words:** sonnets, analysis, translation, translation criticism, *licentia poetica*

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\* E-mail address: jelce@EUnet.rs

## 1. Introduction

Not 50 years since Shakespeare's sonnets were released to the reading public in Serbian, I translated another edition of the sonnets: a collection of Shakespeare's "great sonnets" (Milojević, J. *Šekspir: Soneti*. Belgrade: Faculty of Philology, 2012).

In this paper, different versified translations of Sonnets 27 and 144 are compared to the original and analysed according to their subject matter, figurative techniques, rhythm, metre, and structure, mostly in terms of how these elements relate to translation. In addition, general questions are raised, such as: Why the sonnets, again? Why translate that which has already been translated? Can someone who has no knowledge of the source language translate poetry with the assistance of a prose translation done by someone who does know that language? Where are the limits of poetic license in versification? Are the critic and translator to be the same person? Is it possible to criticise the translation even if one has no sovereign control over the source language? Why is translation criticism necessary? As I consider the freedom to indulge in such criticism meaningful, I present to the readers as a form of *apologia* and for the purposes of illustration a side-by-side analysis and criticism of versified translations of Shakespeare's Sonnets 27 and 144, so that readers may discern for themselves the lemons from the gifts.<sup>1</sup>

**Why the sonnets, again? Why translate that which has already been translated?** There are no fewer than three answers. Translating poetry is among the most demanding of translation tasks and, as such, can always be done differently or better, given that a translation is but an *approximation of the ideal* and not a realisation of that *ideal*. On the other hand, new translations are necessary because language itself is *dynamic* in its historical and social development such that at certain moments communication between the source and target languages becomes strained or impossible. There exists another, perhaps more important, reason: *it is the duty of every specialist and translator to stand, authoritatively, in defense of the poet—the author of the original—and correct the mistakes of their predecessors, insofar as they have failed the original*. We can only imagine, as a result of poor translations which fall short of the original, how much inaccuracy is borne by works of literary criticism and literary history that

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<sup>1</sup> In Shakespeare's play *Love's Labours Lost* (Act V, Scene ii) Hector was proclaimed to have been given a gift—which Berowne interjects was a lemon, i.e. something disappointing.

do not engage with works in the original but rely on translations without suspecting them to be wanting; the same is true of theatre: insufficient translations are adopted by directors, actors and then the public, thus perpetuating inadequate and poor interpretations. "A criminal act is always that which has occurred, has had an impact and repercussions, of relatively short duration, at one time in the past. A poor translation has an impact and repercussions which occur in the future, for an endless period of time" (Živojinović, 1981: 273). Such reasoning prompted me to make my own attempt at translating Shakespeare's sonnets. "A poor translation can only be overcome by a good one. There is no opinion that can take the place of creation itself." (Živojinović, 1981: 267).

**Why the sonnets, again, in Serbian? Or, in other words: Why is translation criticism necessary?** An answer, with annotation, may be framed within the following citation: "A poor translation would possibly deserve no more attention than a weak original work if it weren't a question of it being a false representation of the original. A weak writer speaks only in his own name, while a bad translator lends his voice to even the great poets. This is why translation criticism has an important task to warn readers as to how true to the original the text they are being offered is. The critic who engages in reviewing a translation is the only defense of the defenseless author of the original" (Konstantinović, 1981: 123). "By reading a poor translation the reader most often lives in the false belief that the poet, whose greatness he does not see, has created an ephemeral work, of importance to only his or her contemporaries or compatriots" (Konstantinović: 1981: 122, 123). I would have had such convictions as a reader of Shakespeare's sonnets had I not been consumed by two doubts: that Shakespeare wrote anything ephemeral and that the extant translations were flawless and that I wasn't in a position to peer at such heights. My doubts dissolved the moment I took up the original myself—the poems revealed themselves in their true glory, and the extant translations were but the shadow of a shadow. Thence my decision to take a stand to defend the poet as far as my academic and poetic strength would allow. Thence, as well, my decision to print the original sonnets alongside the translations. Thence, again, the decision to assess through critical analysis the sonnet corpus that has been translated into Serbian thus far and to offer my own translation solutions, which, if successful, will speak much more eloquently than criticism.

To review some of the more important ideas from the introduction to my translations: It is my opinion that Shakespeare was *a poet in his dramas*

as well as a dramatic writer in his poems—how much of each in which instance is a matter of degree: of being more or less rather than one precluding the other. When Shakespeare's sonnets are recited, it is noted that they have been *penned by a hand with a flair for drama* (see, for example, Sonnet 46, which begins with the line, "My eye and heart are at mortal war" and has a clear exposition at the beginning; undergoes conflict, development and climax in the second 'act', i.e. in the second quatrain; reaches epiphany in the third 'act', i.e. third quatrain and comes to an effective resolution in the last distich). As a second example of the connection between the poetic and dramatic, I will cite the example of Sonnet 66, which begins with the line, "Tired with all these, for restful death I cry," and which, in verse, thus through the medium of poetry, shapes and powerfully evokes the theme of Hamlet's dramatic monologue, "To be or not to be". In this instance, in this context, I would like to point out the following: I think that this idea of the dramatic and poetic in Shakespeare's opus could be fruitful in bringing his complete works to the stage: if the opus were to be cut vertically, so that none of the dramas or poems were presented separately but all of the dramatic works and poems were to be assembled in one place *related by theme* (love, jealousy, beauty, disappointment, revenge, death, etc.), it would be possible to speak of variations on a given theme or themes so that, in such a staged presentation of Shakespeare's works, even the sonnets would naturally find their place—as it is, theatre directors find the sonnets to be undramatisable because of the lack of action (Nikita Milivojević, personal communication), which is why we do not often see them in the theatre. The Sonnets, however, were premiered on the stage of the National theatre in Belgrade on 26 February 2014—marking the first time Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were performed in Serbia (the translation used was my own). The director, Aleksandar Nikolić, proved such a feat possible through eloquent theatrical sensibility: the *Sonnets* are already heavily dramatically charged in that they are expressions of deep inner emotional states and conflicts that manifest a strong need to be verbalised and communicated to an audience, as is the case with a soliloquy in a play (compare, for example, the "To be or not to be" Hamlet soliloquy and Sonnet 66). What is more, this idea, as I have put it forward, would also benefit literary criticism, which as far as I know has not considered Shakespeare in this way—I think that only in this way could it have complete insight into Shakespeare's poetic vision.

**The themes of the Sonnets** vary but are all vaulted by the theme of love, which is depicted in an unconventional, anti-Petrarchan and surprisingly complex way so that we may say that the sonnets present a kind of modern love poetry. Shakespeare plays with gender roles, speaks openly about sexual desire and sexual intercourse, glorifies and parodies beauty, describes the temptations of passionate and carnal love, considers Platonic and idealized love and explores man's experience of physical and spiritual love, procreation, everlasting love, disappointment, pining, doubts and fears, hope and imagination, redemption and forgiveness, compassion, jealousy, triumphant love, etc. **Figurative techniques**, imagery and tone are crafted according to the different themes. In recent decades, scholarship of the sonnets has focused almost exclusively on the decomposition of the sonnets and the use of rhetorical figures, such as metaphor, metonymy, allusion, alliteration, assonance, antithesis, synecdoche, personification, internal rhyme, word play, double entendre, multiple associations, anaphora, etc. Examples of such scholarship includes that released by major publishing houses Cambridge University Press (*Sonnets*, CUP:1966) and Penguin (*Sonnets*, Penguin: 1986). For examples of *polysemy and homonymy* we refer the reader to analysis of Sonnet 20 (verses 1-2, verse 10), Sonnet 27 (verses 13-14), Sonnet 144 (polysemy is found in almost every verse); *metonymy*, Sonnet 59; *antithesis* and *synecdoche*, Sonnets 12 and 116; *alliteration*, Sonnet 91 (verse 4) as well as Sonnets 30 and 55; *assonance*, Sonnet 55; *anaphora*, Sonnet 91 (verses 1, 2, 3, and 4); *parallel structure within the verse*, Sonnet 91 (verse 10); personification, Sonnets: 20 (verse 10), 27 (verse 12), 55, 65, 73, 2, 59); *word play and double entendre*, Sonnets 144 (the last quatrain and the couplet), 75, 35 (verse 9), 20 (verse 1, 2); *ambiguity and word play*, Sonnet 20 (verse 7), Sonnet 27 (couplet, verses 13, 14). The absence of elaborate stylistic technique and idiosyncrasy does not deprive the sonnets of their artistic potential and beauty—on the contrary, Shakespeare achieved great effect and beauty by the use of very simple poetic means and structure, strong emotional cohesion and transposition (for example, Sonnet 116). A few more words on style: all stylistic analysis—whether an end in itself or carried out for the purpose of explication and translation—should be preceded by solid and comprehensive research into the meaning of those words that had different meaning in early modern English (note, for example, that Shakespeare was the first to use the word *imaginary* in the sense of imaginative: Sonnet 27, verse 9, or that the word *shadow*, meaning the same as 'senka' in present

day English, meant in Shakespeare's day 'insubstantial image': Sonnet 27, verse 10). This should be *sine qua non*, however, we witness many failures—the original being failed by the translators (see, for example, the couplet verses of Sonnet 27 in Angjelinovic's and Raickovic's translations). A translator should be guided by a healthy skepticism: collocative and associative meanings change over time. Apart from the ignorance of the translator there exist additional objective difficulties having to do with the original text: some of the sonnets, or sections thereof, are intentionally polysemous (cf. Sonnet 20, verses 1-2; Sonnet 27, verses 13-14 (*Sonnets*, CUP, 1996)). Consequently, different readings are possible, which in turn affects translation. We refer the reader to the following quotation: "Poetic work is often insufficiently transparent and it should remain such in translation" (Konstantinović, 1981:126).

Almost all of the sonnets comprise three quatrains of four-line stanzas and a final couplet composed in iambic pentameter; the rhyme scheme is *abab cdcd efef gg*. This is also the meter used extensively in Shakespeare's plays. Because this article is concerned with the translation of Shakespeare's sonnets, I shall add that having considered the **rhythm** favoured by English poetry, *the rhythmic essence of the language is unique*—and it follows that the essence of the Serbian language has its own rhythm (it is trochaic), which must be respected in the translation because in order for a translation to resonate with the rhythmic essence of the target language, it must pulse in that rhythm only. Hence any insistence on the literal transference of the rhythm and metre from the source into the target language makes no sense: the translated poem must have the vibrations of the linguistic essence of the language into which it is being translated.

Regarding the **structure** of Shakespeare's sonnets and the *essential connection between form and meaning*, I would like, from my own perspective as translator, to point out the following aspect of my experience. Taken by the beauty of one distich, I began to translate it at once, unable to wait for the moment it would 'have its turn,' i.e. by beginning with the first quatrain then proceeding to the second, then third. It happened that despite my enthusiasm and what appeared to be the self-contained meaning and aesthetic qualities of a single distich, I was unable to arrive at solutions and problems endured. The following became apparent, which I believe to be of phenomenological value: translation is a journey, undertaken hand in hand with the poet, and it has its beginning: both intellectual and emotional, its duration, and its end, and the poetic hand-holding ought



to give way to trust, empathy and good will; in such a way, the translator, alongside the poet, undergoes catharsis and finishes the journey with a feeling of happiness and *the translation grows only in those places where things, according to the poet's foresight, ought to grow and only when it is time for them to grow*. Prosodic translation is an act of re-creation, making again, and it implies a respect for the natural flow of things: 'hop and skip' translating is unnatural in this respect.

**Licentia poetica**, also known as 'poetic freedom,' is most often a euphemism which stands for the distortion of facts, oversimplification, the stylization or metaphorical condensation of images, the omission or addition of linguistic material, grammar distortion and the verbal reconfiguration of the original text with the intention to renew or improve the inherent content of the original. Those who take liberties with poetic freedom, consciously or not, assume that this is entirely the discretionary right of the poet-translator and that this must be tolerated and approved of by the public. Addressing the poet's understanding of translation, Milovan Danojlić says: "According to that understanding, the original is not considered a protected prototype which must at all costs be preserved and transplanted, but is rather considered a challenge, a stimulus, a model according to which comparable poems are to be written... It was important to leave as personal a mark on the new version as possible, breathe life into it, enable it to have its own aesthetic function. The enterprise was only as alluring and worthy of attention as the personality undertaking it was interesting" (Danojlić: 1981: 247-248). *Examples of poetic freedom, going so far as to become improvisations, appropriations and failures to reach the meaning of the original can be found in the examples of the side-by-side analysis of several versified-translations of Shakespeare's sonnets which I have presented in this paper. It was assumed by the editors and publishers that only literary experts and poets should translate the works of poets and that, insofar as there was a choice, the preference in translation was to be given to poets. It is my opinion, after serious and comprehensive analysis of versified-translation, that poets cannot translate or let the original sing through them without a thorough knowledge of the source language, and I think, furthermore, that both such a **knowledge and a gift for poetry must be united within the same person.***

## 2. Critical assesment of the translations of Sonnets 27 and 144

### 2.1. Sonnet 27

**William Shakespeare**  
**Sonnet 27**  
**(New Penguin Shakespeare, 1986)**  
**(New Cambridge Shakespeare, 1996)**

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,  
The dear repose for limbs with travail tired;  
But then begins a journey in my head  
To work my mind, when body's work's expired;  
For then my thoughts (from far where I abide)  
Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee,  
And keep my drooping eyelids open wide,  
Looking on darkness which the blind do see;  
Save that my soul's imaginary sight  
Presents thy shadow to my sightless view,  
Which, like a jewel (hung in ghastly night)  
Makes black night beauteous, and her old face new.  
Lo thus by day my limbs, by night my mind,  
For thee, and for myself, no quiet find.

**Sonnet 27**  
**Translated by Jelisaveta Milojević (unpublished)**

Umoran od posla postelji žurim,  
Slatkom odmoru za telo palo,  
Al' onda, mislima, na put jurim  
I glava radi i kad je telo stalo.  
Misli, iz daleka, gde prebivaju,  
Sa žarom tad kreću tebe da pohode  
I teške kapke one otvaraju  
Pa gledam mrak koji slepi vide –

Osim što, izmaštan mojom dušom,  
Tvoj nestvarni lik vidim slepim vidom,  
Dragulj što groznu tamu učini lepom  
A noć-staricu učini mladom.  
Mog tela i moje duše nemira  
Ja sam uzrok, a ti uzrok i namera.

### **Sonnet 27**

**Versified translation by Stevan Raičković  
(based on the prose translation by Živojin Simić)  
(Beograd: Prosveta, 1966)**

Postelji žurim – iznuren od rada -  
Miloj počivki umornih od puta;  
Al' put po mojoj glavi počne tada,  
Te posle tela – trud – po umu luta.  
Polaze moje misli, žudnog toka,  
Na hodočašće, tebi, koje sami,  
I ne daju mi da sklopim ni oka,  
Te kao slepi gledam, sam, u tami.  
Al' vidom moje mašte – mome oku –  
U tami tvoje drago lice gradim,  
Koje ko dragulj sja kroz noć duboku  
I učini je lepom, s likom mladim.  
Po noći um moj, danju telo moje –  
Zbog tebe nikad da se uspokoje.

### Sonnet 27

Translated by Danko Angjelinović (Beograd: Kultura, 1966)

U krevet žurim umoran od rada,  
Da mi se mirom trudna uda slade,  
Al' vrtlog počne u glavi tek tada  
I mozak radi kad tijelo prestade.  
Jer tad mi miso iz dalekog stana  
U hodočašće k tebi željno ide,  
I umornoj mi vjeđi ne da sana,  
Već zurim u mrak, kog i slijepci vide;  
Ti kad uskrsneš kroz duše mi plamen,  
Ko mila sjena pred očima slijepim,  
I kroz noć mračnu sjaš ko alem-kamen  
I grozno lice noći praviš lijepim.  
Tako mi noću miso, danju tijelo,  
Rad tebe ne da mira vrijeme cijelo.

In the comparative analysis that will follow, only the couplet will be considered as it is arguably the linguistic and philosophical focal point of the sonnet and notoriously difficult from the point of view of translation. "For" is used twice in a double sense: the poet lies awake 'because of' the friend and 'for his sake'; so, 'because of' his devotion, he finds no quiet 'for' himself; 'on account of you, on account of myself'. "For" translates into Serbian as 'zbog' (indicating cause) and 'radi' (indicating intention). The meaning of the couplet is therefore the following: the poet cannot sleep because he is thinking about his friend and cannot stop the stream of thoughts; but, on the other hand, he himself instigates the thinking wishing to be with his friend in this way, for the purpose of being with his friend in his thoughts. This interpretation, based on analysis published in the editions of the sonnets published by CUP and Penguin, informed my translation. The translations by Raičković and Angjelinović are identical in both being incorrect.

Verses 13, 14: *Lo thus by day my limbs, by night my mind, / For thee, and for myself, no quiet find.* (Shakespeare);

Verses 13, 14: *Po noći um moj, danju telo moje – / Zbog tebe nikad da se uspokoje.* (Raičković);

Verses 13, 14: *Tako mi noću miso, danju tijelo, / Rad tebe ne da mira vrijeme cijelo.* (Angjelinović);

Verses 13, 14: *Mog tela i moje duše nemira / Ja sam uzrok, a ti uzrok i namera.* (Milojević).

## **2. 2 Critical assesment of the translations of Sonnet 144**

This sonnet is even more strikingly polysemous and thus a challenge for the translator.

### **William Shakespeare**

#### **Sonnet 144**

**(New Penguin Shakespeare, 1986)**

**(New Cambridge Shakespeare, 1996)**

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,  
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:  
The better angel is a man right fair  
The worser spirit a woman colour'd ill.  
To win me soon to hell, my female evil  
Tempteth my better angel from my side,  
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,  
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.  
And whether that my angel be turn'd fiend  
Suspect I may, but not directly tell;  
But being both from me, both to each friend,  
I guess one angel in another's hell:  
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,  
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

**Sonnet 144**

**Translated by Jelisaveta Milojević (unpublished)**

Dve ljubavi imam – osećanja tesnac –  
Dva duha, dva anđela, dva iskušenja:  
Anđeo utehe je svetao muškarac,  
Anđeo očaja crna je žena.  
Da me u svoj pakao što pre uvede  
Ljubavnica ljubavnika mi općini -  
Gordom, divljom strašću ona ga zavede  
Želeći da anđela đavolom učini.  
Hoće li anđeo postati đavo?  
Bliski su a između nas daljina.  
Slutim da hoće, al' ne znam zapravo -  
Njemu je otvorena đavolja jazbina.  
Moja će sumnja biti odagnana  
Bude li im ljubav vatrom žigosana.

**Sonnet 144**

**Versified translation by Stevan Raičković  
(based on the prose translation by Živojin Simić)  
(Beograd: Prosveta, 1966)**

Dve su ljubavi sad u mojoj volji,  
Duh zla i dobra ratuju u meni;  
Plavook mladić – anđeo je boji,  
A gori – žena sa mrakom u zeni.  
Da me otera u ad – svojoj tami  
Odvukla mi je anđela boljega  
I lepotom ga sada na greh mami  
Da u đavola pretvori i njega.  
Da l' je postao đavo on od one,  
Slutiti mogu, ali ne znam tačno.  
Oni su prisni, a mene se klone,  
Te mi oboje izgledaju mračno.  
Da li je tako, nikad neću znati  
Dok zli anđeo beljeg ne isprati.

**Sonnet 144**  
**Translated by Danko Angjelinović**  
**(Beograd: Kultura, 1963)**

Do dvije ljubavi – sreće i očaja,  
Ko do dva duha iznad mene bdiju:  
Bolji je anđel mladić prepun sjaja,  
A gori žena, duh mračnih očiju.  
Da otjera me u pako – zavodi  
Ta ženska zlica mog dobrog anđela,  
I čistog sveca na vruga navodi,  
Nevinost da bi u bludnost zavela.  
Da l' i moj anđel postade sotona,  
Nekako slutim, ali ne znam pravo;  
Od mene bježe, prisni on i ona,  
I strah me: crn je i anđel i đavo  
To nikad neću znat i dvojiti stoga,  
Dok moj zli anđel ne uzme dobroga.

We shall pinpoint few polysemous knots to be untied by a translator. Consider the following examples:

“What seems most striking in the polysemy of 144 is the ambivalence of ‘love’ in line 1. Those ‘two loves’ must register as different modes of feeling – comforting and hopeless – until the second line makes them ‘spirits’. Two kinds of loving are summed in two individuals (...), with ‘love’ at once emotion and the loved object. But ‘the bad angel’ represents only the ‘dark’ side of love (...)” (Introduction to the *Sonnets*, CUP, 1966:61)

Verses 1-2: *Two loves I have of comfort and despair,/ Which like two spirits do suggest me still:/* (Shakespeare);

Verses 1-2: *Dve ljubavi imam – osećanja tesnac -/ Dva duha, dva anđela, dva iskušenja:/* (Milojević);

Verses 1-2: *Dve su ljubavi sad u mojoj volji,/ Duh zla i dobra ratuju u meni;* (Raičković);

Verses 1-2: *Do dvije ljubavi – sreće i očaja,/ Ko do dva duha iznad mene bdiju:* (Angjelinović).

We shall also note that the word “suggest” means: 1. prompt; 2. tempt (‘podstaći’; ‘iskušavati’). The translations that approximate the original most are those of Milojević and Raičković whereas that of Angjelinović is the least successful—in fact, it completely misses the point.

Another example of polysemy is the following:

Verse 3: *a man right fair* (Shakespeare);

Verse 3: *svetao muškarac*, (Milojević);

Verse 3: *Plavook mladić* (Raičković);

Verse 3: *mladić prepun sjaja* (Angjelinović).

“Right fair” means the following: 1. just, absolutely honest; 2. most beautiful (pale, blond).

Both meanings are suggested by the choice of the Serbian word ‘svetao,’ which has two meanings: ‘fair-haired’ or ‘fair-skinned’ but also ‘chaste’ and ‘pure.’ This other meaning was ignored by Raičković thus failing the original.

Yet another example:

Verse 8: “foul pride” (Shakespeare) becomes “gorda, divlja strast” (Milojević), “greh” (Raičković), and “bludnost” (Angjelinović).

“Foul pride” has multiple meaning and thus it is very complex and stylistically potent from the point of view of interpretation and connotation. It means: 1. horrible allure (implying beauty and sexual readiness), and 2. vanity. Both Raičković’s and Angjelinović’s translation miss the other meaning.

I have also chosen to focus on the last quatrain and the couplet because of their extreme richness in polysemy. Here is the original and three Serbian translations juxtaposed for comparison.

Verses 9-14: *And whether that my angel be turn’d fiend/ Suspect I may, but not directly tell;/ But being both from me, both to each friend,/ I guess one angel in another’s hell:/ Yet this shall I ne’er know, but live in doubt,/ Till my bad angel fire my good one out.* (Shakespeare);

Verses 9-14: *Hoće li anđeo postati đavo?/ Bliski su a između nas daljina./ Slutim da hoće, al’ ne znam zapravo -/ Njemu je otvorena đavolja jazbina./ Moja će sumnja biti odagnana / Bude li im ljubav vatrom žigosana.* (Milojević);

Verses 9-14: *Da l’ je postao đavo on od one,/ Slutiti mogu, ali ne znam tačno./ Oni su prisni, a mene se klone,/ Te mi oboje izgledaju*



*mračno./ Da li je tako, nikad neću znati/ Dok zli anđeo beljeg ne isprati.* (Raičković);

Verses 9-14: *Da l' i moj anđel postade sotona,/ Nekako slutim, ali ne znam pravo;/Od mene bježe, prisni on i ona,/ I strah me: crn je i anđel i đavo/ To nikad neću znat i dvojiti stoga,/ Dok moj zli anđel ne uzme dobroga.* (Angjelinović).

The polysemy of “hell” (verse 12) includes: 1. the idea of suffering; 2. cunt (slang sense of hell); 3. burrow; 4. vagina. The sexual implication of “fire,” which also meant ‘pox,’ is obvious. The suggestion is also that the good angel has become an animal to be smoked out of its burrow (a lady’s vagina) as well as an allusion to the proverb, “One fire drives out another.” For an extensive explanation and commentary on Sonnet 144 the reader is referred to the “Introduction” in *Sonnets*, CUP, 1966:60. The translations by both Raičković and Angjelinović totally miss the point and thus fail the original.

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, sections of Shakespeare’s Sonnets 27 and 144 have been analysed alongside their Serbian translations. General questions have been put forward and answered: Why the sonnets, again? Why translate that which has already been translated? Can someone who has no knowledge of the source language translate poetry with the assistance of a prose translation done by someone who does know that language? Where are the limits of poetic license in versification? Are the critic and translator to be the same person? Is it possible to criticise a translation even if one has no sovereign control over the source language? Why is translation criticism necessary? As the importance of such criticism is defended in this paper, readers have been presented with side-by-side analysis of Shakespeare’s Sonnets 27 and 144 and their respective Serbian translations serving as a form of *apologia* and the purposes of illustration.

Translating poetry is among the most demanding of translation tasks and, as such, can always be done differently or better, given that a translation is but an *approximation of the ideal* and not a realisation of that *ideal*. There exists another, perhaps more important, reason why translations may ever be performed anew: *it is the duty of every specialist and translator to stand, authoritatively, in defense of the poet—the author of*

*the original*—and correct the mistakes of their predecessors, insofar as they have failed the original. “A criminal act is always that which has occurred, has had an impact and repercussions, of relatively short duration, at one time in the past. A poor translation has an impact and repercussions which occur in the future, for an endless period of time” (Živojinović, 1981: 273). This was the reasoning behind my decision to attempt translate Shakespeare’s sonnets anew. A poor translation can only be overcome by a good one.

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Јелисавета Милојевић

РАЗМРСИТИ ЧВОР: ШЕКСПИРОВИ СОНЕТИ 27 И 144  
У ПРЕВОДИМА НА СРПСКИ

**Сажетак**

Рад се бави рашчитавањем Шекспирових Сонета 27 и 144, одабраних због изразите и пребогате полисемичности, и, отуда, крајње захтевних за превођење. Анализира се оригинал и постојећи преводи на српски, пореде се и вреднују преводна решења. Даје се и ауторов превод ових сонета, који се први пут објављује на овом месту. Апострофирају се кључне теме из области критике превода, испитују се границе песничке слободе у препеву, а поручује се да је експертско знање нужно да би се на њега наслонио таленат. Критичар превода мора императивно стати у одбрану незаштићеног ауторитета песника, који има право на своју мисао и свој израз.

**Кључне речи:** сонети, анализа, превод, критика превода, песничка слобода

**Dubravka Đurić\***

Singidunum University  
Faculty of Media and Communication  
Belgrade, Serbia

## SVETISLAV STEFANOVIĆ'S INTERPRETATION OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND WORLD LITERATURE\*\*

### **Abstract**

This paper deals with Svetislav Stefanović's interpretation of William Shakespeare's plays in which he presents Shakespeare as a classic of world literature (which at the time was a Eurocentric concept). Analyzing how Shakespeare used different sources for his own plays, Stefanović applies a comparative approach and compares Shakespeare with the Bible and with Greek and Roman authors, as well as with other European writers, such as Goethe and Dostoyevsky. The way Stefanović interpreted Shakespeare is performative because he showed how Shakespeare is a classic of the world literature system, and in doing so, he symbolically included modern Serbian literature in that system, too.

**Key words:** classic, comparative approach, translation, world literature, Shakespeare, Stefanović

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\* E-mail address: dubravka.djuric@fmk.edu.rs

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## 1. Introduction

In this text I will deal with the poet and translator Svetislav Stefanović's interpretations of William Shakespeare's dramas. Stefanović was a poet, essayist and translator whose fields of interest were English and American poets.<sup>1</sup> Among his most important translations are those of William Shakespeare's works. His interest in Shakespeare dated back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1920s and late 1930s, new editions of his translations were published, along with his 'Forewords'. Stefanović valued mysticism highly, viewing it as one of the most important characteristics of English poetry, and it was his ambition to pass this aspect of English poetry on to Serbian poetry. He explains:

By emphasizing the mythical spirit of English poetry, I would like it to creatively impregnate our poetry, to broaden and deepen its horizons without which no poetry, be it great or pure, is produced. More than German or any other, it was English poetry that developed out of the hymn, the prayer; that kind of poetry has a certain mythical incarnation, all the more artistic if it possesses the mythical and divine (see: Konstantinović 198: 262n).

This comment leads us into a brief discussion on the function of translation in a culture.

## 2. Constructing modern national literature and the function of translation

I will start from the premise put forward in translation studies that translation is fundamental in all discursive fields. Translation is a text product and at the same time a text producer (Bassnett 2014: 236). It is produced through human labor from existing texts. At the same time, it is an active agent in the production of new texts. In the past, translations

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<sup>1</sup> Since my paper deals with only a small fragment of Stefanović's work and is based on a close reading of the text, it should be pointed out that Stefanović (born in 1877) belonged to a group of 100 Serbian intellectuals sentenced to death for collaborating with the German occupiers and was shot in 1944. Like many others, this controversial intellectual supported Nazi ideas – the historian Olivera Milosavljević wrote about his case (see Milosavljević 2010).

were considered to be of secondary importance, but translating is now viewed as an activity that has a crucial role in the development of any national literary system as it 'involves complex processes of import and export' (Bassnett 2014: 236). Susan Bassnett wrote:

More recently, expanding research in what is termed world literature also serves to highlight the significance of translation in literary transactions. It appears self-evident that the transmission of texts across cultural boundaries should also have a linguistic dimension, yet studies of literary transmission tended for a long time to play down or disregard the role of translation. This is understandable once we pause to reflect on the link between the construction of national histories in the nineteenth century, an age characterized by the passionate struggle to establish clearly defined and coherent national identities across Europe (Bassnett 2014: 238).

Translation is fundamental to the formation of literary systems. The usage of the notion of a system derives from the belief that 'semiotic phenomena, i.e. sign-governed human patterns of communication (such as culture, language, literature, and society), could be more adequately understood and studied if regarded as systems' (Even-Zohar 1990: 9). Every translation is a recreation and interpretation of the source text, while at the same time, 'translation is *a priori* present in every source text: to varying degrees, every literary work is made up of translations, always containing in itself a certain amount of translation work' (Mančić 2010: 13), or as Aleksandra Mančić wrote, 'translation is the site of the shaping of national literature' (Mančić 2010: 13). In the different phases of the forming and developing of national literature, it is the function of translation to provide a repertoire which exists within other, usually older and more developed literary fields. Its other function is to change the national canon and provide new models of literary production. A translation is always accompanied by discourse which gives it additional interpretations, shaping it for contemporary usages within the target culture (the target culture which receives the literary work from some other (source) culture).

I will focus my attention on Stefanović's introductions to several of his Shakespeare translations, which were written to portray Shakespeare as a great European poet, as a classic of world literature. They are important because here Stefanović practiced a world literature approach, which has a performative role in demonstrating the unity of European literature,

considered at the time to be world literature. Written within the Serbian Yugoslav bourgeois culture<sup>2</sup>, his interpretation performatively made this culture part of the world literary system. Since some of the main principles we find in Stefanović's interpretations of Shakespeare correspond to some of T. S. Eliot's significant discussions on European literature and the notion of a great poet, I will first discuss Eliot's theses.

### **3. T.S. Eliot and the definition of a classic and a European poet**

According to T. S. Eliot, every language has its resources and limitations ('What is a classic?' 1944). However, at particular times throughout history, some languages generate moments in which unique classical poets appear, as happened in the history of Rome with the Latin language. Eliot explains:

The maturity of literature is the reflection of that of the society in which it is produced; an individual author – notably Shakespeare and Virgil – can do much to develop his language – but he cannot bring that language to maturity unless the work of his predecessors has prepared it for his final touch. A mature literature, therefore, has a history behind it: a history that is not merely a chronicle, an accumulation of manuscripts and writings of this kind and that, but an ordered, though unconscious, progress of a language to realize its own potentialities within its own limitations (T.S. Eliot 1971: 56).

Discussing Goethe ('Goethe as the Sage', 1954), Eliot explains two crucial concepts: 'a great poet' and 'the unity of European literature'. A 'great poet' is one who unifies wisdom and poetic inspiration. Such poets 'belong, not merely to their own people, but to the world; it is only poets of this kind of whom one can think, not primarily as limited by their own language and nation, but as great Europeans' (Eliot 1971: 207). It is important for us to understand, wrote Eliot, that the unity of European literature exists, deriving from 'our common background, in the literature of Greece, Rome and Israel' (Eliot 1971: 211). He stressed that the great European poets

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<sup>2</sup> With this term I refer to the fact that Serbian culture during 20th century was realized within different political and economic contexts – bourgeois, socialist and post-socialist, as part of the Yugoslavian state or an independent state.



are Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe. They are proclaimed as such by two criteria: *Permanence* and *Universality*. Their work is of continual importance for every new generation in their own language as well as in others, and no one will question this importance. In addition, the influence of such a poet 'is not a matter of historical record only; he will continue to be of value to every Age, and every Age will understand his work differently' (Eliot 1971: 211). There are three characteristics that the great poets have to have: *Abundance*, *Amplitude* and *Unity*. *Abundance* means that they 'wrote a good deal, and nothing that any of them wrote is negligible' (Eliot 1971: 213), while *amplitude* means that each 'had a very wide range of interests' (Eliot 1971: 214). The third quality, *unity*, is explained as 'each of them gives us Life itself, the World seen from a particular point of view of a particular European age and a particular man in that age' (Eliot 1971: 214).

Eliot's discussion is important because the ideas he formulated were characteristic for the period in which he formulated them and they were common to European intellectuals between the two World Wars and immediately after the Second World War. Therefore, we can see that the translation of European classics like Shakespeare was necessary for the local formation of a world literature canon in a literary culture like Serbian between the two World Wars. Here I should mention that the different translations of Shakespeare in Serbian culture were accompanied by public debate concerning the fundamental question of how to translate Shakespeare and how to understand his work (Mančić 2010: 43). I will not deal with these discussions, but only with Stefanović's interpretation of Shakespeare as a universal classic of world literature in the sense Eliot wrote about.

#### **4. Stefanović's Shakespeare as a classic and modern playwright**

My review of Svetislav Stefanović's interpretation of Shakespeare's dramas will deal with the forewords he wrote for the following plays: *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *The Winter's Tale*. Stefanović first explains when each play was written, suggests possible sources for the plot, and outlines what different interpreters wrote about it. Then he himself gives an interpretation of the plot and characters, compares the dramatic techniques used in the plays, and points out the

similarities and differences between the plots and characterization of characters in different dramas. Very often Stefanović calls Shakespeare a *genius* and talks about his *modernity*. The concept of modernity could refer to several conflicting ideas. It can signify something that is contemporary ('the present' or up-to-date) as opposed to what belongs to the past, but it can also signify differences within the present. In other words, the concept of modern art and literature does not only refer to 'art and literature of the modern period' because not all art and literature produced in that period can be considered 'modern'. Only certain types of artistic and literature production have the right to be called so (Fer 1993: 9). Modernity in art and literature 'is connected to a break with traditional modes of Western culture that connected the phenomenon of a work of art with the appearance of the natural world' (Đurić 2009: 23). It should also be highlighted that it is the influential literary centers of Western cultures that hegemonically proclaim what is to be considered modern (Casanova 2004). The concept of modernity is important to Stefanović because he had been advocating the modernization of Serbian poetic culture since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Manojlović, 1987: 265). Thus, it can be said that when he writes about Shakespeare, he does so for contemporary use in the context of modern Serbian literature as part of a system of world literature. When he calls Shakespeare a genius, he means that the artist is a genius because he is capable of producing universal values. A genius 'creates' artwork that transcends the time and space of its origin. I would like to stress here that the modern age concept of universality has evolved out of the humanism of the Enlightenment, that it is Eurocentric, based on the idea of universal literature which is based on the universality of the human spirit (Virk 2007: 73).

I will call Stefanović's approach *comparative* because he compares Shakespeare's works with the great literature from different epochs, showing that *world literature* is one system whose parts are mutually connected, and explaining how themes, motives, and narratives travel and are formed historically in different linguistic (i.e. national) cultures. At this point, I will briefly review comparative studies and world literature. Goethe's concept of world literature can be interpreted in the sense of the post-Enlightenment and pre-Romantic idea of *cosmopolitanism*. The idea functioned as an ideology, meaning it endorsed a conviction that people are in essence all equal regardless of differences in nationality, nation-state, language, religion, class, race, and cultural affiliation (Juvan, 2008: 69). The

cosmopolitan conception on which comparative literature was based was the idea of the existence of world literature that from Goethe's time meant 'the exchange of literary goods across boundaries of language, peoples, states, entities and civilizations' (Juvan 2008: 70). Marx and Engels saw cosmopolitanism as the ideology of bourgeois capitalism that operates on the supranational globalized market, thus connecting it to world literature as a modern form of the exchange and flow of 'spiritual products' (Juvan 2008: 71). They established an analogy between the 'transnational, global expansion of the capitalist economy and the beginning of the construction of an international system of world literature' (Juvan 2008: 71). It is important to note that the canon of world literature up to the late 1970s was essentially Eurocentric. Namely, the concept of *world literature* was understood to mean European and Euro-American literature. Such ideas were clearly expressed in Eliot's texts, especially those written after World War Two, as well as in Stefanović's Forewords, which I will discuss.

In several of his Forewords, Stefanović stresses that Shakespeare's plays were written on the basis of *existing material*, claiming that that was the standard procedure used by writers. He compares them to the Bible and the literature of the classical period, as the core texts of European civilization, as well as to the great European poets and writers, like Goethe, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Cervantes. Thus, he shows the *unity* of world literature in the sense of European and Euro-American literature. Shakespeare appears as a *classic* whose work is universal and immeasurably valuable, comprehensive and unique. Being a classic, it was necessary for the relatively young Serbian national literature, which was going through a process of modernization, to have translations of his works available in the local language.

Below, I will outline several theses and discuss Stefanović's interpretations of Shakespeare's dramas to show how his approach is comparative when attempting to present European literature through the classic interpretation of one unified whole.

### 1) Shakespeare's dramas were written using existing sources

In the Foreword to *Romeo and Juliet*, Svetislav Stefanović insists on the fact that Shakespeare used stories that were already well known, much liked and popular; thus, he comments:

It seems that Shakespeare's creativity was not enough to produce such great masterpieces belonging to the whole of world literature, but that the work of all generations of cultured peoples was needed. Thus, the themes that *Romeo and Juliet* dealt with had already been used by a series of writers before Shakespeare, which gave him not only ready-made material, but also made the plot one of the most popular (Stefanović 1928: 6).

Stefanović expressed variations on this idea of Shakespeare's creative process. Thus, in the Foreword for *Othello*, we read:

Shakespeare took an existing story for his *Othello* as he did for the rest of his plays. He did not invent the plots of his plays, in the same way an architect of a temple or palace does not make his own bricks or other material, but takes ready-made material and uses it for his work of art. Maybe it shows a certain economy of creativity, maybe the need for one basic impulse that spurs the inspiration for further works of art (Stefanović 1921a: V).

Specifically, for example, at the beginning of his introductory text to *King Lear*, he points out that: '[the s]tory of King Lear goes back in history to the oldest mythical Celtic legends in Britain' (Stefanović 1923: V). Asserting that *The Winter's Tale* belongs to Shakespeare's last creative phase of 'great romances, dramatized fairy tales and legends which together with *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* make up the last trilogy' but also 'the final phase of his view on life' (Stefanović 1939b: X), Stefanović mentions that the specific material was taken from the most popular novel of the time, written by Robert Green, entitled *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*. He highlights that all the playwrights in *world literature* had done the same: used sources such as legends, myths, history, novels, or stories from everyday life (Stefanović 1921a: V).

However, Shakespeare's attitude towards the existing sources that were at his disposal changed over time. When writing *Julius Caesar*, his source was the English translation of Plutarch, translated by Sir Thomas North from Jacques Amyot's French translation. In this drama and others

from Roman history, like *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, he followed his sources more literally, using not just the plot lines, but whole scenes and chunks of text. In contrast, when his sources were Italian novels (as for *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*) or when he used Holinshed's *Chronicle of English history*, he would only take 'the bare skeleton'. Hence, in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, a whole series of scenes and speeches were mostly versified versions of North's prose text. All the characters in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* can be found in Plutarch's *Lives*. However, when Stefanović compares North's translation of Plutarch's prose with Shakespeare's version, he points out how the latter turned it masterfully into miraculously magnificent poetry (Stefanović 1939d: XV). However, there are also plays like *Midsummer Night's Dream* that are characterized as being the most liberal mixture of different elements:

...old Greek and Roman mythology, classical heroic and Medieval romantic spirit, stiff academism and the most debauched popular traditionalism. From Plutarch's *Theseus*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from which he took the name of Titania, from the popular Medieval novel *Huon de Bordeaux* from which Oberon was taken in the French version – Alberih from the German tradition, from Montemor's Spanish pastoral prose romances and popular Medieval miracle narratives and mysteries whose main actors were artisans and workers – Shakespeare composed the most miraculous and most charming comedy and as Sir Sydney Lee said 'conquered a new empire for art' (Stefanović 1924: V-VI).

## **2) The comparative approach and the transnational transmission of themes, motives and world (i.e. European) literature narratives**

In order to show how themes, motives and narratives are transmitted from one epoch to another, from one local context to another, and from one genre to another, Stefanović tracks them assiduously up to their appearance in Shakespeare's dramas.<sup>3</sup> Thus when writing about *Othello*, he outlines the plot of the Italian novel *A Moor of Venice* by Giovanni Battista Giraldi. Mapping the different variations of this story, he returns

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<sup>3</sup> The most frequently used source for this data is the book: C.K. Simrock, *Quellen des Shakespeare in Novellen, Sagen und Märchen*, 1870 (Stefanović 1921a: VII).

to Shakespeare and explains that, in terms of aesthetic values, this is Shakespeare's greatest tragedy, comparable to the tragedies of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides (Stefanović 1923: VI). He analyzes the novel by the Italian writer Luigi da Porta, printed in Venice in 1535 and the direct source for *Romeo and Juliet*, and notes that the motive of the death of two star-crossed lovers could be found in an ancient Greek novel by Xenophon of Ephesus from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. This theme reached France with Bandello's famous version and it was via the French adaptation of this story in Belleforest's famous *Histoires tragiques* that it came to England, where it became very popular in various versions. Giving a detailed list of sources for *Hamlet* from the first mention of the Danish prince in *Saxo Grammaticus* (12<sup>th</sup> century) onwards, Stefanović mentions that Hamlet's prototype can be found not only in Roman history with the character of Brutus, but also, by going further back, in the ancient myth 'of the seasons from which so many mythological and general narrative topics of the earlier ages of European literature developed' (Stefanović 1921b: VI). He adds that Simrock had already written that *Hamlet* was the reverse of Orestes. Similarly, when discussing *Twelfth Night*, he notes that John Manningham had mentioned in his diary that this comedy was reminiscent of *The Comedy of Errors* or Plautus's *Menaechmi*, but above all of the Italian comedy *Gli Inganni*. Three Italian comedies of that name existed before Shakespeare, written by Secchia, Gonzaga and Cornaccinia, but older than these and closer to Shakespeare was *Gli Inganni*, produced in Siena in 1531 and printed in Venice in 1537. It gained world fame 'and was staged and translated in Spain, France and England, before Shakespeare began writing his comedy' (Stefanović 1922: VIII). Although the exact origin of this comedy cannot be established, one possible source could be an adaptation of this motive written by the Italian novelist Bandello, whose works were a source for playwrights of Shakespeare's time. Giraldi Centio was another Italian novelist whose novels were a source for dramatists and he adapted this theme in his *Hecatommithi*. Another more significant source for Shakespeare's play is mentioned: the story of Apollonius and Silla by Barnabe Riche, printed in the book *Farewelle to Militarie Profession*.

When discussing Shakespeare's characters, Stefanović writes about their prototypes. I will give two examples. Firstly, the unhappy queen Hermione from *The Winter's Tale* belongs to the group of unjustly persecuted women which, with numerous variants and variations of this character, probably represents the most widely-used theme of the entire early and

late Medieval period, but actually dates back to the ancient classical world (Stefanović 1939b: XXI). Secondly, Autolycus is one of the most daring and most original of all Shakespeare's characters. Stefanović traces his genealogy back to Homer's *Odyssey* and Book 11 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with Ovid becoming popular and accessible in England through Arthur Golding's translation, of which there were several editions (Stefanović 1939b: XXIII-XXXIV).

According to Stefanović, Shakespeare's work is always modern and popular. It is the second most popular literary work after the Bible. Both embody the spirit of good and the spirit of evil, which is maybe the spirit of creation and the same spirit which leads Christ to 'Calvary, and Hamlet to torture himself and Lear to madness, and Macbeth to the witches and Othello to Iago' (Stefanović 1921a: VI). He also emphasizes that *Hamlet*, as the most famous, most studied, most often performed, most comprehensive, and most profound of all Shakespeare's plays, is, apart from the Bible, the work which has been most written about.

### **3) Literary devices and interpretations of Shakespearean drama**

When discussing *Romeo and Juliet*, Svetislav Stefanović notes that this was the play when Shakespeare finally freed himself from the classicist poetics he had followed up to that point by rejecting the unity of character and dramatic activity, the principle of one main character-one main plot. New principles of constructing drama were established in the play, characteristic of Shakespeare and his contemporaries – the *parallelism of plot and character* (for example, the hatred of the Montagues and Capulets and the love of the young Romeo and Juliet) and the *combination of the comic and tragic* (Stefanović 1928: 9). If we compare Shakespeare's plays written in different periods, we can say that in his later period, e.g. in comedies such as *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, he showed a 'combination of realism with the most imaginary elements of folk tales' (Stefanović 1923: VII), while in *King Lear* that combination appears in the form of tragedy. In these plays, there is a *parallelism of the main themes*. In the comedies, two themes take place in parallel and very often they intersect and serve to mirror each other; the same happens in the tragedies *Hamlet* and especially in *King Lear*. In *Lear*, the tragedies of Lear and Gloucester run parallel 'crossing and intersecting each other, not following the life of one, no matter how great a man, an individual, but following the lines and essence of the human being as such

in his social and later on in his cosmic existence' (Stefanović 1923: XIII). In *Twelfth Night* there are also two parallel plots, stylistically independent and separate: Viola's comedy of situations written in verse and Malvolio's comedy of character written in prose. While sources for Viola's story can be found in Italian comedies and novels, the story of Malvolio is considered to be Shakespeare's genuine creation (Stefanović 1922: VIII). As a special device, we can single out a *play-within-a-play*, an example of which is the comedy by the Athenian craftsmen, which is maybe the funniest scene in world dramaturgy (Stefanović 1924: IX). Stefanović compares it with another play-within-a-play – the actor's performance in *Hamlet* which should reveal the crime of Hamlet's uncle. In *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play-within-a-play presents the tragic death of Pyramus and Thisbe and can be understood as an 'unrestrained parody of all that is painful and tragic in human life, a play of imagination or the spirit where the deepest pain of tragic love, the pain that drives the desperate to suicide, is nothing more than a farce' (Stefanović 1924: IX).

Stefanović presents other interpretations of Shakespeare's works. Coleridge, for example, considered *Othello* a tragedy 'of a very primitive man who does not yet differentiate what seems to be from what is reality' (Stefanović 1921a: XI). Dealing with the discourse of primitivism as Coleridge did, Stefanović explains that the play is about a tragic conflict, about a hero who belongs 'to a different, foreign, lower race and who pays a high price for elevating himself' (Stefanović 1921a: XI). Comparing the Italian novella *Moore of Venice* with Shakespeare's *Othello*, he concludes that, in contrast to the Italian novella where people appear as they are in real life, in 'Shakespeare's tragedy the very same people become expressions of all mankind: a whole world can be constructed from each of them; and a world can be fitted into each of them' (Stefanović 1921a: X). Stefanović includes the character of Iago in the ranks of Shakespeare's great analytic characters like Hamlet and Macbeth. He knows life like Hamlet and understands the noble nature of Othello and the unbridled goodness and generosity of Desdemona. While Iago is a stereotype in the Italian novel, in Shakespeare's play 'he has become a grandiose figure thanks to the force of his will and intellect, as if in one figure he has become Hamlet, condemned to be the avenger, and philosopher and hero Macbeth, driven and condemned to be a criminal' (Stefanović 1921a: XIII). It all leads to the conclusion that Shakespeare had out of tragedy made jealousy:



...a gigantic conflict of good and evil and a tragedy of conflict between the primitive and primordial virtues of the human race and refined culture that goes as far as enjoying evil and crime itself and finally a tragedy dealing with the issue of race. Faced with these greater tragedies, the issue of jealousy almost disappears, i.e., in these greater and bigger tragedies it is elevated and sublimed (Stefanović 1921a: XI).

Comparing Goethe's *Faust* with *Othello*, he wrote that unlike Goethe, who strives to elevate man to the world of spirits, Shakespeare seems to lower the whole world of spirits into the human sphere, which is a greater artistic process. The intention to bring the spiritual into the human sphere shows that Shakespeare's drama evolved out of the rituals of the Christian church (Stefanović 1921a: VI).

When discussing those plays dealing with Roman history, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Stefanović sees them as a trilogy. *Coriolanus* deals with the founding of Rome and *Antony and Cleopatra* with Roman decadence and the beginning of its collapse (Stefanović 1939d: XVIII). He stresses that these plays do not only deal with the tragedy of the characters themselves, but are tragedies dealing with 'the great Roman epoch – with human history' (Stefanović 1939d: XVIII). However, they are also 'tragedies of certain great, powerful, spiritual driving forces of human life and history' (Stefanović 1939d: XVIII). Here again we can see the then dominant Eurocentrism, where the history of all mankind is equated with the history of the beginning of Western civilization.

As A. Brandl noted, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare parodies his youthful 'moving, tragic history of *Romeo and Juliet*' (Stefanović 1924: VI). Both plays deal with the devastating power of love. While the lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>4</sup> really do kill themselves, in *Midsummer Night's Dream* the killing takes place on the Athenian craftsmen's stage in 'Pyramus and Thisbe' and is carried out with a stage knife used by actors. By using this comic device, Shakespeare showed the drama of love as the most devastating, tragic force that seizes not only the human world and life on earth, but also the divine and cosmic world. Explaining the infatuation of gods and men with love, Stefanović uses Nietzsche's terminology conceptualizing it as:

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<sup>4</sup> Stefanović thought that from the time of *Romeo and Juliet* up to Goethe's *Werther*, love had not been portrayed in such tragic tones as that in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, thus giving love its expression for centuries to come.

...the contrast between the quiet beauty of the classics and the chaotic beauty of romanticism, between the Apollonian and Dionysian spirit. While passions infatuate the gods and humans, so they talk nonsense, argue, fight, insult each other, become evil – wisdom subdues love and all other passions, and is overfilled with beauty, beauty that flows from Theseus' words and Hippolyta's mouth like the perfect harmony of the Good and the Beautiful (Stefanović 1924: VII).

In addition, Puck, as the mediator between the supernatural world and the world of mortals, gives special power to this Shakespearean play, as well as to the mythical characters of Titania and Oberon. Stefanović thinks that he is one of the most beautiful of all Shakespeare's creations and the most daring match to the ethereal and tragic Ariel from the *Tempest*. As a kind of airy, forest and domestic spirit, Puck is the 'eternal, mild, kind, never bitter always smiling irony of the higher powers that oversees man and his destiny, even the destiny of the gods' (Stefanović 1924: VIII-IX). While many of Shakespeare's characters had earlier versions, Lear's Fool is entirely Shakespeare's creation. He is a human type somewhere between Sancho Panza and Mephisto. Half cynic, half person of common sense, the eternal companion of human tragedy, 'with all the power of realism the chorus of the Greek tragedy has been brought to life' (Stefanović 1923: XVII). One of the great paradoxes of Shakespeare's genius was, explains Stefanović, to have transformed a comic figure from his earlier play into a profoundly tragic one. He compares Lear's Fool with the fool Feste from *Twelfth Night*, who 'is the noblest and most beautiful of Shakespeare's creations in the comedy genre just as Lear's Fool is his highest creation in the genre of tragedy' (Stefanović 1922: XIII). Stefanović pays special attention to the character of Hamlet, which surpasses the artistic representation of an individual because 'he is a type representing all cultured mankind; cultured first of all' (Stefanović 1921b: V), stressing that Hamlet represents a type of culture, i.e. high culture. When Hazlitt listed his character traits, he spoke about a type of man, about a cultured type (Stefanović 1921b: V). According to Stefanović, Faust and Hamlet are parallel works of world literature. They connect the lowest, deepest foundations and the highest peaks of literature and culture with the same artistic expression. Like *Hamlet*, *Faust* also came out of popular stories and legends after previous attempts to adapt and stage it. There was an older *Hamlet* than Shakespeare's and there is a preserved *Hamlet* from popular stories where only the contours of the main characters of his play exist (Stefanović 1921b: VI-VII).

Summarizing the numerous interpretations of Hamlet's character from Coleridge and Goethe up to the time the introductory notes were written, Stefanović groups them into three categories on the basis of which Shakespeare constructs Hamlet's character. The first discusses Hamlet's intellectual heights, the second talks about his paralyzed will, while the third deals with his melancholy that develops into simulated madness (Stefanović 1921b: XI). Hamlet is 'the end of the past and the beginning of something new'. He was the first to feel what is termed after Nietzsche disgust over the misery of human existence; we can find similar thoughts in *Macbeth*. There are numerous copies of *Hamlet* from German romanticism to the Russian Hamlet in Ivan S. Turgenev's stories. Stefanović points out that apart from the Bible, *Hamlet* was and has remained the fundamental book of importance for the spiritual life of the modern world (Stefanović 1921b: XVII). An insight into the religious spirit of modern man cannot be gained without the *Bible*, just as the philosophical and moral thought of modern man cannot be understood without *Hamlet*, even if both ideas are later rejected. He develops his thoughts in the following way:

Hamlet is a great elevation of man above himself, the first great rotation of the value of human life after Christ's, the kind that even Dante, the greatest poet of the Christian epoch, did not do; and which firstly Goethe without the Christian spirit, in the sense of a vain attempt at resurrecting the old Hellenic spirit, and then Nietzsche, similarly in a vain attempt to resurrect the Dionysian spirit, tried to do. In their own way, the first with his aspiration for harmony and the cult of harmony, the second with his aspiration for power and the cult of power, both Goethe and Nietzsche actually tried to elevate some values that were not new, but were those that Hamlet had toppled: the value and cult of harmony and the enjoyment of life and the value and cult of power. We say that Hamlet had toppled these values once and forever. He was the first to feel that harmony was actually the harmony of baseness of general life, human beings and human nature, and what is called enjoyment in life is actually enjoyment in the baseness and transience of all life. He was also the first to feel that the path of power is really the path of evil and crime and not the path of the happiness he is striving for. He elevated the value of the human spirit above these values: he was the first prophet, the first oracle of the gospel of the spirit, none other

than the spirit of knowledge. The greatest aspect which brings man closer to God is the one that Hamlet already knows – the power of knowledge (Stefanović 1921b: XVIII-XIX)

Shakespeare probably liked *Hamlet* more than his other plays because he constructed the whole play carefully as well as certain parts of it and the significant scenes, especially those Hamlet appears in. This is confirmed by the existence of three versions of the text, where Shakespeare painstakingly ‘modeled, corrected, supplemented, changed and improved the text’ of the theme in accordance to his inner thoughts (Stefanović 1921b: XIX). Hamlet is a complicated character with an endless number of nuances. He was the first prototype of the great tragic characters that would appear hundreds of years later. Hamlet was a genius of skepticism to a number of commentators, and a genius of fantasy to others. However, Stefanović thinks that it is crucial to note those of his attributes that give precedence to the spirit, that elevate the spiritual above all other values. That was the belief of a genius, of Hamlet, but above all of Shakespeare, who preaches that ‘only the spiritual is eternal’ (Stefanović 1921b: XXI). Hamlet shows how Shakespeare saw the future and in it ‘the life of mankind, cultured, and although it evolved from past forms lacking culture, it can never go back to these forms and never will’ (Stefanović 1921b: XXI). One phase of mankind ends with him and a new one begins. Hamlet is spirit fighting matter and Stefanović predicts only ‘spirit can overcome matter’ (Stefanović 1921b: XIX).

#### **4) Problems of translation**

One important aspect of Shakespeareology is to show the genealogy of Shakespeare’s themes, narratives, motives and characters and this is what Svetislav Stefanović has done in his texts on Shakespeare’s plays. Following these genealogies, we see how the themes, motives, narratives and characters migrate and are transformed from one context to another by means of translation. Thanks to translations, a text of one culture can become accessible to another. Translations are the foundation on which the literary practice of a language is constructed; they enable and broaden the literary repertoire. Stefanović’s comparative method applied to Shakespeare’s dramas shows the dynamics of cultural transactions that take place through translations.

I will discuss another aspect of translating Shakespeare that Stefanović dealt with at the end of his Foreword to *Macbeth*. Shakespeare's language is dense and complex; thus, each translation is at best only an interpretation. This is reinforced by the fact that some of his plays have reached us in very poor condition, which makes translating them all the more difficult. In his own translation, in order to demonstrate this, Stefanović mentions the translations into other languages of a few verses from Macbeth's famous monologue in which he decides to kill King Duncan. Comparing the French, Italian and German versions of this fragment by Maurice Maeterlinck, Benjamin Laroche, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck and Cino Chiarini, and those from the Serbian, Croatian and Slovene translations by Vladimir Nazor, Oton Župančić and himself, he concluded that not only did each translator express himself differently, but each had a different understanding of the controversial details:

Understanding of the meaning spans extremes that I have cited in my comment: If the (brutal) murder encompassed (as if in a net) all the consequences and thus insured success for itself; or: If the murder excluded, prevented all the consequences – by entangling them in a net, capturing them – and thus with this act ensured success for itself. By one understanding, the murder casts a net on all of its consequences and in that net, in that catch gains success; according to the other understanding, the murder liberates itself from all the consequences because it entwines them in a net and does not allow them to act, but by the very execution of the murder attains success (Stefanović 1939a: XXI).

Apart from the problem of understanding the meaning of the verses and their interpretation, he also warns that much of the word play is not translatable. Stefanović gives an example: the original two verses from the last scene of Act III in *Macbeth*:

Strange things I have heard that will to hand  
Which must be acted ere they can be scann'd

(cited in: Stefanović 1939a: XXII).

Numerous examples of French translations are given in their original French form with the Serbian translation, followed by Stefanović's comment that all translations convey the same meaning, that they all have the same words, but there are incredible differences in the shades of meaning. It

shows how simple verses can be translated and their meaning expressed in many different ways, but ‘not one of the cited versions, apart from retaining the meaning and all the key words, has retained the versification and rhymed verse; thus, it does not express what the original does in the shades of meaning: some say more and some say less, but all in a different way to the original’ (Stefanović 1939a: XXIV). He says that there is a French translation by De Roquigni that stops the tradition of prose translation by translating *Macbeth* in rhymed verse; it is a concise and shorter version, closer to the spirit of the original. He adds that Schlegel’s German translation is actually an adaptation in accordance with the drama conventions of the age he lived in. He also discusses the translations of ‘us – the Yugoslavs’ (Stefanović 1939a: XXIV). He gives examples of how Shakespeare’s problematic verse is worded in his own Serbian translation, written in 1902, then in the Croatian translation by Nazor from 1917 and the 1921 Slovene translation by Župančič. Of his own translation, he says that it is almost literally true to the original. Nazor’s version is most extensive and least true to the original because the translator has omitted the rhyme and changed the rhythm, the form of the verse, because he did not translate from the English original but from an Italian prose translation. Župančič’s is among ‘the most concise’ of our translations and although he exceeds the number of verses in comparison to the English original, he used ‘iambic decasyllables with retained rhyme in verses’ (Stefanović 1939a: XXVIII).<sup>5</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Shakespeare’s works have been present in Eastern Europe since the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the first translations made from German texts. Particularly interesting were the translations of Shakespeare written from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century at a time when European national identities were being formed (Stříbrný 2012: 57-76).

Svetislav Stefanović wrote his texts on William Shakespeare from the perspective of the central, hegemonic position of European literature as

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<sup>5</sup> Vladislava Gordić Petković’s analysis is interesting. She compared how Konstantin Stanišić, Laza Kostić and Svetislav Stefanović translated Shakespeare’s metaphors in regards to: ‘whether they retell the meaning and change the meaning, reveal the original or on the contrary hide it from the reader’ (Gordić-Petković 2006: 8).

world literature, which was standard procedure up to the 1970s. Stefanović treats Shakespeare as a classic, which means that he accepts the assumption that his work is universal and always modern because each new generation recognizes its worth. He emphasizes that his works were created on the basis of existing sources. By using the comparative method, Stefanović shows how themes, motives, narratives and characters migrate from one context to another, which indicates the unity of European literature (regarded as world literature). Translation plays a key role in this process. Stefanović's interpretations have a performative effect: Shakespeare's work became a part of Serbian literary heritage and at the same time Serbian literary culture is shown to be a part of the world system because Shakespeare is one of the most significant classics in that system as the Forewords show in detail.

*Translated by Vanda Perović*

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Дубравка Ђурић

ВИЛИЈАМ ШЕКСПИР У ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЈАМА  
СВЕТИСЛАВА СТЕФАНОВИЋА И СВЕТСКА КЊИЖЕВНОСТ

**Сажетак**

У раду се бавим начином како је песник и преводилац Светислав Стефановић интерпретирао драме Вилијама Шекспира, представљајући га као класика светске књижевности (уз напомену да је тада овај концепт био европоцентричан). Анализирајући како је Шекспир користио различите изворе у грађењу својих драма, Стефановић примењује компаративан приступ и Шекспира пореди са Библијом, грчким и римским ауторима, као и са другим европским писцима попут Гетеа и Достојевског. Стефановићев поступак се може схватити као перформативан, јер показујући да је Шекспир класик светског књижевног сиситема, он модерну српску књижевност симболички укључује у тај систем.

**Кључне речи:** класик, комаративни приступ, превод, светска књижевност, Шекспир, Стефановић

**Zorica Bečanović Nikolić\***

University of Belgrade  
Faculty of Philology  
Belgrade, Serbia

## SHAKESPEARE STUDIES, PHILOSOPHY AND WORLD LITERATURE\*\*

### Abstract

This paper presents introductory considerations of two new books of Shakespearean criticism: *The Demonic. Literature and Experience* by Ewan Fernie and *Free Will. Art and Power on Shakespeare's stage* by Richard Wilson, both published in 2013, and both remarkable for encompassing Shakespeare studies, philosophy and world literature within their respective critical scopes. In *The Demonic*, Shakespeare is considered, along with Milton, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, Kierkegaard and other authors, in the context of demonic transgression, paradoxically close to the mystical knowledge of what is beyond self-experience. This book is an audacious step away from the current literary criticism in so far as it insists on responding to the crucial ontological and ethical questions by passionate spiritual engagement with art, literature and philosophy. In Wilson's *Free Will* the focus is on Shakespeare's demystification of the ruse of power, based on both truthful experience and careful performance of nonentity, which produced a specific form of early modern creative autonomy. *Free Will* is as provocative as *The Demonic* because it mediates, directly or indirectly, awareness of the aporetic nature of weakness and power – of the *weakness of power* and the *power in weakness*.

**Key words:** Shakespeare studies, literature, experience, art, aesthetics, the demonic, freedom, power

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\* E-mail address: z.b.nikolic@fil.bg.ac.rs

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Two important books of Shakespearean Criticism by two outstanding Shakespeare critics delineated the year 2013 and greeted Shakespeare's 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary with sharp, lucid and provocative thinking worthy of the Bard himself. At the very beginning of year 2013, Routledge published *The Demonic. Literature and Experience* by Ewan Fernie, and at its end, Manchester University Press brought out *Free Will. Art and Power on Shakespeare's Stage* by Richard Wilson. Although Shakespeare studies have been saturated with theory, philosophy and comparative criticism of world literature for more than three decades, ever since the postmodern critical approaches to literature were brought into Shakespearean scholarship with deconstruction and new historicism, these two books and their authors distinguish themselves by the particularly wide arrays of the involved philosophical perspectives and exceptionally diverse literary works from non-Anglophone traditions. In these two books, two Shakespearean polyhistorians offer their most exigent, but at the same time most gratifying thinking.

## 1. Observingly distilled

*There is some soul of goodness in things evil  
Would men observingly distil it out*

W. Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 4.1.4-5

**Ewan Fernie, *The Demonic. Literature and Experience* London and New York: Routledge, 2013, 312 p.**

The critical and theoretical trajectory which precedes *The Demonic. Literature and Experience* began with Ewan Fernie's first monograph *Shame in Shakespeare* (2002), and continued with articles and chapters in books on presentism<sup>1</sup> or in the context of the spiritual turn in Shakespeare studies,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ewan Fernie, "Shakespeare and the Prospect of Presentism", *Shakespeare Survey* 59 (2005); "Terrible Action: Recent Criticism and the Questions of Agency", *Shakespeare* 2 (2006); "Action: *Henry V*", *Presentist Shakespeares*, ed. by Hugh Grady and Terrence Hawkes, London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ewan Fernie, ed, *Spiritual Shakespeares*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

editorial and authorial work within the series *Shakespeare Now!*, published by Arden,<sup>3</sup> and collections of essays *Reconceiving the Renaissance: A Critical Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2006) and *Redcrosse: Remaking Religious Poetry for Today's World* (Bloomsbury, 2012). In 2004, Gary Taylor and the Hudson Strode Program selected Fernie as “one of the six most brilliant scholars of Renaissance drama in the world under 40”. Presently, Ewan Fernie is Chair of Shakespeare Studies at the Shakespeare Institute of the University of Birmingham in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The arc which could be drawn between *Shame in Shakespeare* and *The Demonic* would show that in his first book Fernie had already developed a complex, ethically and politically alert enquiry into the spiritual extremes in Shakespeare's works. The intensity of shame as related to two lost traditions – the heroic and the Christian – and as manifested in identity (de)formation and the sense of responsibility in *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* was the focus of his first monograph. In *The Demonic*, however, Fernie's interpretative scope is significantly wider (its span reminds one of the comparative literature criticism and hermeneutics practiced by Erich Auerbach or George Steiner) and his philosophical scrutiny is more extended than in the first book, at the same time daring and exigent, conscientious and refined. *The Demonic* is divided into three major parts: “Demonic negativity”, “Turnabout and dialectic” and “Possession”, with two subdivisions “The agony in possessing” and “The possessed”, thus encompassing the phenomenon of the demonic in literature, philosophy and experience. “Like all important works of criticism,” writes Jonathan Dollimore in the Foreword, “this book unobtrusively involves us in larger metaphysical considerations – about human individuality, social being, and especially our relationship to others and other cultures.” (Fernie 2013: xvii)

The opening chapter “Dark night of the soul” evokes the famous poem *Noche oscura del alma* of St John of the Cross, as well as the corresponding Catholic metaphor for spiritual crisis, but none of the two is explicitly mentioned. It introduces a number of urgent contemporary questions

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Mallin, *Godless Shakespeare*; Amy Scott Douglas, *Shakespeare Inside*; Philip Davis, *Shakespeare Thinking*; Douglas Bruster, *To be or Not to Be*; Henry Turner, *Shakespeare's Double Helix*; Michael Witmore, *Shakespearean Metaphysics*; Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare's Modern Collaborators*; Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*; Philippa Kelly, *The King and I*; David Fuller, *The Life in the Sonnets*; Will McKenzie and Theodora Papadopoulou (ed.), *Shakespeare and I*; Graham Holderness, *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare*; David Schalkwyk, *Hamlet's Dreams*.

regarding literature, experience, aesthetics and ethics, which will be dealt with in hermeneutic focusing on the demonic in the works of Shakespeare and a number of other authors of world literature – Marlowe, Milton, Donne, Dostoevsky, Mann, Melville, James, Huxley, and Coetzee, as well as of theology – St Paul, St Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Martin Luther, Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth, and philosophy – Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Kierkegaard, and Arendt. A distinctive line of Fernie's thought comes out of his response to the writings of Georges Bataille and to Jonathan Dollimore's criticism. Fernie distances his own position from new historical criticism, because the latter obliterates the subjectivity of aesthetic experience. At the same time, he sees theory/philosophy as "abstraction from experience", and political criticism as a position which provides comfortable distance from the painful ambivalences of moral life. It seems as if the editor of the series *Shakespeare Now*, in which the volume *Shakespeare and I* appeared, is confronting us with the urgency of an intense personal response to the 'real presences' of literature. Like George Steiner in *Real Presences*, he discusses Rilke's *Archaic Torso of Apollo* (Steiner 1989: 142-143) as a metaphor of art which can and should change our life. Even without Kafka's well-known image of "an axe which should break the frozen sea within our being", Fernie's arguments that literature matters are as compelling.

Fernie believes that new intellectual and spiritual engagement with art should involve looking – eyes wide open – into the liminal area between life and death, into the controversies of the tragic, into the spheres of transgression and transcendence, and, there within, into – the demonic. With Richard of Gloucester, Macbeth and Iago's famous statement *I am not what I am* (*Othello*, I, 1, 65) at the centre of his attention, Fernie sees Shakespeare as foretelling demonic modernity. God's anchoring self-identification from *Exodus* (3. 14) – *I am that I am* – serves as an essential opposite to the Devil's 'snap', as Fernie puts it, of *I am not what I am*. Along this dangerous and highly elevated tightrope between the two ultimate ontological positions, Fernie exploits his arguments by way of interpreting literary works of art. What happens when the rejection of the self involves the undoing of one's own being, as in *Coriolanus*? The annihilation of the self without physical distraction is tragic, says Fernie, but at the same time, the self without natural and social predicates is deeply stirring in its purity. "As if a man were author of himself and knew no other kin" (*Coriolanus* 5. 3. 36-37) is the starting point for understanding Richard of Gloucester's doing and undoing himself as a king, for Macbeth's as well, and for Lady

Macbeth's 'unsexing' and subsequent auto-destruction. The negative form of life is then, in Fernie's hermeneutic dialogues, considered in Milton's Satan, in Byron's, Shelley's and Blake's works and their echoes in the twenty-first century counter-cultural voices (with a tendency to become the mainstream). Stable identities are rare in modernity and post-modern times and Fernie explores the gnoseological potential of understanding *I am not what I am*. The undermining of the self or its evacuation is approached from a wide range of positions such as existentialism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and a number of postmodern eclectic perspectives.

Demonic literary characters like Macbeth or Stavrogin are personal possibilities of evil. Fernie investigates the negativity turning into mysterious positive power and searches for arguments in theology and philosophy. Contrary to the postulates of the *privatio boni* theory, associated with St Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Fernie accentuates places in both thinkers' works<sup>4</sup> which express, substantiate and perhaps even glamorize evil (Fernie 2013: 14). On his way to articulating the paradoxical (and alluring) indivisibility of good and evil, the author looks for arguments in Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but his methodically responsible discussion pays due attention to Kant's qualification of evil as an ultimate dedication to self-interest, or Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil'.

Some of the instances of the demonic Fernie will understand as merely evil and nothing else, whereas in some cases he will find that negativity carried into the self can produce "an ecstatic openness to others where eros and ethics merge; and where, though it risks possession, the demonic even acquires a touch of sainthood" (Fernie 2013: 17). A polemical dialogue emerges from Fernie's consideration of the equally generally and philosophically entitled book by Terry Eagleton – *On Evil* (2010), and differences become clear: Fernie wants to investigate the *subjective* possibilities of evil, not evil in the conceptual abstraction, but the demonic as a form of life mediated by art. And that he finds in Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Mann, but also in the criticism of another contemporary critic – Jonathan Dollimore. Georges Bataille leads Fernie towards the central argument of this book – that demonic literature "represents a revolutionary challenge to traditional ethical ontology", that

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<sup>4</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 2, 3-4, pp. 28-31; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, trans. Colin Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 85.

good and evil are “mutually intensifying and inextricable” (Ferne 2013: 24-25).

Later on in the book, Karl Jaspers provides more vivid arguments: the demonic is the failure of being, but on the other hand it is an alternative to being. It is vacant and infinite, says Ferne, following Jaspers, *because* it is vacant, it is infinite. It is an abyss of nothingness, says Jaspers, dragging everything into its whirl. Finding stimulation for his own thoughts in Jaspers, Bataille and Dollimore, Ferne is, on the other hand, skeptical towards the tendency to sacralize negativity in various ways in Levinas, Derrida and Žižek, rather than to demonize it. Closest to Bataille, he is interested in the possibility of both sacralizing and demonizing negativity.

In the conclusion of the chapter “Dark night of the soul”, Ferne investigates negativity and darkness in the deity and turns to theologians Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. In Tillich, he finds the demonic without the acknowledged darkness, and in Barth –religion described as an abyss, a terror, where demons appear. Evil, for Barth, is a great negative possibility which, just like true religion, has the power of transforming the world. This offers Ferne a starting point for his interpretations of literature: “Reading Barth, good and evil start to look like opposite sides of what in fact is a Möbius strip, even though nothing can be more important than distinguishing them. Here is an agony of soul to bring us in contact with the terrors of existence that, according to Kierkegaard, moral systems don’t reach.” (Ferne 2013: 31)

The sequence of interpretations begins with Luther and his potent and long lasting contribution to the vivid and influential presence of the Devil in the minds of Protestant believers as well as in the creative imagination of Western literature, from Marlowe to Thomas Mann. Spirituality which involves sinfulness is what Ferne highlights as Luther’s gift to the playwrights of the Elizabethan age, who, in his opinion, dared to go further than Luther, the first of them being Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus*, whose Faust is not only an antitype of Luther, but, in a way, a metaphor of Luther. If one abandons oneself to sin and negation, i.e., gives oneself temporarily to the Devil, and hopes for God’s grace, one is like Faustus, says Ferne, and vulnerable to being damned like him. He stresses that sainthood is perilously close to damnation – hence, the tragic allure of the Faustian figures. In Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, however, there is at least a hint of the possibility of redemption, whereas in *Macbeth*, demonic negation excludes the God of redemption and shows God’s “bloody Stage”.



The questions Fernie detects in *Macbeth* are terrifying: “what if the demonic in fact is the last rung on the ladder, what if this is human personhood at its highest?” but his analysis – minute and painstaking – is persuasive. Macbeth’s ambition to exceed himself is not realized by the mediating power of a Mephistopheles, nor is he a servant to Satan (on the contrary, his servant is Seyton). *Macbeth*, Shakespeare’s ‘Faustus’ as Fernie calls it, emerges as the most radical artistic exposure of the vertiginously destructive heights of human ambition, which doesn’t settle for life humbly accepted as mere givenness. Milton’s Satan, next in Fernie’s focus, is introduced as “Macbeth – raised to cosmological significance”, “the demonic in pure form” (Fernie 2013: 69). Satan is someone who wants something else, and something more than God’s creation. What makes him grand is that he is not self-deceiving; he turns away from “the debt immense of endless gratitude so burdensome” (*Paradise Lost* 4. 53) and steps into uncreated, autonomous selfhood, says Fernie. The two points that Fernie is making are that Satan is the primordial sufferer, the first created being to feel pain, which makes him akin to humanity, and the first being to have sex as known to humans, involving fantasy, perversion and cruelty, since in *Paradise Lost*, demonic sexuality precedes natural sexuality. Thence an analogy: Adam and Eve become fully human with the integrated experience of “demonic desire [...] to be someone else in and through desire”, says Fernie. For the demonic – *being*, as God’s creation, is not enough.

Interpretations of *Macbeth* and *Paradise Lost*, along with those that follow of Dostoevsky’s *Demons* and Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, stand out as a book-within-a-book. Whereas in Fernie’s readings of *Macbeth* and *Paradise Lost*, the accent is mainly on the universal human condition, in Dostoevsky and Mann, symbolic representations of the demonic related to the cultural conditions of the Western world, Europe, Russia, Germany, and Christianity in its Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant variants prove themselves equally, if not more, pertinent. The philosophical import of Fernie’s interpretation of Stavrogin, as the most alluring personification of the demonic in Dostoevsky, a distant and infinitely more intensified kin of Shakespeare’s Hal and Hamlet, lies in the consideration of a state “*beyond identity*”. Not only is he, in his amoral conduct, in his pride and haughtiness, on the other side of the *human* condition of being – understood as humbly accepted givenness fulfilled in love – or, furthermore, on the other side of good and evil, Stavrogin is, along with being recklessly unfaithful to

others and to God, incapable of fidelity to himself, as is well shown by Fernie. His constant self-negation is what, according to Fernie, brings him close to the spiritual self-negation of the saints, and makes him a negative, demonic variant of such an ontological *ek-stasis*. The philosophical aspect of Fernie's reading of *Doctor Faustus* belongs to ethics and aesthetics at the same time, like the philosophical aspects of the novel itself. The demonic is again related to Shakespeare, only more so, in persuasive parallels between early modern recognition of the barrenness of parody and self-subversion in *Love's Labour's Lost*, on the one hand, and in the eponymous modern opera written by Mann's central character, composer Adrian Leverkühn, on the other. The extremes of heat and cold in the music of the German composer, with their infernal and apocalyptic echoes, symbolically reflect the artist's existential aloofness, chill, and absence of love, conditioned by modern Faustus' contract with the Devil in exchange for the groundbreaking artistic expression. The motivational lines of the novel are polyvalent in representing the demonic in modern art, in German Nazism, in Lutheran Christianity and in Western civilization. All these semantic potentials receive adequate elaboration in Fernie's interpretation, along with the major challenge of the novel: the paradox of art, which is at the same time demonic and serene. Leverkühn's new musical system (the metaphorical representation of Schönberg's dodecaphony) is perfectly organized and rational, like a magic square, and Mann uses it as a symbolic parallel to the demonically destructive politics of Nazism. Nevertheless, Mann's modern artist is a cold transgressor, but he is also a self-chosen *pharmakos*. Leverkühn's final composition is his most infernal work, but, oddly enough, it brings the possibility of beauty and of harmony, of an art being on intimate terms with humanity: *auf Du und Du*. The demonic transgressor and demonic transgression bring us to the other side of good and evil once more. Parallel to that and concerning form as a carrier of meanings – demonic transgressions require generic transgressions: neither *Demons* nor *Doctor Faustus* can be seen as exemplary novels in terms of their form. In fact, it is the contrary, just like Goethe's demonic masterpiece *Faust*, especially *Part II*, which is generically indefinable and utterly (diabolically) shape-shifting, as if the artistic structures, and not only the characters, signify – *I am not what I am*.

Part Two brings philosophical support to Fernie's audacious advocacy of the demonic as a paradoxically positive transgression which, like 'the dark night of the soul', can lead to intensely pure spiritual states comparable

*mutatis mutandis* to those of the saints. Kierkegaard comes first with his insight concerning different forms of self-expressive non-conformity in the demonic and the religious. After Kierkegaard's responsibility and intensification of true faith in the demonic aspects of fear and trembling, as a superlative of intensity comes Nietzsche with his affirmative, albeit ambivalent and agonized recognition of the demonic. Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* serves both as a poetic equivalent of Nietzschean enthusiasm for the demonic and an introduction to the ensuing dialectic in the works of Boehme, Schelling and Hegel, where the ecstatic freedom of demonic energy is balanced with the holiness of existential and spiritual peace.

Part Three deals with the relationship of the demonic and desire in the ambit of possession. Again, between Tillich, in whose theology Fernie finds a clear distinction between demonic possession and religious ecstasy, and Barth's understanding of religion as a fearful thing in which human opening to the absolute implies sacrifice, suffering and giving up the rational structure of the mind, the author follows Barth. Upon entering the most disturbing, tormenting and intimate area of being – the paradoxes of demonic possession – be it on the side of the possessing or the possessed, Fernie is determined to give it an openly personal approach. A version of the essay previously published in the collection *Shakespeare and I* (McKenzie and Papadopoulou, eds. 2012: 19-39) entitled "Mea culpa", now appears under the title "Angelo" and elucidates the "sin in loving virtue" of Shakespeare's Angelo from *Measure for Measure* as demonic profanation dependent on deep awareness of the Good. Fernie manages to interweave a critical reading of the play with an ethical analysis, focusing not only on the characters of the play: Angelo and Isabella, but on his very own self as well, thus powerfully drawing the readers into a whirlpool of self-examination. As in a natural vortex, our attention is whirled to the bottom of the problem and, after a memorable experience, released back to the academic decorum of reading literary criticism. An impressive accomplishment!

The ethical transgression inherent in possession is then examined in Melville's Claggart from *Billy Budd*, in James's Miss Jessel from *The Turn of the Screw*, and in a thrilling analysis of Yeats' *Leda*, with a double focus on Leda's human subjectivity of subjection and on the indifferent possession of the supernatural rapist Zeus. The closing counterpoint of this section is both a disturbing and comforting consideration of Christ as possessor in the contemporary novel *The Sparrow*, by Mary Doria Russell, and in Christian authors such as St John of the Cross and St John Chrysostom.

The final section of the book, at the other end of the phenomenon of possession, deals with the radical receptivity of the possessed. The third Shakespearean climax of this book, after *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure*, comes with the reading of *King Lear* focused on Poor Tom – not Poor Tom as Edgar’s ‘fraudulent, histrionic performance’ from Greenblatt’s famous essay “Shakespeare and the Exorcists” (Greenblatt 1988: 127), and not Edgar of ‘cheerful and confident endurance’, as described by Bradley (Bradley 1920: 306), but Poor Tom as Edgar’s demon-afflicted, utterly deprived, egoless alter ego. Fernie asserts that Poor Tom’s voice is more alive and more truthful than Edgar’s sane clichés. The multifarious demons possessing Poor Tom embody “the existential recognition that, far from being masters of our own fate, we are, in multitudinous ways, mastered by them,” claims Fernie (2013: 227). The subjectivity of subjection in this instance involves giving one’s self to many possessors. Like the possessed man from St Mark’s Gospel who says ‘My name is Legion: for we are many’ (Mark, 5. 2), Poor Tom is also – many, *he is not what he is*, but oddly enough, he is, according to Lear, “the thing itself” (*King Lear*, 3,4, 104), and according to Bradley, “in the secret of things” (Bradley 1920: 289). The painful experience of unwilling (or willing) susceptibility and openness, of spiritual nakedness is, stresses Fernie, inseparable from a fully experienced life. The radical example of Poor Tom prompts the author to juxtapose his interpretation with the Levinasian theory of the primacy of the Other, and to juxtapose, once more, the demonic and the sainthood, on the common ground of self-abandon which, in both cases, “extends into mystical knowledge of what is beyond self-experience”. (Fernie 2013: 236)

Two more literary texts – Huxley’s *The Devils of Loudon* and J. M. Coetzee’s *The Master of Petersburg* – are paralleled with two personally related experiences of possession unmediated by art. As suggested in the subtitle: *Literature and Experience*, the book ends with a thoroughly disturbing personal record of the experience of possession by Daniel Paul Schreber, famous for his psychiatric case history. The artistically unmediated experience of ‘real’ spiritual nakedness makes the ending bitterly memorable and irrevocably unsettling.

Throughout the book, just as in the final section, which ties up various lines of intellectual elaboration of the demonic, one feels the presence of a self-subverting undercurrent reminder not to place too much confidence in intellectual formulas, but to feel disturbed by literature and responsible to experience. *The Demonic* seems to have been written with

the Kierkegaardian intention to keep “the wound of negativity” open and with a refusal to derive “positive, cozy joy from life”. Thus, the author lets the two closing lines of the book create lingering awe for the readers: “The most gruesome time of my life was the most holy time of my life.” and “I am not what I am.”

## 2. The Aesthetics of Freedom

**Richard Wilson, *Free Will: Art and Power on Shakespeare's Stage*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013.**

Richard Wilson's intellectual and critical atlas is a complex diagram which offers a creative and provocative consideration of several theoretical fields. In *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority* (1993), he positioned himself as a new historicist and defined his methodology as a Foucauldian dialogue between theory and archives; this was followed by *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in theatre, religion and resistance* (2004), which approached Shakespeare's reticence regarding religious questions in the manner of postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion, sensitive to “the unsaid/unwritten”, and the dynamic interchange with Derrida, Foucault, Bourdieu, Deleuze, Lacan, Levinas, Hélène Cixous in *Shakespeare in French Theory: King of Shadows* (2007). In his latest book *Free Will: Art and Power on Shakespeare's Stage* (2013), Wilson expands the demanding theoretical horizon of his works towards Kant's and Adorno's aesthetics, the intricacies of the political theology of Ernst Kantorowitz and Carl Schmitt, and the political and cultural theory of Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Rancière. From the initial research of the material conditions of Shakespearean authority in *Will Power*, via his detailed inquiry into the “resistance to resistance” and “*politique* respect for the secrecy of the human heart” of *Secret Shakespeare*, Richard Wilson has arrived at the point from where he offers an insight into the paradoxical nature of the “power of weakness” on the one hand and the “weakness of power” on the other. In *Free Will*, the readers will find a thorough, refined and precisely developed analysis of the artist's desire for “powerful powerlessness”, the power in self-irony, passivity and creative unselfing.

Having chosen to reiterate Shakespearean expressions of freedom in plays and poems, with relevant emphases on artistic and political stances, Richard Wilson composes his book by concentrating on the most intriguing semantic knots. In his approach to Shakespeare's dual role as player and playwright, he draws on theories concerned with the meaning derived from both personal presence and symbolic representation. Leaving aside what he calls "the current *doxa* of Shakespeare as the exemplar of either sacred monarchy or monarchical selfhood", he conducts his line of reasoning by showing that Shakespeare's plays untie freedom from royalty and "dismantle sovereignty in all its forms". Richard Wilson's introduction of Simone Weil into the discussion of the Shakespearean subject – real playwright, real actor, fictional king, fictional servant, real king and real servant – is illuminating and thought-provoking. "Instead of a 'subject position', Shakespeare seems [...] to fall back to what might be better termed an *abject position*," says Wilson and introduces Simone Weil's conviction that the only way into truth is through one's own annihilation and utter humiliation. Throughout the book, the author detects "politics of presence" and "poetics of representation", showing the rivalry of state and stage in Shakespearean culture. The convolution of dramatic art Wilson concentrates upon consists of the controversial position of "our bending author" – from the epilogue of *Henry V* and numerous other instances – whose ironic resistance depends upon restraint. The straightforward opposition to absolutism, a characteristic of Isaiah Berlin's concept of negative liberty, in Wilson's view, doesn't answer for Shakespeare's authorial attitude. On the contrary, by assuming the predetermined subservient role of the artist, which made so many critics see him as a supporter of absolutism, Shakespeare, "ever the post-structuralist *avant la lettre*", in Wilson's words, knew that entry into the symbolic order is a form of castration. He demystified the ruse of power by the careful performance of nonentity, which, paradoxically, produced a specific form of early modern creative autonomy.

Drawing on Adorno's opinion developed in *Aesthetic Theory* that the social aspect of art is not its manifest position taking, but its immanent advance against society, performed by its form, not by any recognizable social content, Wilson sees Shakespeare as an author who could "hold the mirror up to nature", or "show virtue her own feature", or "scorn her own image" in a far more superior way than Hamlet could have envisioned at all. Later in the book, Wilson traces Pierre Bourdieu's argument that

the self-reflexivity of art is liberating and considers Shakespeare's critical thinking in relation to both political and artistic sovereignty.

Wilson develops Foucault's concept of inverted sovereignty, its infamy and its Ubu-esque strategies, Derrida's notion of *iterabilité* as repetition that at the same time reiterates and brings change, Kierkegaard's insight that no repetition was possible in theatre, and connects them to Judith Butler's psychoanalytic model of foreclosure as the formation of a subject in subordination. One of the contentions of this book is that Shakespeare discovered the Erasmian topos of "the great stage of fools", present in *King Lear* and elsewhere in Shakespeare's works *passim*, as a pattern of showing the dialectical dynamics of determinism on the one hand, and free will on the other. The symbolic order that creates a subject is the same one which the subject opposes. This line of argument brings Wilson to Ernst Kantorowitz and the epochal transfer of sovereignty from ruler to poet, parallel not only in the inherent autonomy, but also in the ritual humiliation – as the symbolic integration of the weakness of power – to which kings were obliged before coronation, and the always already humiliated position of the artist as servant. *Free Will*, according to its author, "is thus a book about the creaturely echo-effect with which Shakespeare strove to minimize the sovereignty of his own writing, and generated a world of difference that exceeds the context of its enunciation not by contradicting, but by answering power back in its own words." (Wilson 2013: 10) Reiteration in the Derridean sense deconstructs and disarticulates the system. Via Derrida, Wilson draws our attention to the paradox of the artistic desire for powerful powerlessness. Ironic perspective and punning are at the heart of it: "How every fool can play upon the word!" Shakespeare, therefore, emerges from *Free Will* as an auto-ironic, auto-reflexive author, both autonomous and subdued to power, involved in distinguishing representation from presence, and language and art from power, all the time being aware of their indivisibility, which Wilson sees as tragic.

The title of the first chapter "Picture of Nobody" recalls the Caliban-Stephano-Trinculo scene from *The Tempest* (3, 2) and Wilson employs its echo as a background on which he develops the thesis that Shakespeare must have been, throughout his life, involved in creating a willed authorial nonentity. Concepts such as pre-Kantian interested disinterestedness, active passivity, dramatics of attention, formula of potentiality, fulfillment in non-fulfillment, epochal divestment of majesty, paperless person, power of attendance and creative unselfing arise in their full complexity

from Wilson's pulsating analyses of Kant, Derrida, Agamben, Lyotard, Kantorowitz, Bataille, and Eliot. Throughout, Richard Wilson is ever attentive to the authorial voices of contemporary Shakespeare scholarship and never misses an occasion to intensify the polyphonic composition of his own text by paying attention to his fellow Shakespeareans' theses regarding the matter he is dealing with (Greenblatt, Lupton, Hawkes, Dollimore, Sinfield, Barker, Belsey, and Fernie). Diverse dimensions of Shakespeare's self-suppressing reticence are approached in this manner: from the introductory scrutiny of his controversial comportment in the Welcombe and Mountjoy cases via numerous lines which express the player's and playwright's self-effacing position, to the liberating refusal of authorial sovereignty that Richard Wilson consequently conceptualizes.

The second chapter "Welsh Roots" takes readers into the dim light of the rabbit-duck type contentious historical understanding of Welsh-English and English-Welsh cultural and political relations, providing them with a post postcolonial inversion of the Tudor state and its dignitaries as Welsh colonizers of England. The new historicist 'thick description' of the introduction flows into a sharp interpretation of the education parody in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* bringing together a multilayered discussion with Terence Hawkes, George Bataille, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Rancière and other interlocutors. Monthly Python's perspective is one of the viewpoints considered as well. In the next chapter "O World", the focus widens towards a more general outlook and encompasses the aesthetic aspects of the "Wooden O" in 1599, at the newly-opened Globe theatre, along with the political aspects of the fictive Roman world from the inauguration play *Julius Caesar* and the intrusions of real Elizabethan politics. The German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt is addressed here, as elsewhere throughout *Free Will*, for the constructive argument regarding the disturbingly unresolved tension between Shakespearean yearning towards the aesthetic purity of a play and the traumatic irruption of real history and politics into the art of theatre. In search of the aesthetics of Shakespeare's freedom and the freedom of the aesthetic, Wilson knowingly insists on conversing with Schmitt, who wouldn't accept the conceptual difference of theatre, forum and the pulpit, but would, nevertheless, concede that Shakespeare represented history as a ground to be negated, which, in certain aspects at least, impels the poetic and theatrical transpositions of the historical and political echoes and repetitions towards the interested disinterestedness of the aesthetic.



In the chapter “Denmark’s a prison”, the sovereignty of art is under scrutiny in the context of close affiliation with the utterly aestheticised absolutism of the Danish King Christian IV. The lively narrated accounts of John Dowland at the court of King Christian and the touring English theatre companies at the courts of Germany and Netherlands flow into a carefully carried out analysis of *Hamlet* in the light of King James’ relations with Queen Anne’s brother Christian IV and the Oldenburg dynasty. Read from such a perspective, *Hamlet* as “a tragedy about a system that so dangerously combines the barbaric and Baroque” (Wilson 2013: 212), appears as a daring provocation. Wilson sees Shakespeare as “skating on very thin ice”, his symbolically mediated political allusions and premonitions as mad impertinence. Along with an overview of the preceding criticism concerning the meta-theatrical significance of Hamlet’s explicit and Shakespeare’s implicit poetics of theatre, Wilson brings up Montrose’s expression ‘meta-theatrical tragedy of state’, which in his interpretation becomes a “tragedy of non-cooperation”, and winds the text up with a playful quotation from another Dane – Hans Christian Andersen and *The Emperor’s New Clothes*.

In peeling the onion of the stage and state dynamics, Wilson reaches its very core without residue in a far-reaching interpretation of *King Lear* entitled “Great stage of fools: *King Lear* and the King’s Men”. Structural and symbolic analogies with the *Cinderella*-type motives, tales and myths, folkloric or artistic, ascertain the elemental base of *King Lear* so as to discern beneath it not only desacralized royal sovereignty but a specific depersonalization of the playwright’s work. The introduction of Kafka’s story “The Hunger Artist” and Beckett’s poetics symbolically and conceptually support Wilson’s hermeneutic turn towards the negative aesthetics. *King Lear*, according to Wilson, touches upon symbolic self-castration, artistic *askesis* comparable to the anoretic passive aggression directed against the surrounding reality, the art of failure and the negative absolutism of the autonomous artwork. In Adorno’s analysis of the modernist minimalism of the Dadaist “da-da”, Wilson finds confirmation for the radical negative aesthetic potential of the destitution, divestment, linguistic abstraction and semantics of the absurd in *King Lear*. The Shakespeare of *King Lear*, in Wilson’s view, is by no means a flattering King’s man, profiting from his privileged official position as appointed royal artist, but, on the contrary, a profound, albeit skillfully disguised, provocateur who symbolically deconsecrates the King and deconstructs the abject position of the artist at the same time.

Wilson's interpretation of Shakespeare's implicit focus on the Stuart dynasty requires close and exacting attention in the chapter on *Macbeth* entitled "Double trouble". The mirror from the masque that the Witches set up for Macbeth, carried by the eighth ruler of the same dynasty, reflects rulers with twofold balls and triple scepters, usually interpreted as James VI of Scotland and I of England and perhaps his brother-in-law Christian IV as well. Nevertheless, when Richard Wilson reminds his readers that the eighth Stuart ruler was James' mother Mary Queen of Scots, the meaning suddenly becomes deeply controversial: was Shakespeare, instead of adulation, symbolically mediating – with artistic skill, ruse, freedom and audacity – the accusation of a son who was, more or less indirectly, a traitor to his own mother? Less than a hundred lines later, in the very next scene, Macduff's son, Richard Wilson reminds us, poses a crucial question "What is a traitor?" Interdisciplinary arches are a distinctive trait of Wilson's criticism, and they're always suitably placed. One can hardly see a better instance for a comparative analysis of Caravaggio's *Medusa* painted for the Medici and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* played for James Stuart in the same year – 1606. These contemporaneous works which connect Baroque and barbarity serve as an outline for a dialectically ramified argument regarding the perception of the authorized and unauthorized, 'good' and 'bad' violence. The arguments progress from Schmitt's emphasis on *theology* to Kantorowitz's emphasis on *political* in *political theology*, from Benjamin's critique of violence to Derrida's deconstructive philosophy and in the end lead the reader to the conclusion that *Macbeth* expresses a refusal of the spiritually mystified violence invested in the modern state.

In the continuation of the study dealing with the anxiety of the playwright whose art was not only intended for the general theatre audience, but also a commanded performance at the absolutist court, Wilson investigates an anamorphic reversal in *Anthony and Cleopatra*. The seventh chapter "Your crown's awry" again refers to the poetics of Baroque painting, adjacent to the poetics of Stuart theatre masque. The painter in focus now is Velázquez and the painting is *Las Meninas*, famous for the simultaneous representation of at least three perspectives: that of the central characters, the princess and her maids of honour, that of the hidden royal couple, reflected in a looking glass, and that of the painter, offered to the spectator as a peculiar exercise of the aesthetics of freedom. Velázquez's equally famous painting *Las Hilanderas*, with equally delicate lingering tension between the absolutist power and the power of art, is

another central analogy in this chapter. Wilson's innovative contribution to discussions concerning visual and anamorphic semantics of the play brings into focus the wryness of perspective vision, as well as the ironic position of the artist's own viewpoint and of the democratic gaze. The given arguments bring to mind Friedrich Schlegel's definition of irony as a permanent parabasis, the indispensable element of the Attic Old Comedy, primarily Aristophanes', in which the chorus comments on the action, and provides a special – knowing – perspective to the audience. Wilson begins with E. H. Gombrich's thesis that the idea of art in which the painter's skill of suggestion matches the public's skill in taking hints can be recognized in Antony's words on the polymorphic transformations of a cloud (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4, 14, 3-8). His elaborate debate, duly involving all the relevant authors' viewpoints concerning the play of perspectives, the phenomenon of anamorphosis, the aspects of Mannerism and Baroque in the art of painting and in the Jacobean theatre, ends with the contention that "a lower place" of the *waiting* characters in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *mutatis mutandis* that of actors, playwrights, artists, physically close to power, but socially and politically weak, is characterized by the uncanny power of weakness.

The *finale* of the *Free Will* symphony deals with *Coriolanus*, the "unperformable play about unperformability". Related to Wilson's two previous texts, "Against the Grain: Representing the Market in *Coriolanus*" from *Will Power* and "The Management of Mirth: Shakespeare via Bourdieu" from *Marxist Shakespeares* (Howard and Shershow, eds. 2001: 159-177), this study penetrates into both the metaphoric and metonymic representation of convoluted relationships between artists and the commercial public, on the one hand, and aristocratic patrons, on the other. A careful deciphering of Shakespeare's hypothetical code of the autonomy of art, disguised in the tragic fate of the Roman general who changes sides in search of a dignified position for his own valour, introduces the specific standpoints of Jürgen Habermas and Pierre Bourdieu. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* by the German philosopher corresponds with historical reports of the social dynamics at London playhouses in the early modern age. Habermas traces the roots of art as a commodity to the playhouse in which everyone had equal claim to judge and Wilson traces Shakespeare's metaphoric expressions of consumer demand in histories and Roman plays, thus shedding light on the birth of the modern cultural public sphere in which the urban audience becomes a sovereign of a consumer society.

Bourdieu's assertions from *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* fulfill Wilson's theoretical framework by illuminating the fact that the artists who allege creative freedom in any cultural system are always confronted with a double bind of *economic demand* and *political command*. When interpreting *Coriolanus* as Shakespeare's metaphoric/metonymic expression of the aesthetic notion of interested disinterestedness, art-for-art's-sake represented as valour-for-valour's-sake, Wilson widens the picture towards a comparative and diachronic understanding of the works of Flaubert and Baudelaire dealing with the same problem. In between the public sphere and the demands of the powerful patrons, in Shakespeare's case, the Herbert family (brothers William and Philip, with their respective lists of aristocratic titles, and their mother Mary, Countess of Pembroke, Sir Philip Sidney's sister), stands a writer and player, who, like the general he created, faces the complex issue of self-authorship ("As if a man were author of himself/ And knew no other kin" (*Coriolanus* 5, 3, 35-37). The play which was never presented on the public stage, but only for the Herbert patrons and their guests, is, according to Stanley Cavell, Shakespeare's defence of poetry. Richard Wilson reads it as the most noncompliant rejection of feudal livery and an assertion of freedom adroitly conveyed by a playwright aware of the tension between the medieval concept of sovereignty and the modern royalty of literary subject.

The closing movement of Richard Wilson's remarkable composition winds up the preceding discussions – often cynically demystifying and involving *tutti* of postmodern theory, as well as Karl Schmitt and Ernst Kantorowitz, Adorno and Habermas – with the sparkling but serene *andante* of the Epilogue entitled: "No Sovereignty: Shakespeare's voyage to Greece". Elaborate scrutiny of both political and artistic sovereignty and their interactive tensions, in historical reality and in dramatic fiction, has prepared readers for Shakespeare's utopian intimations of the late plays, *As You Like It* and some of the *Sonnets*. Gonzalo's famous utopian fantasy from *The Tempest* is harshly undermined and deconstructed in the play itself. Most of the plays discussed, as well as the romances, confirm Shakespeare's awareness of what Agamben calls "the dark mystery of the sovereign power", and his readiness to show, from play to play, princes who beg for mercy. *The Sonnets* convey the idea of the poet as a superior – sovereign – creator, but the poet of *The Sonnets* is "tongue-tied Will" as well. Sovereignty and No Sovereignty. The Epilogue contains a 'study-within-a-study' on utopia, with Fredrick Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Marx-

via-Derrida, and Marx-via-Jameson, Ernst Bloch, Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Hélène Cixous, and Slavoj Žižek, as Wilson's co-locutors, along with the presentist Shakespeareans: Ewan Fernie and Hugh Grady. Passages with lively responses to the voices of Stephen Greenblatt, Julia Lupton, Gary Taylor, David Norbrook, Simon Palfrey, and Kiernan Ryan confirm the impression one has throughout this book, that Wilson always considers the current issues in Shakespeare studies relevant for his own inquiry, and never leaves them without recognition or creative dialogical expansion.

'No Sovereignty' emerges in the Epilogue from the Golden Age, Arcadian and Utopian trans-temporal and symbolically powerful influences, and from Pauline Christianity, here approached via Alain Badiou's postmodern interpretation, from Heidegger's ultimate disavowal of the sovereignty of all decision making, or Hannah Arendt's inference that renounced sovereignty is a condition for freedom. *Free Will* shows Shakespeare's art as free because it mediates, directly or indirectly, an awareness of the aporetic nature of weakness and power, of the *weakness of power* and the *power in weakness*. At the very end of the *Introduction*, Wilson quotes David Reiff's meditation on Susan Sontag's death and his admiration for a writer who can express human unimportance and remain compassionate, who can take in the real measure of one's own insignificance. Immediately after that, Wilson mentions the "voluntary servitude" of Étienne de la Boétie, Montaigne's friend, and one of the Renaissance thinkers to whom, along with Montaigne and Shakespeare, the ability Reiff admires can be attributed. At the very end of his Epilogue, symmetrically, Wilson highlights the parallel between the *askesis* of modern art and Shakespearean weakness as an assertion of sovereign freedom, which he calls "an *aporia* that literally cries out for endless deconstruction".

Like Cecil Grayson, who compared reading *The King's Two Bodies* to deciphering a kaleidoscope, the reader of *Free Will* reaches the end of the book with the impression that following Wilson's hermeneutic journey has been a challenging task indeed. Nevertheless, virtually every step of this subtle line of reasoning, leading to 'No Sovereignty' as an endlessly deconstructive and paradoxical source of freedom, provides, as with all Wilson's previous books, indelible intellectual gratification and reward.

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Зорица Бечановић Николић

ПРОУЧАВАЊЕ ШЕКСПИРА, ФИЛОЗОФИЈА  
И СВЕТСКА КЊИЖЕВНОСТ

**Сажетак**

Овај рад представља уводна критичка разматрања у вези са две нове књиге из области савремених проучавања Шекспира. Реч је о студији Јуана Фернија *Демонско у књижевности и искуству* (2013) и студији Ричарда Вилсона *Слободни Вил или слобода воље. Уметност и моћ на Шекспировој позорници* (2013). Обе књиге истичу се свеобухватним повезивањем проучавања Шекспира, филозофије и светске књижевности. У студији Јуана Фернија, Шекспирово стваралаштво је, упоредо с делима Милтона, Достојевског, Томаса Мана, Кјеркегора и других аутора, сагледано у контексту демонске трансгресије, која је, парадоксално, блиска и аналогна мистичком познању надискуствене сфере. У студији *Слободни Вил или слобода воље*, Ричард Вилсон се бави односом уметности и политичке моћи. Ка демистификацији тог односа води разумевање искуства и пажљивог приказивања непризнатог уметничког (не)бића, које је ауторима раног модерног доба, парадоксално, обезбедило посебну врсту стваралачке аутономије. У компаративном сагледавању две студије, овај рад приказује и преиспитује књижевно-херменеутичке, филозофске и компаратистичке домете савремене шекспирологије.

**Кључне речи:** Проучавање Шекспира, књижевност, искуство, уметност, естетика, демонско, слобода, моћ





**Danica Igrutinović\***  
University Singidunum  
Faculty for Media and Communications  
Belgrade, Serbia

## **NOTHING OF WOMAN: THE FEMININE VOID OF MATTER IN SHAKESPEARE**

### **Abstract**

Studying the metaphysics of Renaissance Neoplatonism might arguably help throw into sharper relief some of the more haunting figures in Shakespeare's work. Referring to the Neoplatonic concept of matter, this paper attempts to expand and further illuminate the figure that Philippa Berry has termed "Shakespeare's tragic O's" (2002) by showing it to connect multiple images of matter as the maternal/infernal void. In Shakespeare's darker plays, the "O" as feminine prime matter can figure as a locus for the encounter with primordial matter, the womb/tomb that (en)matters and thus kills, "hell" and "nothing" that can indicate both unformed matter and the vaginal orifice, and the nothing – the 0 – out of which everything is made.

**Key words:** Renaissance Neoplatonism, matter, the maternal, nothing, O

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\* E-mail address: danica.igrutinovic@fmk.edu.rs

## 1. Matter in Renaissance Neoplatonism

By the sixteenth century, under the widespread influence of Marsilio Ficino's writings and his Florentine Academy, modeled on Plato's, Platonism had become an extremely important aspect of popular culture and had an "almost ubiquitous presence" throughout Europe. (Kristeller 1961: 61) This, significantly, included England – especially its poets. Many of Ficino's theories, Jayne declares, "were in the intellectual atmosphere and could have reached England in a number of indirect ways," but there are also those English poets who were demonstrably directly impacted by Ficino's writings. There are, for instance, in Spenser's verses "verbatim quotations and sequences of ideas unquestionably taken directly from Ficino," (Jayne 1952: 217) and other poets who can be shown to have actually read Ficino include Raleigh, Burton, and Chapman (Jayne 1952: 238). Other poets and thinkers had received Ficino's ideas via other sources, mostly poetic, resulting in a profusion of thought closely reflecting his own, and justifying his reputation as the "fountainhead" of Platonism in the English Renaissance (Jayne 1952: 222).

We have in the past two decades, owing to the recently appearing translations of Ficino's works into English, witnessed a revival of interest in the phenomenon known as Renaissance Neoplatonism. Although not unknown to Shakespearologists, Renaissance Neoplatonism has long been neglected in interpretations of Shakespeare's works – especially the "darker" ones – as an overly marginal, eccentric, or optimistic concoction of notions on the harmony of the spheres. A deeper reading of Ficino's texts, as well as those of other Renaissance Neoplatonists and their ancient sources, offers an invaluable insight into the "dark" sides of both Neoplatonism and Shakespeare's "darker" plays.

Studying the inherently poetic and frequently paradoxical metaphysics of (Renaissance) Neoplatonism helps put into relief some of the more haunting figures in Shakespeare's work. A consistently gendered and hierarchized spirit/matter dichotomy is firmly at the basis of this metaphysics: spirit is forming, rational, light, and constructed as masculine, whereas matter is chaotic, irrational, dark, and constructed as feminine. The cosmos is a hierarchical combination of the two: at its top is the pure spirit of God, followed by a series of lower spheres, each reflecting, albeit imperfectly, the harmony of the one immediately above it, and each increasingly material (Lauster 2002: 48). The bottommost

rung on this ladder is the hell of primordial matter. That hell is no more – or less – than being, banished into the realm of the unformed elements, was a common tenet of Renaissance Neoplatonism, and advocated most famously by Paracelsus (Murray 1968: 284).

This infernal feminine matter is the unavoidable basis of all being that is, paradoxically, best avoided. In his highly influential *De Amore*, in which his ideas on love and beauty that in fact passed for “Platonism” in English Renaissance poetry are promulgated (Jayne 1952: 238), Ficino urges the (invariably) male subject to become purified via an erotic desire for beautiful (almost invariably) male figures (though personifying heavenly Venus, liberating spirit from the shackles of matter) which inspire Platonic ascent towards the pristine purity of spirit that is reflected in their beauty. In the proliferation of *trattati d’amore* that followed in the wake of Ficino’s (a phenomenon which has since become known as “Renaissance love theory”) these figures could also be female – provided they be chaste to the point of cruelty (Hanegraaff 2008: 175). Conversely, Ficino laments, *carnal* female figures (personifications of his vulgar Venus, trapping sparks of spirit in mortal bodies) will drag the lustful lover on a descent towards the more material spheres and, finally, tragically, right into the abyss that is unformed prime matter (Kodera 2002: 289).

Masculine spirit can thus descend to the very bottom of feminine prime matter and find in it nothing other than hell. The mythical figure that best personifies the hell of feminine prime matter would have to be Hecate. Queen of the daimons and first among the witches, personifying all the powers of lower nature, Hecate is, interestingly enough, in Neoplatonic thought firmly *identified* with matter itself. Shaw explicitly elucidates that, for Neoplatonists, Hecate does not merely *preside* over matter or have a symbolic *association* with matter – she *is* matter (Shaw 1995: 41).

The infernal feminine of Neoplatonism thus not only leads to and governs this dark realm, she is identified with it. Unlike the female anagogic figures that merely mirror or reflect the pristine purity of the (male) spirit they lead their (male) adorers towards, the seductress who causes the male hero to fall is also the *place* to which he falls. She is the thing itself, and the thing itself will transpire to be a nothing – a void. This void, as I hope to show, is represented in Shakespeare’s work with circular, O-shaped figures, which is significant in multiple ways, and seems to be inextricably associated with female reproductive orifices – as is Neoplatonic matter itself.

## 2. O: facing the “oomb”

Several critics have noticed the significance of what Berry, perhaps most illuminatingly, terms “Shakespeare’s tragic O’s.” Shakespeare’s O’s, she notes, frequently appearing in conjunction with his lethal and whorish queens/queans, elide these infernal female figures with “bodily openings or dilations that are similarly amoral,” connecting the “gynaphobic” with the “reginaphobic” strand in his tragedies (Berry 2002: 50). This figure can, I hope, be expanded and further illuminated by referring to the Neoplatonic concept of matter.

The O which heroes, defeated by the infernal feminine figures, die with on their lips is simultaneously the O of the vaginal orifice, but it is also the womb/tomb – Joyce’s brilliantly coined “oomb” – of Mother Earth, the O of dark feminine prime matter to which every Neoplatonic descent ultimately leads. More than just a vowel uttered by the gynaphobic male hero, this O also presents itself visually on Shakespeare’s stage as the locus for an encounter with the hell of unformed matter.

The first – and also the most elaborate and explicit – appearance of an actual O on Shakespeare’s stage is Tamora’s infernal pit, with which the dark queen of Rome is identified in multiple ways. She is the first to mention it, and does a fair job of describing both its surroundings and the hole itself:

A barren detested vale you see it is,  
The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,  
Overcome with moss and baleful mistletoe;  
Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds,  
Unless the mighty owl or fatal raven;  
And when they show’d me this abhorred pit,  
They told me, here, at dead time of the night,  
A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,  
Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,  
Would make such fearful and confused cries,  
As any mortal body hearing it  
Should straight fall mad, or else die suddenly.  
(*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 93-104)

The pit is a fascinating amalgam of the monstrously sterile (barren vale) and the monstrously fertile (hissing snakes and swelling toads) and thus clearly represents matter itself, which is in Neoplatonic thought paradoxically both disgustingly fecund – teeming and oozing with misshapen potentialities – and unable to create actual life without the truly vital spirit. The delicious ambiguity of “here nothing breeds” must be especially emphasized, as it can denote both the utter sterility and the uber-fertility of the nothingness of malformed dark prime matter, untouched by the forming, life-infusing sun.

Attributes are added to the image of the pit when Martius falls into it, and Quintus eloquently muses on it before attempting to aid his brother:

What, art thou fallen? What subtle hole is this,  
Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briars,  
Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood  
As fresh as morning dew distill'd on flowers?  
A very fatal place it seems to me.  
(*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 198-202)

Gordon Williams classifies the circular hole of Tamora's pit under “O” in his *Glossary of Shakespeare's sexual language* and explains both as meaning “vagina,” elucidating that “briars” were a common appellation for pubic hair (Williams 1997). O as the vagina is also “the swallowing womb” of “this deep pit, poor Bassianus' grave” (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 239-240). The womb is, of course, simultaneously the tomb.

This tomb is also a mouth that devours all: the “detested, dark, blood-drinking pit” (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 224) and “this fell devouring receptacle” which is as “hateful as [Cocytus'] misty mouth” (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 235-236). Hades represented as a “hell-mouth,” equipped to emit smoke, it should be noted here, was a standard stage-property of Renaissance theater. The devouring “receptacle” – a word reminiscent of Plato's term for the matrix of the world – is also hell, another term for the vagina; and thus the circle of O closes.

Kahn explains that Tamora's explicit “self-association with hell is more than conventional, given the imagery of the pit that connects hell not only with female sexuality (a connection ubiquitous in the Shakespearean canon as well) but more specifically [...] with the malign fecundity of the maternal womb” (Kahn 2002: 69).

The O of the vagina, womb, and tomb is finally, Berry notes, “the O of Tamora's gaping mouth, when she devours her own children” (Berry 2002: 139).

Romeo's own descent into the O of Juliet's grave shows a similar over-elaborate elision of the gaping devouring mouth with the womb and the tomb of earth:

Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death,  
Gorg'd with the dearest morsel of the earth,  
Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open,  
And in despite I'll cram thee with more food.  
(*Romeo and Juliet*, V. iii. 45-48)

In *Macbeth*, the witches significantly prepare their "hell-broth" in an O-shaped cauldron, and its ingredients should make it clear that we have now descended to the very bottom of the universe. Being bits and body parts of mostly formless, slimy animals like toads, lizards, and snakes, they plainly indicate primordial matter – chaotic, disordered, and disgusting. An especially intriguing addition to the mix is a "Finger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-deliver'd by a drab" (*Macbeth*, IV. i. 30-31). This links women as whores and mothers with witches as women constantly suspended between the two, proliferating nothing but dead misshapen matter. Hecate is understandably pleased.

Othello descends in his mind into the O he believes Desdemona to be: a "subtile whore" and a "closet lock and key of villainous secrets" (*Othello*, IV. ii. 21-22). A woman's closet, as her most intimate chamber where she is likely to entertain lovers, (Jardine 2005: 148) is linked in imagery with every facet of what Shakespeare's O represents, an association reinforced in Othello's accusation aimed at Emilia of having "the office opposite to Saint Peter" and keeping "the gate of hell" (*Othello*, IV. ii. 91-92). Presumably, as she has allowed lovers into Desdemona's closet – and thus into her vagina as well – Emilia is cast in the role of the hell porter.

Lear similarly descends in his mind into this vaginal hell or feminine prime matter:

But to the girdle do the gods inherit,  
Beneath is all the fiends': there's hell, there's darkness,  
There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,  
Stench, consumption. Fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!  
(*King Lear*, IV. vi. 126-129)

Muir warns against interpreting this disgust as “Shakespeare’s own revulsion against sexuality” as may have been suggested by Harsnett’s account of the exorcists’ pretence that Sara Williams was, during menstruation, possessed with a devil “in a peculiar part of the body,” “in the inferior parts,” and “in the most secret part of my body.” It must be noted, however, that the vocabulary used here is quite rational and mild. Harsnett, as Muir has argued, does indeed mention evocative phrases such as “filthy fumes,” “the bottomlesse pit of hell,” “scalded,” “thicke smoake & vapour of hell,” “brimstone,” “vgly blackness, smoake, scorching, boyling and heate” (Muir 1956: 160), but in a completely separate context, fully unconnected with women’s sexual organs. This would in fact prove that it is Shakespeare (or, at any rate, Lear) who makes the connection between the dark, sulphurous pit of hell and women’s genitals, and not Harsnett, or Jesuit exorcists, or poor misguided Sara.

Timon suffers a parallel plunge into a feminine gynecological hell:

Common mother, thou  
Whose womb unmeasurable and infinite breast  
Teems and feeds all; whose self-same mettle  
Whereof thy proud child (arrogant man) is puff’d,  
Engenders the black toad and adder blue,  
The gilded newt and eyeless venom’d worm,  
With all th’ abhorred births below crisp heaven  
Whereon Hyperion’s quick’ning fire doth shine:  
[...]  
Ensear thy fertile and conception womb,  
Let it no more bring out ingrateful man!  
Go great with tigers, dragons, wolves, and bears,  
Teems with new monsters, whom thy upward face  
Hath to the marbled mansion all above  
Never presented!  
(*Timon of Athens*, IV. iii. 177-192)

Burgess notices that *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens* were written roughly at the same time and have in common a strong, seemingly unwarranted revulsion at womanhood and sexuality. Timon, in his apt phrase, has a “gratuitous venereal obsession,” and Lear “finds in sex a symbol of the hell he wishes on the whole world.” Burgess argues that both Lear and Timon

“go beyond simple dramatic necessity in invoking woman as the source of degradation and disease” and surmises that if “Shakespeare was ill with something other than overwork, that something was venereal disease” (Burgess 1970: 197-199).

Although personal experience with venereal disease can certainly cause one to become more puritanical, invoking woman – or, rather, infernal feminine prime matter located in and identified with the female sexual organs – as the source of degradation and disease hardly necessitates contracting syphilis; Neoplatonism will suffice. Lear and Timon rage at female sexuality because they have descended into the bottom of their universes’ O’s, and are there faced with this prime matter, which they rightly (according to Neoplatonists of all persuasions) see as the root of all that is rotten.

The O of infernal prime matter was often quite literal, tangible, and visible on Shakespeare’s stage. Its role was played by the trap on the stage, a standard theatrical property. As Kinney explains:

The trap in the middle of the stage, in the *platea*, serves the gravediggers in *Hamlet* as they dig in unsacred ground and find Yorick’s skull [...]. It is the pit in *Titus Andronicus* into which Bassianus’ body is thrown and where Quintus and Martius fall, smearing themselves in his blood and thus appearing guilty of his death (2.3). It is also, most commonly, infernal. Joan de Pucell’s familiar spirits are “culled Out of the powerful regions under earth” (1 *Henry VI*, 5.3.10-11); it is where the spirit rising for Mother Jordan the witch is commanded by Bolingbroke to “Descend to darkness and the burning lake!” (1 *Henry VI*, 1.4.39). This may be why the trap seems so fitting a place for Malvolio and why Feste thinks of exorcism as the way of bringing him back onstage. But ghosts may issue from the trap, too [...] Hamlet’s father seems doomed to remain in the trap as one who “cries under the stage” (1.5). [...] But it is used most frequently by the weird sisters in *Macbeth*, who enter and exit by it. (Kinney 2003: 22)

From it emerge the deceiving liars, demons, witches, and, interestingly enough, Old Hamlet. Iamblichus’ warning that “from the hollows of the earth leap chthonian dogs (i.e., daimons), who never show a true sign to a mortal” (Shaw 1995: 41) is strangely appropriate here.



A hero can also actively descend into an O as part of a daring exploratory feat. Part of Hamlet's timeless allure may stem from the fact that his adventurous dealings with matter appear voluntary and that his descent seems to leave him relatively unsullied. He does not fall into the abyss of matter owing to, say, inordinate lust – he plunges in because he feels it his duty to investigate what is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Hamlet in fact undergoes not one, but *three* separate descents into three separate O's analogous with the three faces of the Triple Goddess, the Neoplatonic ruler over matter: the virgin, the mother, and the queen of the underworld.

His first encounter is with the virgin. When he intrudes in Ophelia's closet, her private chambers, "all unbrac'd," he has entered his first O. He renounces her along with all "baser matter," but has still to solve the riddle. Ophelia, though she belongs to the female sex, is not the source of all corruption in Denmark, and ridding himself of her resolves little. As Laoutaris notes, Hamlet's "fixation with "matter" [...] increasingly takes on the moralised burden of the maternal body." Shakespeare swiftly moves from the "country matters" of Hamlet's banter with Ophelia to a

more intricate pun on mother/matter, *mater* (Latin for "mother") still providing the root of the word *maternity*: "My wit's diseased ... as you say, my mother. Therefore no more, but to the matter. My mother, you say ... / O wonderful son, that can so astonish a mother!" (III. ii. 303-310) Weighted with the hierarchical sexual biology of Aristotelian embryological theory, which defined the female contribution to conception and gestation as gross "matter" acted upon by the masculine motive principle of generation, Hamlet's imaginative penetration into the anatomical reaches of the womb turns it into the origin of the "corruption" which plagues the state. (Laoutaris 2008: 65)

Hamlet's second plunge is into the O of his mother's closet – the place Berry refers to, in Lacanian terms, as the "hollow phallus of the mother" (Berry 2003: 79). Line lucidly observes that Hamlet asks "Now, mother, what's the matter?" (Hamlet, III. iv. 7) on "entering the womb-like cavern of her closet to look into the face of his own substance" (Line 2004: 129). For in Gertrude's private chamber, Hamlet is faced with his material origins. The presence of dead Polonius in Gertrude's closet, much like that of dead Bassanius in Tamora's pit, is no accident. What Hamlet discovers in the O

of the mother is dead, bloody, maternal, menstrual matter that is at the basis of his mortal body. Screaming insults at her, however, does not solve his quandary, as the originating source of all rottenness lies elsewhere.

The O that Hamlet faces last is the gaping hole of Ophelia's grave. Dug in unhallowed ground and spewing forth a medley of skulls and bones, it is eerily reminiscent of the witches' hell-broth, and similarly comprises chaotic, disgusting dead matter. Hamlet has discovered the womb/tomb of Mother Earth, the very bottom of the universe where the hell of prime matter lies, and the real culprit for all chaos, rottenness, and death. He muses on human mortality and the volatility of the earthy matter that even great kings were made of:

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,  
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.  
O that that earth which kept the world in awe  
Should patch a wall t'expel the [winter's] flaw!  
(*Hamlet*, V. i. 208-216)

Ophelia's grave, significantly, spits forth the skull of Hamlet's beloved jester Yorick, who, in Rutter's interpretation, comes to speak for her one last time:

Bizarrely, proleptically, Yorick is Ophelia's double, for "to this favour she must come." The skull makes the audience face up to death's horrors in a materially specific way that Hamlet's philosophizing has managed to avoid. Death, the prince learns from Yorick, stinks. The jester is a substitute who grounds ghastliness, displacing it from Ophelia *now*, for, newly-dead, her corpse still registers her sweetness, while casting imagination forward to Ophelia *then*, in the grave, "instant old," no longer even a body but rotten flesh and jumbled bones. The words Hamlet puts into Yorick's mouth let Ophelia, strangely, speak for the last time – "to this favour she must come." (Rutter 2001: 41)

However, when Hamlet instructs Yorick's skull "Now get you to my lady's [chamber], and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come; make her laugh at that" (*Hamlet*, V. i. 192-195), we are not necessarily certain *which* lady Hamlet has in mind. He has been to both his ladies' chambers and ascertained that both Gertrude and Ophelia are feminine dead matter that is mere bait and not to be trusted. "My lady" can, in fact, be *any* lady: a woman luring her lover towards carnality (like Ophelia); a mother trapping her child in a mortal body (like Gertrude); or Mother Earth, the dead matter from which it is made merely being painted over with a pleasing shape. Hamlet seems to be echoing Plotinus' sentiment that the material world (and any beautiful body in it) remains forever but a "corpse adorned" (*Enn.*, II.4.5.18, cited in Celenza 2002: 79).

Yorick also serves as a surrogate for Hamlet's deceased father – and certainly appears in his memories as more of a true father figure than the late king ever does. Old Hamlet's still fresh grave is, interestingly enough, never visited in the course of Act V, but he is briefly remembered by the gravedigger, who significantly began his career on the day of the late king's victory over Old Norway. Even more significantly, the gravedigger started digging on the very day when Hamlet was born. A more chilling *memento mori* specifically meant for Hamlet would be hard to devise. The two events are actually linked in the graveyard scene as Hamlet contemplates the death of his father, his own impending death, and the end of his line. There is no grandson following Old Hamlet's death that would be heir to his conquest – just as there was no grandson following John Shakespeare's death – either recent or impending at the time *Hamlet* was written (Welsh 2001: 36-37).

Ophelia, who might have been Hamlet's true earthly Venus, his unear'd womb to produce his sons and his bodily immortality, is discarded as "baser matter" and "good kissing carrion," and fittingly thrown into the gaping O in the middle of the stage – and Hamlet leaps in after her, daring the pit to devour him, much as does Romeo. The pit finally does devour all. The Ghost proves to have been her consort, doing her bidding and at last bringing death upon everyone. She wins, as does every O that opens in the tragedies, and there is no escaping this Charybdis.

### 3. Mother, what's the matter? Mother (en)matters

Jacqueline Rose, replying in her “Sexuality in the reading of Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*” to Eliot’s notorious judgment that Hamlet’s “mother is not an adequate equivalent” for his disgust, which “envelops and exceeds her” (Eliot 1920), issues a bold statement. Reversing Eliot’s argument, she suggests that, rather than attacking the very existence of something “inscrutable, unmanageable or even horrible,” one should instead question “an aesthetic theory which will only allow into its definition what can be controlled or managed by art” – such as was Eliot’s (although in practice he certainly had his share of excessively disgusted and horrified moments). Rose finds that the true object of horror and disgust in *Hamlet* is “nothing other than femininity itself” (Rose 2002: 103). Given that femininity is in the entire tradition of Western dualistic thought identified with maternity and materiality, and matter is seen as the root of all evil, Hamlet’s disgust seems only natural.

The view that the mother provides only base menstrual matter in procreation while the father provides the spiritual form was expounded by Plato, elaborated by Aristotle, and even propounded by the likes of Aquinas. All-pervasive before the discovery of the ovum (Allen 1997), it was demonstrably held by Shakespeare. Helen herself warns a potential husband: “You are too young, too happy, and too good, / To make yourself a son out of my blood” (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, II. iii. 96-97). Sebastian likewise explicates this distinctly dualistic view in *Twelfth Night*: “A spirit I am indeed, / But am in that dimension grossly clad / Which from the womb I did participate” (*Twelfth Night*, V. i. 236-238).

The mother does not merely make us material; she also makes us mortal, as without embodiment, we could have happily remained pure eternal spirits. As Janet Adelman explains: “The mother’s body brings death into the world because her body itself is death: in the traditional alignment of spirit and matter, the mother gives us the stuff – the female matter – of our bodies and thus our mortality” (Adelman 1992: 27; cited in Armstrong P. 2006: 185). This “traditional alignment” which harks from Plato and Neoplatonism necessitates Hamlet’s and other tragic heroes’ realization that maternal matter makes us mortal and that vulgar Venus creates us only to destroy us.

This is at the root of the persistent and sinister association between motherhood and mortality, between mothering and murdering, between

womb and tomb. It appears in Cleopatra's disturbing oath made to Antony: "The next Caesarion [smite], / Till by degrees the memory of my womb [...] / Lie graveless" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III. xiii. 162-166). It varies from Romeo's "womb of death" aimed at Juliet's tomb through Friar Lawrence's jovial and casual "The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb" to Rosse's lament that Scotland can no longer be "call'd our mother, but our grave" which seems on the surface to have little to do with metaphysical issues. That the enmattering mother is also a murderess plainly follows from the dualistic logic of Neoplatonism, and finds many expressions in Shakespeare's work.

Cases in point are the disturbing images of breastfeeding portraying a helpless male child in danger of bloody violence perpetrated by the mother. Lady Macbeth notoriously threatens her perhaps imaginary infant:

I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out.  
(*Macbeth*, I. vii. 54-58)

Volumnia's threat to her own son is perhaps less direct but no less disturbing:

The breasts of Hecuba,  
When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier  
Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood  
At Grecian sword.  
(*Coriolanus*, I. iii. 40-43)

She finally manages to effect Coriolanus' death by equating her womb with Rome as his native land:

thou shalt no sooner  
March to assault thy country that to tread  
[...] on thy mother's womb  
That brought thee to this world.  
(*Coriolanus*, V. iii. 122-125)

For Coriolanus, Rome is the monstrous multitude which desires his bloody wounds – much like his mother does. The multitude, elsewhere associated with chaotic lower matter, is here explicitly linked with the mother’s womb. The many-headed monster that finally overwhelms Coriolanus certainly also comprises his mother, as well as the two mutually indistinguishable multitudes – the Roman and the Volscian – that offer to destroy him at differing points in time. Defeating her son, this monstrous maternal O will devour him:

O mother, mother!  
[...] O my mother, mother! O!  
You have won a happy victory to Rome;  
But, for your son  
[...] most mortal to him.  
(*Coriolanus*, V. iii. 185-189)

Rome and Volumnia are thus one – the mother that here metaphorically eats her young. Timon is even more explicitly being eaten by the multitude of Athens. As Apemantus notices, “what a number of men eats Timon, and he sees ‘em not!” (*Timon of Athens*, I. ii. 39-40). Tamora is *literally* a mother that eats her young, as Titus uses deception to force her to “like to the earth swallow her own increase.” (*Titus Andronicus*, V. ii. 191)

The womb-tomb that eats her own young is not Shakespeare’s invention nor is it without precedent. In Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Errorr’s misshapen offspring crawl around her in the darkness, but “Soone as that uncouth light upon them shone, / Into her mouth they crept, and suddain all were gone.” (I. I. xv. 8-9) This is simply what the O of maternal prime matter does in Neoplatonic dualism.

#### **4. Nothing of woman: motherfree**

It is understandable – given the usual attributes coupled with maternal materiality in Renaissance Neoplatonism – that so many Shakespeare’s heroes attempt to evade any association with the feminine. Before her death, as Cleopatra grows determined and “marble-constant,” she feels impelled to claim: “I have nothing / Of woman in me” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii. 238-239). Renouncing her femininity apparently allows

Cleopatra to assume a masculine fixity of spirit. The statement can also be read as a humorous aside of the boy actor playing Cleopatra's role, who truly would have been granted the liberty to claim to have nothing of woman in him.

"Nothing of woman" can, however, also be linked with the desire that some heroes have to break free from the maternal body in which they were tragically enmattered and thus to *not have anything* of woman in them. I would like to term this an aspiration to be "motherfree" – adding the suffix which is used to denote a "lack" that is seen as positive and advantageous.<sup>1</sup> Ficino's "heavenly Venus," as opposed to her earthly, "vulgar" counterpart, is said to have been born without a mother, which makes her a stranger to matter, and thus exalted and free.

To be of woman born is a heavy burden to bear and makes one vulnerable to all that flesh is heir to: pain, illness, death, and worst of all – lust. When the puritanical boy rejects her advances, Vulgar Venus asks Adonis: "Art thou a woman's son and canst not feel / What 'tis to love, how want of love tormenteth?" (*Venus and Adonis*, 201-202). She scolds him that he is a "Thing like a man, but of no woman bred!" (*Venus and Adonis*, 214). A similar sentiment is found in Sonnet 41: "And when a woman woos, what woman's son / Will sourly leave her till [she] have prevailed?" (Sonnet 41, 7-8). Freedom from being born to a mother is freedom from lust and entanglements with women – which does not seem like a bad thing at all in the Neoplatonic value system.

Being motherfree confers other privileges as well. In a vision provided by the witches, a bloody child tells Macbeth that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (*Macbeth*, IV. i. 80-81). What Macbeth does not immediately realize is that he will indeed be harmed – only by someone *not* "of woman born." The bloody child anticipates Macduff, who, "untimely ripp'd" from his mother's womb, and thus free from the maternal body, can slay Macbeth and carry a victory over Hecate. To be motherfree is to be virtuous, valiant, truly masculine, and impervious to the evil effects of matter. Posthumus (also "ripp'd" from his mother) asserts that "There's no motion / That tends to vice in man, but I affirm / It is the woman's part" (*Cymbeline*, II. v. 20-22). Minimizing "the woman's part" in a child maximizes the chances that the child will be a decent and virtuous human being. Leontes is glad that Hermione did not nurse the boy, as she already

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<sup>1</sup> Note the use of the suffix "-free" in the name for the Childfree movement – the movement of happily and intentionally "childless" individuals and couples.

has “too much blood in him.” Mother’s milk, as the contemporary physician John Sadler insists, it should be noted here, “is nothing but the monstrous blood made white in the breasts” (Laoutaris 2008: 171).

## 5. The ladies have prevail’d

Would-be motherfree heroes may sometimes attempt to sever their associations with maternal matter in somewhat violent ways. Coriolanus faces this chaotic substance in “the mutable, rank-scented meiny” which, according to him, is a Hydra and a monster – the beast with many heads (*Coriolanus*, III. i. 66-71). He “banishes” the maternal material multitude:

You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate  
As reek a’ th’ rotten fens, whose loves I prize  
As the dead carcasses of unburied men  
That do corrupt my air – I banish you!  
(*Coriolanus*, III. iii. 120-123)

It is this maternal material monster that he attempts to escape when he “elopes” into Aufidius’ open arms – much like Othello does with Iago.

However, there is really no banishing or escaping one’s feminine basis and origins. The triple goddess, who reigns over matter, will usually win in Shakespeare’s darker plays. It might be useful to remember here that the triple goddess – part of the Neoplatonic tradition – was comprised of three goddesses: infernal Persephone/Hecate, benevolent maternal nature represented by Demeter/Ceres, and Artemis/Diana, the virgin goddess of the new moon (Line 2004: 28).

It is precisely this trio of goddesses that appears before Coriolanus and assures him that resistance is futile and that he cannot destroy or escape the maternal womb and the monstrous multitude of his native Rome: Volumnia, “the most noble mother in the world” – and the sinister manly witch who is fooling no one, Virgilia, the benign young wife and mother, and the utterly gratuitous virgin Valeria – clearly there only to complete the triple goddess in the most clichéd way imaginable – “The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle / That’s curdied by the frost from purest snow / And hangs on Dian’s temple.” (*Coriolanus*, V. iii. 65-67). “The ladies have prevail’d” (*Coriolanus*, V. iv. 40), the news goes, and when the three



ladies enter Rome triumphantly, a Senator exclaims “Behold our patroness, the life of Rome!” (*Coriolanus*, V. v. 1). For all the talk of virtue and virility, Rome in effect worships – and is apparently ruled by – the triple goddess, and Coriolanus does not stand a chance against her. He belongs to her.

For Coriolanus is “a thing of blood.” Frequently covered in blood, he may superficially resemble in imagery the “bloody man”/“bloody child” of *Macbeth*. The “bloody child” in *Macbeth* – bloody because he has been “ripp’d” from his mother’s womb – indicates, however, a radical cut from the mother, being motherfree and thus free from matter as well: Macduff, free from the materiality of the maternal body, can slay Hecate’s consort Macbeth. Coriolanus, on the other hand, who “from face to foot” is “a thing of blood” (*Coriolanus*, II. ii. 108-109), is entirely his mother’s, a part of her body, constantly returning to it, struggling to be born and separated, and will be reabsorbed by her when he is devoured by the multitude.

The ladies have similarly prevail’d against Bertram in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. The triple goddess tricks him after he has attempted to renounce women, and he is finally faced with a trio of women: the pure virgin Dian, the pregnant mother Helen, and the old Widow, who demonstrate to him that he cannot flee materiality and that he is indeed already trapped in it.

## 6. Nothing of woman: 0 = 0

There is yet another way in which to interpret Cleopatra’s assertion that she has “nothing of woman” in her. In most Neoplatonic thought, prime matter is viewed as privation – and thus literally *nothing* (Celenza 2002: 75-76). Therefore, whoever is meant to be saying this – however “constant” Cleopatra is and however male-bodied the boy actor is – neither can escape the fact that they were enmattered in their mothers’ wombs and that they consequently have in them the nothing of prime matter that is at the basis of every living human being. We all have, according to Neoplatonists, the *nothing* of woman in us, the nothing of maternal mortal matter we inherited from our mothers. This enables Hamlet to play with his eerie rhymes and claim that

The King is a thing –  
Guildenstern: A thing, my lord?  
Hamlet: Of nothing, bring me to him.  
(*Hamlet*, IV. i. 27-30)

It is irrelevant here which king Hamlet has in mind, as the (still) living king is, just as much as the dead one, a thing of nothing, made of the nothingness of matter.

The fact that Neoplatonism so often equated prime matter with privation, the void, nothingness itself, solidifies the meanings associated with “Shakespeare’s tragic O’s” and adds to them. “O,” “nothing,” and “hell” are all things an Elizabethan might use to refer to female genitals; they can also, significantly, denote feminine maternal matter. The void of O is the womb we are enmattered in and the tomb we will be devoured by in death.

Showalter declares in her “Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism” that Ophelia, consistently with the customary representations of femininity, is “certainly a creature of lack.” “I think nothing, my lord,” she says in the Mousetrap scene, to which he retorts:

Hamlet: That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs.  
Ophelia: What is, my lord?  
Hamlet: Nothing.  
(*Hamlet*, III. ii. 117–19)

Showalter notes that in Elizabethan slang “nothing” was a term for the vagina, but that its meanings are further proliferated in a distinctly feminine paradigm. To Hamlet, she explains,

“nothing” is what lies between maids’ legs, for, in the male visual system of representation and desire, women’s sexual organs, in the words of the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, “represent the horror of having nothing to see.” When Ophelia is mad, Gertrude says that “Her speech is nothing,” mere “unshaped use.” Ophelia’s speech thus represents the horror of having nothing to say in the public terms defined by the court. Deprived of thought, sexuality, language, Ophelia’s story becomes the Story of O – the

zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference, the cipher of female sexuality (Parker/Hartman 1985: 78-79).

The nothing of the vagina and the nothing of the chaotic, irrational incoherence of feminine madness are both ultimately the nothing of unformed prime matter.

“Nothing” is thus deservedly the crucial key word of the tragedies – the original problem, the posed question, the stumbling block, but also the usually unsatisfactory solution. All the “ocular proof” and “auricular evidence” that the tragedies ultimately give in response to the probing questions of the neurotic male heroes can boil down to “nothing” – the nothing of dark, unformed prime matter.

The apparently widespread contemporary notion that “prime matter” could fully be equated with “nothing” is attributable to one of the bolder moves in the history of ideas, occurring right around Shakespeare’s time as part of an effort to reconcile traditional monotheistic religions with the increasingly popular dualistic ideas spreading as part of the package of Renaissance Neoplatonism.

The entire subject of the origin of the cosmos was rife with controversy in Shakespeare’s time and there was an ongoing debate between the so-called pagan prima-materialists and the Christian ex-nihilists. Plato and Aristotle unproblematically claimed that the cosmos was created from chaotic prime matter in a culture whose creation myths shared the same narrative. However, adherents of the Judeo-Christian tradition had to see the very notion of prime matter as heretical because it directly contradicted the Biblical doctrine of creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*). This notion was, nonetheless, being heartily espoused by learned people who read Plato and Aristotle, and with increasing frequency.

William R. Elton cites in his informative “*Deus Absconditus: Lear*” some of the arguments that Christian authors used to denounce the pagan notion of prime matter. Some of these belie a great deal of anxiety, as the arguments of pagan philosophers seemed to make quite a bit of logical sense. Mutian categorically announces: “We leave behind the entelechy of Aristotle and the ideas of Plato. God created all things from nothing.” Montaigne sees the reasoning that “Because nothing is made of nothing: God was not able to frame the world without matter” as proof of the vanity of feeble human understanding, and Robert Parsons similarly exalts the doctrine of ex-nihilism as “high and hidden doctrine,” beyond the merely human capacity of comprehension. A contemporary of Shakespeare’s, R.

B., Esquire, prays to God in *The Difference betwene the Auncient Phisicke and the Latter Phisicke* (1585) to “teach, ayd, & assist thy servants against the heathnish and false Philosophie of Aristotle, which teacheth” that “of nothyng, nothyng can be made” (Elton 2008: 252). Apparently, this was a hot and anxiety-inducing issue.

A potential solution was long before offered by the early Neoplatonists – who, not being bound by the Torah, needed no such solution. According to Plotinus, as paraphrased by Celenza, “matter, even when informed, retains its ontological status as anti-substantial, evil privation” (Celenza 2002: 79). This solution was then embraced by some of the dualists who wished to hold on to at least part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Gnostics saw the cosmos as formed from dark prime matter by the blundering Demiurge – very differently than the Jews and the Christians. This matter, however, resulted from the shadow cast by the curtain separating the realm of light from Sophia’s prideful creation. The substance of matter is, thus, nothing but shadow, which is nothing other than the absence of light – which is *nothing*. Cabalists – notably Maimonides – similarly took the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* very seriously, but saw this “nothing” as the abyss of prime matter that was within En Sof and has since been continuously being overcome in creation (Armstrong K. 2007: 149).

Christian Neoplatonists in the Renaissance, faced with a similar problem, adopted a similar solution. The brilliant, if audacious turn in contemporary thought connecting and reconciling the debating parties – the traditionally and “naïvely” monotheistic with the popularly and “scientifically” dualistic – appears to have originated in the mind of the mathematician Thomas Harriot, Raleigh’s protégé, member of the mythical School of Night, and probably an acquaintance of Shakespeare’s. According to Aubrey, at one point, Harriot did not value “the old storie of the Creation of the World. He could not beleve the old position; he would say *ex nihilo nihil fit*” (Elton 2008: 254). However, in his writings there is also a marginal note that states: “*Ex nihilo nihil fit; sed omnia fint ex nihilo*” – out of nothing nothing is made; yet everything is made out of nothing (Turner 1999: 35). This seemingly paradoxical addendum to Aristotle’s insufficiently imaginative dictum in effect reconciles the “pagan prima-materialists” with the “Christian ex-nihilists” in the Christian Neoplatonic vision of the cosmos fashioned from the “nothing” – the void, the O/O – that is prime matter.

For the womblike and vaginally suggestive “nothing” – the O – of feminine matter is simultaneously the absolute nothing – the 0 – that prime matter is. As Frederick Turner reveals in his brilliant *Shakespeare’s Twenty-First-Century Economics: The Morality of Love and Money*, despite centuries of previous contact between the Arab world and Europe, the zero only made its way into Christendom in the fourteenth century, and “it was only in Shakespeare’s time that its full power as a concept and as a source of mathematical ideas began to be realized.” Lear’s Fool is obviously fascinated by its ramifications:

When Lear’s Fool wants to find the ultimate description of the nonexistence to which Lear has reduced himself by giving away his kingdom, he says to his master: “Now thou art an O without a figure” (*King Lear*, I. iv. 193). What he means is that if Lear had a figure or digit, say 8 or 2 or 5, followed by a zero (an “O”), then he would have eighty or twenty or fifty; but as it is, he has only the zero, he has nothing. Or rather, is nothing. There is something utterly chilling about this image; the Fool is insisting on a meaning for zero that is not simply as a conventional placeholding sign to signify tens or hundreds or thousands, but the mysterious void itself. (Turner 1999: 36)

This is what Lear encounters in the stormy wilderness: the void of prime matter as the basis of the cosmos and his own frail body – and this is what he has been reduced to. Gloucester lucidly observes, on seeing Lear mad: “O ruin’d piece of nature! This great world / Shall so wear out to nought” (*King Lear*, IV. vi. 134-135). Lear is here compared to the cosmos, and both will, without the forming spirit, eventually revert to the “nought” – the zero – of chaotic, unformed matter. The abdicated king is being schooled in the paradoxical cosmogony and cosmology of Christian Neoplatonism, which is at variance both with the naïve-sounding traditional monism of *creatio ex nihilo* and with the popular scientific-seeming but unimaginative materialism of Aristotle’s *ex nihilo nihil fit* which Hobbes dryly explicates “because nothing, however it be multiplied, will for ever be nothing” (Elton 2008: 254). Apparently, Lear is initially a staunch follower of Aristotle and Hobbes, as can be seen in his opening dispute with Cordelia, who has “nothing” to offer him:

Lear: what can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.

Lear: Nothing?

Cordelia: Nothing.

Lear: Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.

(*King Lear*, I. i. 85-89)

Conversely, Lear is able to say to Goneril when Regan only allows him to keep twenty-five retainers: “Your fifty yet doth double five and twenty, / And thou art twice her love” (*King Lear*, II. iv. 268-269). Both their “loves” will eventually “wear out to nought” – deflate to zero – as neither daughter will ultimately allow him a single servant. An O/0 without a figure, however it be multiplied, remains nothing. The characters heavily associated with lower matter – Edmund, Goneril, and Regan – will, attempting to multiply their material possessions (which are in themselves nothing, as matter is nothing) predictably end up with nothing.

In contrast, the less materialistic characters – Cordelia, Edgar, Kent, Gloucester, and Lear – are all more or less voluntarily reduced to nothing/0 in the course of the play. Cordelia has “nothing” to offer, either to her father and her new husband. Edgar becomes poor Tom, a “poor, bare, fork’d animal,” “the thing itself,” realizing that “Edgar I nothing am” (*King Lear*, II. iii. 21). Kent is put in the stocks for serving the King, and Gloucester is blinded and leaps into the abyss. Lear is reduced to an O/0 without a figure, and he has apparently still not learned his lesson:

Fool: Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?

Lear: Why, no, boy, nothing can be made out of nothing.

(*King Lear*, I. iv. 132-133)

What he needs to realize is that everything is made out of nothing – something even young Romeo seems to understand when he exclaims “O any thing, of nothing first [create]!” (*Romeo and Juliet*, I. i. 177). The universe is created out of the nothingness of feminine prime matter, the “Nothing, the middle, the female genitals, procreation” (Berry 2002: 152) that Lear has attempted to banish with Cordelia, the spurned, despised zero which turns out to be “the womb of all” (Turner 1999: 43). Apparently, the appropriate mathematical operation is putting a “figure” – a digit – before the 0, and not multiplying it. The chaotic dark feminine nothing of matter, led, guided, and lovingly formed by masculine numerical spirit, makes the

universe. The way the universe is created on the cosmic level is analogous to the way a child is made by the male spirit forming the nothingness of menstrual matter, and both operations paradoxically make something out of nothing.

## 7. Conclusion

The Neoplatonic concept of matter can indeed help illuminate Shakespeare's "tragic O's," a figure which can be shown to connect multiple images of matter as the maternal/infernal void. In Shakespeare's darker plays, the "O" as prime matter can figure as a circular O-shaped locus for the encounter with primordial matter, the womb/tomb that enmatters and thus kills, "hell" and "nothing" that can indicate both unformed matter and the vaginal orifice, and the nothing – the 0 – out of which everything is made.

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Даница Игрутиновић

НИШТА ОД ЖЕНЕ: АМБИС ФЕМИНИНЕ МАТЕРИЈЕ  
У ШЕКСПИРА

**Сажетак**

Проучавање метафизике ренесансног неоплатонизма помаже да се додатно појасне неке фигуре које се појављују у Шекспировим делима. Позивајући се на неоплатоничарски концепт материје, овај рад представља покушај да се прошири и додатно расветли фигура коју је Филипа Бери назвала Шекспировим трагичним О (2002). Показује се како ова фигура повезује неколике приказе материје као истовремено материнског и пакленог амбиса, што је у складу са неоплатоничарским концептом примордијалне материје. У Шекспировим трагедијама и проблемским драмама О као феминино детерминисана примордијална материја фигурира као место сусрета са примордијалном материјом, материца/гробница која убија тиме што даје смртно материјално тело, *пакао* и *ништа(вило)* који могу назначити и неформирану материју и вагинални отвор, као и ништа(вило), нула – 0 – из које настаје све.

**Кључне речи:** ренесансни неоплатонизам, матер(ија), ништа(вило), О



**Goran Stanivuković\***  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia

## **EARLIEST SHAKESPEARE: BOMBAST AND AUTHENTICITY**

### **Abstract**

The essay explores bombast as one of the defining features of Shakespeare's style of writing in the earliest, pre-1594 phase of his career as a dramatist. The qualifier 'earliest' is an operative term which refers to the part of Shakespeare's canon that has not been explored in recent criticism. Bombast is considered as both a logical and rhetorical instrument of knowing. At the cognitive dimension of text, improbability, which is the key feature of bombast, plays an important role in 'earliest' Shakespeare because it captures competing currents of thought that fill dramatic plots, as they were described in the Elizabethan practices of playwriting, and moves the action forward. 'Earliest' Shakespeare is both under the spell of Christopher Marlowe's bombastic blankverse, but he also looks beyond Marlowe, turning bombast into a tool of opening up new possibilities for drama performed within the specific context of London's burgeoning theatre scene in the 1590s.

**Key words:** bombast, improbability, drama, literary influence, Shakespeare, Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe

### **1. 'Earliest': exploring the term**

As scholars around the world celebrate the 450th year of Shakespeare's birth in Stratford-upon-Avon, we may want to turn to the beginning of

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\* E-mail address: Goran.Stanivukovic@smu.ca

his career as a writer. Recently, Shakespeare's 'late' period has attracted much critical attention, and for a long time Shakespeare's 'mature' plays have been the staple of critical analysis. Yet, Shakespeare's earliest works seem to have dropped out of critical focus in recent years. In this essay, 'earliest' is understood to be an operative term that helps isolate that body of Shakespeare's writing before "the dividing line of 1594" (Van Es 2013: 79). In 1594, he went from being essentially a freelance writer to a sharer in the theatre company the Lord Chamberlain's Men and, from that point forward, he wrote plays for only one theatre company. Although this move took place at the beginning of his career, the practical reason, however, for choosing this year as the cut off point is that it has a justified place in Shakespearean historiography, because it also helps us acknowledge the astonishing working energy and speed with which Shakespeare wrote during his first few years in London. According to the chronology of writing established by the editors of the Complete Oxford Shakespeare, before 1594, Shakespeare wrote ten plays, two highly popular narrative poems, and possibly penned some sonnets. This impressive output comprises one third of the entire body of Shakespeare's canon of work. The various literary forms within the earliest portion of the canon makes 'earliest' texts the most diverse body of work within Shakespeare's canon as well as the most complex segment of his oeuvre to study. Because of the complexities and problems of the chronology and authorship of early plays, any study of Shakespeare's personal style is mired with difficulties. So isolating one aspect of that style, bombast in this case, is a way of acknowledging, not so much Shakespeare's stylistic specificity but addressing his adherence and re-imagination of a mode of writing that in the early 1590s was both pervasive and critically challenged. The study of early Shakespeare, Ernst Honigmann writes in his analysis of his analysis of bombast, should involve "an examination of the various kinds of high style; of the blending of one style with another; and of the effects of inflation on the audience," concluding rightly that "the really difficult questions" (Honigmann 1980: 162) come from the study of Shakespeare's early style. Bombast was a signature style of 'earliest' Shakespeare that permeated every genre that he used to convey the force, the restlessness, and above all the sense of writing in the spirit of Elizabethan aesthetics.

Since the 1980 publication of Ernst Honigmann's important book on Shakespeare's early years, scholarship has advanced our knowledge of his chronology and collaboration, issues central to the historiography of the

earliest part of Shakespeare's opus. Yet the lack of critical interest in 'earliest' plays suggests that scholars still find it safer to stay away from that body of work often thought to be the one deeply rooted in the technicalities of rhetoric and wedded to a close imitation of Shakespeare's contemporaries, especially those already established as writers and playwrights. As mentioned, the question of collaboration adds to the difficulty of making arguments about Shakespeare's early writing as a self-contained segment of Shakespeare's writing career. This is the case, for instance, with some of the earliest works like the tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, considered by the editors of the Oxford Complete Works of Shakespeare to have been authored by Shakespeare but containing additional passages written by George Peele, or the comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, dated, by the same editors, between 1589 and 1591. Yet, critical caution should not lead to avoidance when it comes to exploring other works from the pre-1594 phase of writing, or even from studying those parts of collaborative plays that can be identified as possibly written by Shakespeare. Moreover, to study Shakespeare's 'earliest' writing as a way of anticipating his later writing should not overshadow attempts to explore the earliest works as texts with their own autonomous style and imaginative worlds. I intend to argue that the style of Shakespeare's earliest plays and his rhetorical strategy of bombast in particular, reveals not so much the beginnings of the aesthetic dimension of Shakespeare's writing that expands in later writing, but a feature distinctive of earliest Shakespeare searching for his authentic creative voice at the time when other powerful dramatic voices compete for the place in the growing theatre world of 1590s London. Bombast is not an isolated aspect of Shakespeare's early style, but a mode of writing transformed into other expressive resources in later work. Bombast is also a design of language, to which the modern ear is not accustomed, as the moderns are conditioned to think of bombast in pejorative terms. To the Elizabethans, bombast would have appeared as something quite different from what it sounds to our ears.

Used as a qualifier of style, 'earliest' brings to mind opportunities not yet seized, craft not yet mastered, the first steps. It can also mean 'too early,' before something has fully come into being. 'Earliest' can also refer to the least significant and often neglected body of work. It is a qualifying term of uncertain meaning and temporal limits. When does 'earliest' Shakespeare become 'early' Shakespeare, or 'mature' Shakespeare? These questions imply that Shakespeare develops his artistic style in a linear

manner. The works themselves, however, defy such categorization because the hierarchy of texts does not come out of their writing organically but is artificially established by modern critics. ‘Earliest’ tends to be neglected on teleological grounds, precisely because it is undeveloped, undistinguished, inauthentic, and because its temporal boundaries—when does ‘earliest’ begin and when it stops—are all too clear. The year 1594 helps a critic come up with a sample of work that is easier to address in a limited space of critical writing, but the year serves the contingencies of literary criticism more than what one might call, if somewhat unfashionably, the evolution of a writer’s personal style and aesthetics in general. ‘Earliest’ provides us with an opportunity to uncover the limitations of critical forgetting. Shakespeare of the early 1590s wrote within the “decorative continuum” of Elizabethan England that was “magnificent by design and saw magnificence as the sum of all virtues,” a culture whose spirit was “overblown” (Mowl 1993: 14-14). This cultural and aesthetic milieu determined Shakespeare’s love of, and skill with which he used bombast early in his writing career. In ‘earliest’ Shakespeare bombast is the place where he expands the capacity of language to shape meaning and reinforce that meaning through verbal sound.

To begin with bombast as the starting point for an analysis of ‘earliest’ Shakespeare makes sense because it was targeted as the main object of critique in the first surviving published review of Shakespeare’s ‘earliest’ writing. It is also the dominant feature of “grand style (and its counterfeit)” in early modern writing, as suggested by a recent critic (Adamson 2007: 46). In an age when the English language expanded its semantic potential, when rhetoricians recommended amplification and ornamentation as the proper strategy for narrative composition and its padding with exempla for turning orations into stories (as the rhetorician Richard Rainolde maintains [1563: A4<sup>v</sup>]), and when repetition was not considered a deficiency but a virtue of style, bombast became both a compositional principle and a stylistic strategy of producing meaning. To sound modern in the early 1590s meant to write in one’s own grand style, one’s personal bombast.

## **2. Bombast: the practice of writing**

The “trivial lying pamphlet,” as Thomas Nashe called *Greene’s Groats-worthof Wit* in *Pierce Pennilesse* in 1592, gives us the first record of the

effect Shakespeare's earliest writing had on his contemporaries; it also provides an opportunity to explore bombast as a rhetorical dimension and chronologically determined property of Shakespeare's earliest style (Nashe 1985: 50). Although critics like Samuel Schoenbaum have debated whether writing or acting is targeted in this piece of malicious writing (Schoenbaum 1970: 51) and whether the pamphlet was even authored by the dying Robert Greene, which is the question raised by a recent biographer of Shakespeare (Duncan-Jones 2001: 48), early Shakespeare has continued to be linked with bombast in subsequent interpretations of this pamphlet. The familiar words referring to a "Shake-scene" as an "upstart crow", that "supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of" his contemporaries (Schoenbaum 1970: 50), have shaped the idea of bombast as a negative quality of writing in criticism for years to come. Yet it is not bombast style itself, but Shakespeare's ability to employ it as well as, if not better than, other "live-wire young writers" (Nicholl 2013: 3) of the early 1590s, that irks the author of the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet. This incendiary pamphlet, which caused quite a bit of turmoil when it came out, calls our attention to the fact that, for the Elizabethans, unlike for us, bombast did not imply faulty style, an error of language. The author does not attack "Shake-scene" for using bombast in the first place. Second, the pamphlet invites us to put Shakespeare's bombast in relation to that of his contemporaries, and encourages comparative analysis with other playwrights.<sup>1</sup> If anything, this pamphlet tells us that 'earliest' Shakespeare stood out among his contemporaries because of his virtuoso handling of bombast.

For an early view of bombast, not as a derisory quality of poetry but a sign of poetic finesse, let us turn to John Dryden. In his 1679 essay "The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy" he says that bombast is commonly the delight of that audience which loves poetry but understands it not: and as commonly has been the practice of those writers who, not being able to infuse a natural passion into the mind, have made it their business to ply the ears, and to stun their judges by the noise. But Shakespeare does not often thus." (Dryden 195: 143). Drawing on the example of an exchange between Brutus and Cassius from Shakespeare's Roman tragedy *Julius Caesar*, Dryden shows that Shakespeare adjusts words to subject

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<sup>1</sup> Schoenbaum's suggestion that it is acting, not writing, that the words in the pamphlet refer to, seems plausible. But since we do not have any substantial evidence of the specific modalities of Shakespeare's acting ability, I will treat the reference in this pamphlet to be about writing, because that is what the language seems to be suggesting at this point.

matter and language to passions, aiming for psychological motivation to correspond with linguistic form. In Dryden's estimation Shakespeare's bombast sounds authentic and not cliché. Dryden's reference attends to what one might call the sound of bombast, that is, bombast that is soft and meaningfully employed, not a thundering accumulation of words. Dryden was the first critic among poets to write about Shakespeare's use of bombast as a positive feature of style. There were earlier versions of assessing the sound of exaggeration by language. In his 1589 treatise on poetry, *The Arte of English Poesy*, George Puttenham refers to hyperbole as "Loud Liar" (Puttenham 2007: 276). Puttenham uses the adjective "loud" to mean rhetorically vivid (as we might say that someone's clothing is too bright—loud colours) as opposed to too noisy. Dryden asserts that some writers cannot get bombast right, and that some audiences do not understand it, but that Shakespeare mastered the art of bombast and made it meaningful to his audiences. Much of Shakespeare's earliest dramatic and lyric poetry, I would argue, is about trying to get the right measure of, and balance between, the lexical form and sound of bombast, making bombast a vehicle for thought. Rather than view it as a fault, which would be a modern-day understanding of bombast, we need to understand bombast in its historical complexity. Bombast tests the boundaries between rhetorical and cognitive models of reading because it is both a rhetorical device and a sound to be cognized. As the examples that follow show, Shakespeare experiments with the modalities of style and structure within the linguistic frame of bombast. If some of Shakespeare's texts appear more bombastic than others, it is because the text is doing work instead of defaulting to the teleological assumption that 'earliest' Shakespeare is learning his craft. In employing bombast in all of its complexity, Shakespeare turns against his critics, like the author of the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet, and wields the same weapon they used to attack his earliest achievement. The expansive and explosive word 'bombast' gave writers and their critics sufficient material to reach for it liberally and creatively.

The etymology of bombast is a stuffing made out of cotton wool that gave garments (and presumably their wearers) an inflated impression. 'Bombast' is both conceptually and acoustically close to *bombarda*, the Italian for "a gun, or any kind of bombard" and to *bombardare*, meaning "to batter, to shoote, to beate", which is how John Florio glosses these words in his 1598 Italian-English dictionary (Florio 2013: 99). For the author of the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet, bombast became the lexical gun with which to shoot down the new grand style practiced by Shakespeare.



One of the reasons that historiographers of early modern drama have differed on what the pamphlet's author may have meant shows that we are not certain whether early modern ways of assessing style are accessible to us today in all their critical nuances. On the matters of style, if we take Puttenham as a guide, then it is the "tenor of speaking and writing, extending to the whole tale or process of the poem or history [narrative], and not properly to any piece or member of a tale." As he simply puts it, style is "of words, speeches, or sentences" (Puttenham 2007: 233). For the Elizabethans, style covered a large spectrum of writing modalities, from the smallest unit of a word, to a sound, to the largest organization of those units into a meaningful story like narrative. More generally, any smallest and any largest unit of a composition constituted one notion of style in the Elizabethan period to comprise what we now call formalism.

While the Elizabethan idea of style remained oriented toward close reading, modern examinations of style also take into account external factors that leave an imprint on literary style. In contemporary critical writing poetic style comprises the study of "the smallest measurable units of poetry" as well as more abstract notions of style like "historical, religious, economic, political" (Nolan 2010: 396). And these are, Nolan argues, "contradictory aspects" (Nolan 2010: 396) of style. They are contradictory because external and internal aspects of style are considered to work together towards a general notion of style in a specific period. What these aspects of style also contradict is how the Elizabethans conceived of style, because what for us are more abstract features of style for the Elizabethans would be an altogether different level of experiencing and expressing the world, history, religion, and politics through aesthetics. This approach reflects the extent to which material and ideological orientation of some influential and prevailing modern critical practices and methodologies marginalize formalist criticism. So the critical point, then, is to what extent we can distinguish a writer's personal style from a mode of cultural expression that reflects habits and practices of representation in Elizabethan culture as a whole. Shakespeare's earliest style is not only a product of his comprehensive reading and his attentiveness to the requirements of acting on the stage, but also a certain immanent quality that bears his imprint and that distinguishes his writing, and bombast in particular, from his contemporaries.

Shakespeare's bombast crosses the boundary that separates the personal from the cultural. One of the features of Shakespeare's stylistic

expression lies precisely in the blurring of such a boundary which matters more to our extremely individualistic culture than to the Elizabethan age where the sense of collective belonging (especially with respect to religious sects) was more pronounced.

Writing about Shakespeare's style, therefore, is not without methodological difficulties largely because analytical tools that we use to study language and style are neither consolidated nor consistently employed by critics, and those tools may not fully be adequate either. Some might even say that writing about style hides within itself a particular ideological stance manifested in avoidance of politics and history, which produce literature in the first place. For the art historian Ernst Gombrich, the preferred approach to the study of style in Renaissance visual arts is through sociology and psychology (Gombrich 1959: 17). Yet Gombrich's critical method demonstrated in much of his writing about art history is the best example of treating styles as cultural and historical manifestations. Gombrich's approach to style is based on an exploration of what he calls "materialist incarnations" that make "styles [...] instances" of cultural traditions (Gombrich 1977: 17). Following up on Gombrich, one could, then, argue that bombast is an instance of the cultural tradition of writing in late Elizabethan aesthetics.

Historians of the English language have studied style mostly through words and grammar; literary scholars have assessed it primarily through rhetoric and meter. But there has been a change in the ways literary critics analyze style. Interdisciplinary approaches to Elizabethan styles have recently produced compelling arguments about the styles of Shakespeare's writing, especially his late plays. For example, Russ McDonald has analyzed the style of Elizabethan artistic and materialist world, such as garden design and architecture, providing a new model for literary critics how to expand the ways of interpreting literary style (McDonald 2013: 486-504). The study of Shakespeare's bombast brings together verbal, linguistic, metrical, visual, and cultural properties that underpin his creative imagination. Yet bombast also, and inevitably, because it is associated with volume, invites comparison with music.

In the essay "Racine's Classical Piano," first published in 1927 and expanded in 1931, Leo Spitzer borrows the term *piano* from music to explore the morphology of Racine's tragic language. In this sense, *piano* is the effect of softening sound, and Spitzer uses it to describe Racine's style as that of "distinguishing restraint, of self enclosure" (Spitzer 1983:

4), by exploring a range of linguistic strategies (he calls them “attenuating devices” [11]), including figures and tropes, which cumulatively produce the effect of “something muted, distanced and icy [...] of the stylistic expressions of modesty and restraint” (103), where Racine hides the ardour in his writing. Setting the larger concern of Spitzer’s essay aside, a concern with the untranslatability of the linguistic effects of Racine’s dramatic poetry, to focus on his metaphorical use of a musical effect, *piano*, to capture the nature of that stylistic elusiveness, I want to suggest that unlike Spitzer’s Racine, ‘earliest’ Shakespeare is the writer of linguistic *forte*. If *piano* is the term that best describes Racine’s stylistic elusiveness, then ‘earliest’ Shakespeare’s bombastic style can be called *forte*, alluding to the acoustic presence that Shakespeare’s works asserted for themselves on stage. *Forte* is both a figure for bombast and a quality of sound; it is the capacity of language to give force to ideas. Shakespeare’s bombast reveals the force of linguistic experimentation. It is also evidence of Shakespeare’s fast-developing skill in turning the growing opportunities of the expanding semantic potential of English language into both the subject of his drama and the vehicle for thought. ‘Earliest’ bombast is both a linguistic music and a meaning-generating device.

### **3. Shakespeare’s dramatic *forte*: bombast and authenticity**

In a sense, Shakespeare’s bombast comprises both style and the linguistic place of improbability, understood here as an aberration and departure from different kinds of literary conventions, including intelligible syntax, plain, and moderate style. It is both a rhetorical realization of an idea and a cognitive practice. Bombast is a logical as well as rhetorical instrument of knowing, that underpins representation. At the cognitive dimension of text, improbability plays an important role in ‘earliest’ Shakespeare because it captures competing ontological currents of thought that fill dramatic plots and actions. Bombast is often composed of “conceptual tropes”, or figures of thought, like hyperbole, irony, allegory, synecdoche (Lausberg 1998: 328) and of figures of syntax, like repetition, all of which are added, almost like verbal jewels, to the fine fabric of textual background. Shakespeare exploited this possibility of language to dilate, grow, expand, and bulge with ornament and verbal bravura to a level in which language, performance, and the actor’s art together shaped a new reality, a new

“playworld” (Palfrey 2014:1), in his stage plays. In his ‘earliest’ works, Shakespeare capitalized on bombast’s multidimensional form and *forte* (its meaning-creating volume) to set his work apart from the often one-dimensional sonic force of much of the bombast of his contemporaries.

To understand how Shakespeare’s bombast differed from that of his contemporaries we should turn to Christopher Marlowe, whose use of bombast framed in iambic pentameter blankverse, a style that led Harry Levin to call him an “overreacher” (Levin 1965), shows how qualitatively different his bombast is from Shakespeare’s. If Shakespeare competed with, and was influenced by the already popular Marlowe, bombast became the obvious sign of that competition, given Marlowe’s predilection for expressive exaggeration. Marlowe’s bombast impresses more as an image than as a thought, Shakespeare’s is ornament *as* thought. The effect of Marlowe’s bombast is in the linguistic form as such, of Shakespeare’s in its multidimensional meanings. There is a sense that each bombastic passage in Marlowe’s overreaching plays is a self-contained stylistic vignette. Here is Tamburlaine courting Zenocrate, from the second part of Tamburlaine the Great:

Zenocrate, lovelier than the love of Jove,  
Brighter than is the silver Rhodope,  
Fairer than whitest snow on Scythian hills,  
Thy person is more worth to Tamburlaine  
Than the possession of the Persian crown,  
Which gracious stars have promised at my birth.  
A hundred Tartars shall attend on thee,  
Mounted on steeds swifter than Pegasus;  
Thy garments shall be made of Median silk,  
Enchased with precious jewels of mine own,  
More rich and valorous than Zenocrate’s;  
With milk-white harts upon an ivory sled  
Thou shalt be drawn amidst the frozen pools  
And scale the icy mountains’ lofty tops,  
Which with thy beauty will be soon resolved;  
My martial prizes, with five hundred men,  
Won on the fifty-headed Volga’s waves,  
Shall all we offer to Zenocrate,  
And then myself to fair Zenocrate. (1.2.87-105)

Words referring to a world beyond England, an otherworld, create in this apostrophe an acoustic and visual effect of estrangement; Zenocrate, the absent character is imagined again and again, but only as an idea. She never directly speaks. The play, already crowded with men, displaces the absent woman, banishing her to the cold zones in Russia and in frozen landscape, creates even more room for men to bond with one another. As the plot progresses her beauty figures as improbable, her image constituted by hyperbolic metaphors. It is as if in the heroic world of Marlowe's grinding soldiers, female beauty is a strange fellow, a remote idea. There is a disjuncture between words and action, since desiring Tamburlaine, who only moves in the world of military men, imagines Zenocrate more as a concept than a body of flesh. The poetic energy of Tamburlaine's bombast, and the dramatist's intelligence to conjure up cold beauty in such a way that it creates an illusion of affect and admiration in this set piece, act as visual-verbal set pieces on stage. In the words of a recent critic, this kind of speech represents rhetorical "comfort food" (Adamson 2007: 46). In terms of its meaning, this example of bombast does not reach beyond verbal embellishment; it almost renders Zenocrate a stage prop. Marlowe varies the same syntactic formula through auditory repetitions, counting on the aural effect of his verbal padding. This formula worked well in plays that are more based on a series of extraordinarily crafted episodes than on a developing plot. In contrast to the ornamental grammar of Marlowe's bombast, Shakespeare's bombast privileges the rhetorical dimension of bombast as a composite of different strategies and instruments of persuasion. His bombast is calculated to animate physical, affective, and cognitive aspects of drama, which are in consonance with the plot and action as developing features of stage plays. In that respect, Marlowe's style is limited, and Shakespeare's is multilayered. In his comparison of Marlowe and Shakespeare, Simon Palfrey has recently argued that "Marlowe's reputation is for nonchalant carelessness, but in truth he is much more possessive of his instruments than Shakespeare" (Palfrey 2014: 74). This idea that Marlowe does not let his expressive instruments in the theatre—language and performance—run away from him, captures clearly the quality of Marlowe's bombast. Marlowe's refined ear for poetry and for stage spectacle better follows his intuition for crafting dramatic verse than structuring dramatic plot; so he puts all of his "charismatic intelligence" (Palfrey 2014: 14) into the formal effect and the ornamentation of his blank verse. While Marlowe puts all of his creative energies in producing

impressive poetic imagery, “Shakespeare allows his materials a quasi-independent appetite, or morphs his mind into their potential for such” (Palfrey 2014: 14). “Morphs” is the key word here because it suggests the extent to which Shakespeare uses rhetorical dimension of language for multiple purposes. Shakespeare treats bombast as complex language itself, as malleable verbal matter, and weaves it around and through both actions and characters, to enrich other forms of expression. He wrote his bombast against the background of the culture and practice of bombastic expression in late Elizabethan aesthetics, which included public theatre as well. Marlowe was not alone in treating bombast as merely ornate style. Shakespeare would have been surrounded by other playwrights who handled bombast in the way Marlowe did.

Marlowe conceives of bombast as ornamental in a similar way in which Robert Greene uses blankverse in his popular play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, written probably in 1589, shortly after Tamburlaine (written in 1587/8), and performed successfully at the Rose Theatre. In *Friar Bacon*, a play popular on the public stage in London at time when earliest Shakespeare was busy acting and writing plays, Shakespeare may have heard the actor playing King Henry III deliver the following speech:

Great men of Europe, monarchs of the west,  
Ring'd with the walls of old Oceanus,  
Whose lofty surge is like the battlements  
That compass'd high-built Babel in the towers,  
Welcome, my lords, welcome, brave western kings,  
To England's shore, whose promontory cleaves  
Shows Albion is another little world. (Greene, Scene 4, 1-7)

The vocabulary of this speech highlights physical geography that consists of walls, battlements, towers, cliffs, a shore, and a promontory. This exterior world delineates thought much like Tamburlaine's thundering recitations of the countries and territories that he conquers in his thirst to extend his domain from the East to the West. Yet this bombast does not anticipate Shakespeare's grand style. In Shakespeare's hand, bombast is a way of shaping knowledge about women. In Shakespeare's bombast, we follow the movement of the mind in the first place, only then we are impressed by the sound of language. It is as if Shakespeare had the speaking part and the speaking body of the actor in mind when he wrote some of his

bombast. He is careful not to deafen the actor's vocal performance by the volume of verbal sound. In *3 Henry 6*, York is speaking of Queen Margaret on stage:

'Tis beauty that doth oft make women **proud**—  
But, God he knows, thy share thereof small;  
'Tis virtue that doth make them most **admired**—  
The country doth make thee wondered at;  
'Tis government that makes them seem **divine**—  
The want thereof makes thee abominable.  
Thou art as opposite to every good  
As the antipodes are unto us,  
Or as the south to the septentrion.  
O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide! (1.4.129-138)

Spread evenly across several lines (129, 131, 133), repetition creates balance and harmony. Between each repeated line, Shakespeare gives the actor a pause to introduce another thought directly related to the external context that shapes the world. God and country are just as crucial points in developing this argument as is woman and her power because they are all one universe. Interestingly, it is striking that the author of the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet picks up the last line of this speech, in a possible reference to Shakespeare, "beautified with our feathers" and acting bombastically with his "Tiger's heart wrapt in a player's hide" (Schoenbaum 1970: 50). The connection between this line and cultural history might not have escaped contemporary audience. Writing against the historical background of Queen Elizabeth I's rule, the last line of York's speech can be read as exposing a male aristocrat's anxiety of being subservient to a powerful woman, and could very well be a reference to Elizabeth herself. At the semantic and formal levels, the words and ideas from one line grow out of those in the previous to create an organic cascade of sound. The stylistic and ontological shock of bombast at the end calls for a re-valuation of York's intent, for a radically different way of thinking about woman's role in a heroic play, and outside it, in heroic discourse, with which patriotic Elizabethan age was enamoured. This bombastic line, then, is more than an insult directed at Queen Margaret; it resonates with a view of Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabethan tragedy is particularly attentive to the treatment of ambition and its consequences, and that theme establishes the larger

frame for York's speech, whose last line is a logical, if not exaggerated, articulation of denouement towards which the speech is build up. It is this kind of linguistic crescendo that creates the effect of *forte* in Shakespeare's bombastic writing; volume is increased at the point where meaning is expanded to cover more than one set of issues, more than one world.

Structured around repetition ('Tis beauty; 'Tis virtue ;'Tis government) the bombast of this speech dampen some of Marlowe's overreaching rhetoric. But this flattening, this repetition executed as a linear sequence of the same lexical formula, reflects, as Russ McDonald has argued writing about rhetorical repetitions in *Romeo and Juliet*, "the Elizabethan fondness for pattern" (McDonald 2009: 2) that produces balance and harmony, which were Elizabethan stylistic ideals. Elizabethan music, gardens, and the "well-defined but unadventurous timbering" (Mowl 2001: 44) of the facades of town houses, as well as those of country mansions (like Hardwick Hall) and castles (like Kenilworth), are all evidence of the love of balance achieved through parallelism and the repetition of structural forms. If we want to gain knowledge of where Shakespeare's bombast came from, we should not only turn to literature but also to the material culture of the physical environment in which he lived and the visual world which surrounded him. While we prefer variety and difference, the Elizabethans preferred sameness and the balance of equal parts. What for us, then, is monotony, for them would have been harmony. We avoid monotony, they sought harmony stemming from repetition. The corresponding rhythm of forms that create balance through the repetition of like formal patterns has its textual equivalent in Shakespeare's use of rhetorical strategies that create just such an effect.

In Shakespeare, the broken *conduplicatio*, which Richard Lanham defines as "repetition of a word or words in succeeding clauses" (Lanham 1991: 190), moves towards building a thought that culminates in a bombastic climax in the last line of the speech. "Beauty [...] proud ," "country [...] admired", "government [...] divine": these are important collocations in lines shaped around *conduplicatio*. Those lines make conceptual pairs based on collocations concerning government and country, two entities that mattered to Shakespeare's audience. In other words, beauty supplies the scaffolding of a larger frame of the historical basis of human condition. At the levels of logic and rhetoric, that is, at the level of form, the conceptual coherence achieved in the examples of bombast from York's speech indicates careful following of the precepts for building



a point around various examples recommended in textbooks of rhetoric. But the effect of this bombast is an individual achievement. This bombast does not produce disbelief, as does Marlowe's bombastic blankverse, but calls attention to the subject of this speech, the pragmatics of earthly rule. Marlowe's words and sounds flow out as if propelled by one giant bluster. Shakespeare braids the styles the Elizabethans liked: lexical exaggeration alternates with rhetorical parallelism.

Yet bombast also provides a conceptual way of imagining history, history conceived not as a repository of *exempla* involving the work of Fortune and divine justice. As an outcome of man's agency outside the reach of Fortune and divine justice, history brings its own turmoil; so bombast becomes the vehicle that captures a new reality, as an audience would have witnessed in *2 Henry VI*. Here is Suffolk:

My tongue should stumble in mine earnest words;  
My eyes should sparkle like the beaten flint;  
My hair be fixed on end, as one distraught;  
Ay, every joint should seem to curse and ban.  
And, even now, my burdened heart would break  
Should I not curse them . . .  
Their sweetest shade a grove of cypress trees!  
Their chiefest prospect murd'ring basilisks!  
Their softest touch as smart as lizards' stings!  
Their music frightful as the serpent 's hiss,  
And boding screech-owls make the consort full!  
All the foul terrors in dark-seated hell—(3.2.320-325 ; 326-332)

The curse depends on repetition for its power and the repetition of possessive pronouns in the initial positions (“My/Mine” and “Their”) may sound syntactically tedious to us, but for the Elizabethans repetition which produced harmony was a source of delight. “Distraught”, a key word in this speech, conditions “passionate exclamations” which are the affective state identified by the literary theoretician William Scott as one of the situations requiring the writer to “force violently” (Scott 2013: 67) poetic language to enhance the power of utterance, in his recently discovered work, *The Art of Poesy* (c1599).<sup>2</sup> Here Scott's model is Quintilian. But Shakespeare's

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<sup>2</sup> Scott was a contemporary of Sir Philip Sidney, whose treatise *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1595) inspired Scott's treatise.

tunes his bombast to the processes of thinking ideas in the language as a living force of theatre. Heaping up adjectives becomes a way of displaying to Elizabethan theatre goers the richness of language to produce both ornament and meaning; to capture high emotions with swelling terms.

Some detectable linguistic traces in this speech reveal an astonishing sensitivity to work simultaneously with lexical nuances and ontological categories, suggesting in turn that bombast was a carefully thought-through strategy of writing, not a rhetorical stream of consciousness. Style that reflects a concentration of Latinate influence, in collocating Latinate nouns with Saxon adjective words (nouns + adjectives) and with adjectives appearing in the Latinate position following the noun, as in “chiefest prospect,” “music frightful”, “four terrors”, are linguistic signs of bombast as a cultural category as well. Shakespeare echoes the period’s instructions for grand style by using “great words” (Wilson 2009: 45); that is, Latin lexicon, as the rhetorician Thomas Wilson advises in his popular treatise, *The Art of Rhetoric* (Wilson 2009: 45). If style which collocates Latinate with Latinate words, as Sylvia Adamson suggests (Adamson 1999: 571), tends to appear in parodies and not in the grand style, then mixing words of Latin and Saxon origins in Suffolk’s speech shows Shakespeare’s artistic skill in adjusting vehement style to a linguistically attentive and not just ambitious soldier in a historical situation. Much of the tension between political and military players as rivals in Shakespeare’s early history plays like *2 Henry VI* depends on achieving balance between possibility and improbability of heroic agency.

Improbability implied by bombast makes us think about what history, man’s ambition for rule, and heroic agency mean after history is no longer a series of exempla and when Fortune’s doing is replaced by human agency. Shakespeare’s dramatic parts (or characters) are good listeners on stage who aptly commentators on language and the speech of others. To Queen Margaret and to the audience of Shakespeare’s theatre, Suffolk’s vehement language sounds “like an overcharged gun” that can “recoil / And turn the force of them upon thyself.” (3.2.333) Shakespeare’s text issues a warning about the limits of bombast to capture history in full. The self-conscious reference to bombast signals Shakespeare’s awareness of the limits and potential of this rhetorical device for representation. Bombast suited well historical narratives the Elizabethan liked, and thus fitted the mode of speaking of characters that delivered such narratives.

The best way to see what Shakespeare does with his bombast is to compare his drama to that of Thomas Kyd, who introduced bombast to the public stage of London theatres at the close of the sixteenth century. In Kyd's play *The Spanish Tragedy* Shakespeare might have seen how to employ bombast for narrative purpose. Here is Don Andrea:

I saw more sights than thousand tongues can tell,  
Or pens can write, or mortal hearts can think.  
Three ways there were: that one on the right-hand side  
Was ready way unto the foresaid fields  
Where lovers lived and bloody martialists,  
But neither sort contained within his bounds.  
The left hand-path, declining fearfully,  
Was ready downfall to the deepest hell,  
Where bloody Furies shake their whips of steel,  
And poor Ixion turns an endless wheel;  
Where usurers are cloaked with melting gold,  
And wantons are embraced with ugly snakes,  
And murderers groan with never-killing wounds,  
And perjured wights scalded in a boiling lead  
And full foul sins with torments overwhelmed. (1.1. 55-71)

The force of Kyd's writing depends on bombast as a narrative principle that also generates stylistic excess, with the ghost of Don Andrea, delivering this fantastical account that runs over eighty three lines of an imagined topography of Hell, that dreaded land that lies on the other side of death. The figure of language called *anaphora*, which Lanham defines as "repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses or verses" (Lanham 1991: 11), furnishes bombast in this speech. Anaphora leads to the acoustic climax at the end of a long block of blank verse, just before bombast gives the listener a reprieve when the wondering ghost of Don Andrea reaches "the fair Elysian green" (1.1.74). Shakespeare could have learned a lot from Kyd's example, especially how to vary the modalities of bombast language to push the narrative forward. But he could have also learned how to avoid the excess of anaphora turn into a bombastic tedium. That *The Spanish Tragedy* was performed regularly for fifty years, from about 1592, soon after it was written, until the closure of the theatres in 1642, suggests that an abundance of bombast was not an obstacle to

the play's popularity. Marlowe's and Kyd's bombast left an imprint on the language of drama, and Shakespeare worked both alongside and against that tradition of dramatic rhetoric.

The authentic quality of bombast of 'earliest' Shakespeare lies in eliminating the disconnection between language and the agency performed by characters on stage. In Shakespeare's early tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, the language that Tamora uses to describe the dangerous landscape (the hell on earth) where she finds herself with her the two "lascivious" (2.3.110) Goth sons, Chiron and Demetrius, resembles a thick and dark English forest (lines 93-7) rather than a distant and foreign place. Here is Tamora:

A barren detested vale you see it is;  
The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,  
Overcome with moss and baleful mistletoe.  
Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds  
Unless the nightly owl or fatal raven,  
And when they showed me this abhorred pit  
They told me here at dead time of the night  
A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,  
Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins  
Would make such fearful and confused cries  
As any mortal body hearing it  
Should straight fall mad or else die suddenly. (2.3.93-104)

Linguistic vehemence intensifies an imagined answer to the question that possessed the period in which Shakespeare lived: what Hell is like. Both visual and textual presentations of Hell in the early modern period often associate Hell with exaggeration, Hell with excess, and Hell with improbability. Shakespeare's version of making Hell legible if not fully comprehensible is to present it as an eerie anti pastoral landscape crowned with hyperbole (A thousand/Ten thousand), arranged as "gradual intensification" (Lausberg 1998: 410). Lausberg links hyperbole to extremity and implausibility (1998: 263), and, like Claudia Claridge, for whom hyperbole is "not only an evaluation device" but "first and foremost a quantity and thus an intensity device" (2011: 87), Lausberg treats hyperbole as a trope that creates volume rather than generate meaning. In his modern rendering, hyperbole is more a Marlovian than a Shakespearean trope, revealing a certain limitation of linguistic formalist criticism when tropes are analyzed outside an aesthetic

context, which gives meaning to their use. Claridge, working on a corpus of hyperbole coming largely from Shakespeare's works, makes a valuable comment regarding the quality of hyperbolic use: "Perhaps the hyperbole was somewhat more restrained, less blatant in the past" (Claridge 2001: 183). At this point a historian of literature and a historian of the English language join hands in claiming that while Shakespeare continues to employ even the simplest form of hyperbole, the hyperbole of number (hyperbole whose lexical base is in the use of number, like 'thousand'), the immediate linguistic milieu is not linguistic exaggeration.

Returning to Tamora's words, we encounter epithets that enable vivid language ("a barren detested vale", "baleful mistletoe", "fatal raven", "abhorred pit"). To argue that 'earliest' Shakespeare is too rhetorical and that his poetry is too much rooted in clichés and techniques, as generations of critics have done, is to overlook the choice of stylistic tools which he used to create nuances of linguistic opportunities. Tamora's speech is rhetorical, and stylistically rich, and the bombast that lies at the heart of it features more as an ornament than a thinking tool. The audience is carried along by the poetical particularities of epithets and nouns that see into the nature of contemporary imagination that tries to comprehend Hell with clarity and sharpness. These two hyperboles extend the meaning of Hell by intensifying its intent to conjure it up on earth, which suits Tamora's character. The snakes and toads, which appear within the frame of this hyperbole of number, are the animals associated with hell (remember Hieronymus Bosch's painted fantasies of Hell); as such, they correspond to Tamora's animalistic, hellish, and destructive character. In this careful balancing of hyperbole with other aspects of ornate style lies the authenticity of Shakespeare's bombast adjusted to character and dramatic situation.

The English vocabulary in this speech, that corresponds to the imaginable and potentially familiar landscape is far removed from the flight of Tamburlaine's fancy about distant geography and Don Andrea's verbal rendering of Hell. In an age when "the new delight in spectacle" (Gurr 1992: 226) determined both performance and play writing in early modern England, delight in speaking in language that itself is a spectacle of word choices, combinations, the modalities of sound and semantics, as well as syntax, represent a way of becoming attuned to bombast's rhythm and action on the stage. *Titus* is a good example of a play in which the combination of bombast and action create spectacle. Part of the richness and gothic appeal of *Titus* comes from the way Shakespeare knitted together

different strategies of crafting bombast through vocabulary, hyperbole, and rhetorical figures of syntax. Shakespeare's turn to bombast signals experimentation with multiple possibilities of exaggeration as a mode of writing, not as one might say, an error of expression. That, too, is a sign of stylistic authenticity in an age of linguistic excess. Shakespeare's *forte* created by resounding bombast marks him off from his contemporaries who energized his own writing, but against whom he developed his own personal style that clearly surprised them, as the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet suggests.

That Shakespeare was mindful of the rhetorical and performing dimensions of bombast is evident not only in the way he matches it with action but how he makes dramatic parts self-conscious of their use of it. That is most often the case in his early and late comedies. Shakespeare's earliest comedies are most often concerned with troubling and mocking traditions of love, and with the opportunities and limitations of courtship and the rhetoric of courtship. They probe deep into the puzzling and fuzzy psychology of lovers, exploring love and desire as powerful and engulfing charges that transform his imagined men and women in ways that are frighteningly appealing in the end. Within an aetiology of amorous excess, the recourse to bombast makes sense; its formal and rhetorical excess make it an ideal medium for writing about the power, exaggeration, and improbability of love as acted and articulated on stage. Reading his early comedies of love, one is almost lead to think that Shakespeare knew there were only a few things one could say about love, and once they were said, the rest could be only exaggeration and improbability, necessary though they may be to sustain the illusion of love's enduring effect. In that spirit the Queen of Navarre's commentary on Biron's love-letter writing is revealing of bombast invoked as a term as a critique of the style previously written out as emotion:

We have received your letters full of love,  
Your favours the ambassadors of love,  
And in all maiden council rated them  
At courtship, pleasant jest, and courtesy,  
As bombast and as lining to the time. (5.2.669-773)

It is hard to disagree with the Queen that bombast was the verbal lining of writing about love in the 1590s. From lining used in Biron's speech in

the sense of bombast as cotton wool, to the extended meaning of bombast as a figure for writing, Shakespeare shows how flexible and meaning-generating potential the two words—bombast and lining—offer when used in the same line. That is, after all, what made

bombast the obvious subject of humour and of depicting silly lovers—and what makes comedy sound like comedy. Biron says:

A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind.  
A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound  
When the suspicious head of theft is stopped.  
Love's feeling is more soft and sensible  
Than are the tender horns of cockled snails.  
Love's tongue proves dainty Bacchus gross in taste. (4.3. 310-315)

These lines parody both Petrarchism and Euphuism. The speech also exemplifies self-conscious writing of that parody. These two stylistic media show that lover's imagination cannot be liberated from clichés, which makes love such a tragicomic subject in comedies at the time when drama reached the heights of rhetorical fashioning.

'Earliest' Shakespeare continues to experiment with and search for a poetic medium that will hold the various features of 1590s aesthetics together within literary and dramatic expression. He realizes his bombast in dramatically and rhetorically sensitive moves towards turning the period's favoured (and therefore often attacked) mode of writing into an instrument of thought. In his book *Distant Reading*, Franco Moretti suggests that style provides critics with a model for studying how "human beings make sense of situations" (Moretti 2013: 229). The idea that Shakespeare's characters, his stylized humans, draw attention to the role bombast played in turning psychology into words, emotions into syntax, illusions into images, and history into inner torment, represents a new way of thinking about how a derided feature of style in fact should be treated as one of the key instruments of Shakespeare's authentic style-making, a signature of his personal style in the 1590s through which he conveyed the idea of his characters making sense of dramatic situations created to make them alive on stage.

If the author of the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet reacted against Shakespeare's use of bombast because the device was more suitable for those who were academically educated, unlike a budding author without

university education, such as Shakespeare, still a novice on the London artistic scene, he said something important both about bombast and about Shakespeare. On the one hand, the implication in that pamphlet may be that bombast was treated as a complex rhetorical device, so much so that only the educated were fit to write it and understand its uses. And Shakespeare was one of them, since the caliber of Elizabethan grammar-school education in rhetoric, imitation, translation and composition exercises, was high enough to have furnished him with the creative and cognitive resources for such an understanding and artistic skill. On the other hand, the author of the pamphlet may also be suggesting that a crafty use of bombast was the key to successful play writing in cut-throat competition for the presence and visibility on the public stage in early 1590s London already filled with plays written by playwrights who used bombast liberally. 'Earliest' Shakespeare gives ample evidence for arguments in favour of these two possible explanations. Bombast shows that 'earliest' Shakespeare wrote within the Elizabethan rhetorical and stylistic traditions in which repetition and exaggeration, which alternate and battle with mean and plain style became one of the ways for managing the sound of drama and audiences' affects. Through bombast Shakespeare simultaneously created and reduced the distance between his audience and the world and how to create other worlds that extended both the plots of his plays and the use of language of his characters. Shakespeare's bombast became a sign of authenticity and a writing strategy which he will return to in the plays written and performed after 1594, like *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. In these plays he will use bombast sparingly yet with more sophistication, but with no less *forte* than in his 'earliest' dramas.



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Горан Станивуковић

## НАЈРАНИЈИ ШЕКСПИР: БОМБАСТИЧНОСТ И АУТЕНТИЧНОСТ

### Сажетак

У раду се испитује Шекспирова употреба бомбастичног стила као језичког и драмског израза који је Шекспиру послужио да почне да развија лични стил у окружењу у којем је писао под јаким утицајем својих савременика, који су се користили бомбастичним стилем као помодним стилем. Атрибутом “најранији” се, прво, описује период Шекспировог стваралаштва од доласка у Лондон до 1594. године када постаје деоничар у позоришној дружини Лорда Коморника (*The Chamberlain’s Men*) и, практично, професионални драмски писац (у односу на слободног писца пре тога); друго, овим атрибутом се исто тако отвара поље истраживања феноменологије појмова “рани” и “најранији” када се користе у опису развоја личног стила неког писца. Неколико примера из Шекспирових најранијих драма се анализирају у односу на књижевне утицаје, посебно Кристофера Марлоа, и закључује се да је Шекспиров бомбастичан стил, не толико израз још неуглађене употребе реторичких стратегија у писању колико начин да се популаран бомбастичан стил употреби као стилско оружје против оних који су га користили често и обилато, али на начин на који се бомбастичан украс, или везује за смисао, или се, додатно, користи као изражајно средство преко којег ширење семантичког обиља које се догађа крајем 16. века постаје израз нове књижевне естетике у последњој деценији 1590-их.

**Кључне речи:** бомбастичан стил, немогућност, драма, књижевни утицај, Шекспир, Томас Кид, Кристофер Марло



**Vesna Lopičić\***

University of Nis  
Faculty of Philosophy  
Serbia

## THE STAGE AS PURGATORY: SHAKESPEREAN MORAL DILEMMAS

### **Abstract**

This article was inspired by Trevor Nunn's 2011 production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in London. As the performance and the title of the play transpire, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are detained in Purgatory after being killed in England. The aim of this article is to explore the reasons why Tom Stoppard keeps them in Purgatory and repeatedly exposes them to the crucial moments from their earthly lives. The necessary theoretical framework is set out by Stephen Greenblatt's study *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2002), and Gareth Leyshon's B.Th. thesis *The Purpose of Purgatory: Expiation or Maturation?* (2005). The conclusion we would like to propose is that the purpose of their detention is maturation, meaning the ability to make morally right choices when faced with Shakespearean moral dilemmas.

**Key words:** theatre, Purgatory, Greenblatt, Leyshon, Shakespeare, Stoppard, moral dilemmas

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\* E-mail address: lovevuk@gmail.com

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*I thank him that prays for me when the bell tolls,  
but I thank him much more that catechises me, or preaches to me,  
or instructs me how to live.*

John Donne

## 1. Introduction

In his book *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2002), Stephen Greenblatt endorses the views of John Gee, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Protestant, on “the degree to which idolatry, superstition and credulity defined Catholic spirituality” (Shami 2003: 195) in his time. As a convert from Catholicism, in 1624 Gee published a book, *The Foot out of the Snare*, in which he documented and illustrated many deceptions, public spectacles, and vices (fear of Purgatory being one of them), allegedly practiced by Catholic priests in order to ensnare common folk. The book came to be known as *Somers Tracts* and became widely popular among Protestants. Jeanne Shami identified the dominant comparison used by Gee in order to subject popish practices to public ridicule. In the chapter “Sermons and the Moral Marketplace” of her study *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit*, she says: “In fact, the Tract compares these public spectacles to theatrical stage plays and interludes” (Shami 2003: 195). Shami is right to notice that Gee was the first to establish this connection between religious practices and the theatre. Therefore, it seems that Stephen Greenblatt got the idea for his research into the phenomenon of Purgatory directly from John Gee and his perception that Purgatory in the end reached the Renaissance stage. In the last paragraph of his book Greenblatt comes to the same conclusion: “The space of Purgatory becomes the space of the stage” (Greenblatt 2002: 257), which he repeats in his Epilogue (261), leaving his readers no room for doubt as to whether Hamlet is in a metaphorical Purgatory or not. The goal of this paper is not principally to determine the presence of Purgatory in *Hamlet*, but to focus on the representation of Purgatory in its complementary play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Our aim is to prove that Stoppard places Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a real, not metaphorical Purgatory in order to explore how they would react to a second opportunity to make a morally correct choice. Before looking at the text of the play in greater detail, it is important to set the background for this research by outlining the concept of Purgatory as shown in *Hamlet*.

## 2. Purgatory and Shakespeare

Greenblatt wrote *Hamlet in Purgatory* as if to put an end to the endless debate regarding the issue of the Ghost. Both Protestant and Catholic audiences raise the question of the origin of the Ghost. The play was staged for the first time around 1602, about half a century after the Protestant Reformation was completed and the Anglican Church established. By that time, Purgatory as part of Christian teaching had been eliminated from the official Protestant doctrine, and practices related to it were disapproved of, if not forbidden. Why Shakespeare then introduced a ghost into the original story remains the subject of dispute. If the Ghost is an earthly representation of the soul of King Hamlet, then it means that the King's soul is suffering in Purgatory, which is definitely part of the Catholic portrayal of the human lot. The evidence from the text supports this interpretation:

My hour is almost come,  
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames  
Must render up myself...  
...I am thy father's spirit,  
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away (Act 1, Scene 5).

These are the words with which King Hamlet rather conventionally describes his suffering in Purgatory. The Christian people of Europe, regardless of their religious persuasion, are all quite familiar with these images of torturing flames and sulphurous stench to which the soul of a sinner is condemned for a certain period of time. The King also reminds his listeners of the purpose of this punishment which is the purification of the soul so that it can ascend to the Holy Father in its pure state. Reminding is definitely unnecessary since to this day the readers, believers and non-believers alike, tremble at the stories of purgatorial agonies experienced either as realistic post-mortem perils or as vivid metaphors for the plights of this life.

King Hamlet (or his ghost) is fully aware of his own foul crimes and the need to purify himself through fire until all sins are burnt away and his soul remains clean and ready to meet its Maker. The only problem with

this standard representation of Purgatory is that doctrinally it should have been unacceptable to Shakespeare's audiences which Shakespeare was definitely aware of and yet he chose to make the nature of the Ghost the crux of the problem. Greenblatt points out that Hamlet, as „a young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost” (Greenblatt 2002: 240), which could mean that at the turn of the century Protestantism was still being haunted by Catholicism. Deeply rooted images and practices are not easily eradicated, nor is it unusual for old customs to surface in a new guise centuries later, as often happens with pagan rituals. Still, it was daring of Shakespeare to open his play with intimations of Purgatory, unless he wanted to warn against it and show how devastating the effect of such a belief is: Prince Hamlet goes mad, and eight people including him die over the course of the play. It would stand to reason that he does indeed go mad and cause the death of eight persons, haunted as he is by the request of the Ghost, being unable to reject the moral obligation imposed upon him by his father's ghost. Consequently, at least part of the audience would get the message that Catholicism, with Purgatory which the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, may be devastating to people's mental or physical being.

Other questions that arise in this context are equally intriguing. Is the Ghost the workings of the Devil; why does it confuse us by demanding vengeance instead of simple Catholic remembrance; did Shakespeare perhaps want to thrill the audiences as a strategy to increase ticket sales, or perhaps he intended to take a subversive stand against the Protestant authorities because, though he was a conforming member of the Church of England, he was secretly a Catholic? It is well-known that these questions related to the nature of the Ghost are not the only unanswered ones in Hamlet, but there are also other questions related to the nature of Purgatory which beg to be tackled in view of the fact that Stoppard makes Purgatory the setting for his play: why did the Anglican Church reject Purgatory and what is its canonical purpose today?

It took Stephen Greenblatt a book of over 300 pages to answer the first question, relating it to *Hamlet*. Briefly,

Though it received its full doctrinal elaboration quite late – the historian Jacques Le Goff places the “birth of Purgatory” in the latter half of the twelfth century – the notion of an intermediate place between Heaven and Hell and the system of indulgences



and pardons meant to relieve the sufferings of souls imprisoned within it had come to seem, for many heretics and orthodox believers alike, essential to the institutional structure, authority, and power of the Catholic Church (Greenblatt 2002: 13-14).

This means that the rituals and paraphernalia of Catholicism relied heavily on the institution of Purgatory for good reason. It was believed, and this belief was reinforced by all classes of the clergy,<sup>1</sup> that the souls of sinners suffered such unimaginable torments in Purgatory that any means of relieving them of these pains was acceptable. That is how the system of indulgences and pardons was developed where a person would willingly part with their last penny in order to save their soul from the scorching flames. Suffrages also included prayers, fasts, almsgiving and masses which could all be purchased. This favour could be extended to the departed as well, and since almost all souls were imperfect, shortening their stay in Purgatory through suffrages became a lucrative side-activity for the Church. The living could thus reduce the duration and intensity of the soul's agony which the Church encouraged by spreading the fear of Purgatory. To hasten their souls through it, people parted with their wealth, commissioned prayers and bought whatever relics were placed before them by the clergy or impostors. Their fear was ungrounded, Purgatory itself imaginary, but the money they paid was real. As Greenblatt phrases it: "purgatorial fire, though a figment of the imagination, brings real gold and silver into the coffers of the Catholic Church" (Greenblatt 2002: 39).

When the institutional practices related to Purgatory spread out of control and beyond pragmatic argument, they made the Catholic Church vulnerable to the attacks of Protestants. The extent of corruption of the clergy became intolerable to lay folk and nobility alike, and the reformation of the church was inevitable. The intense exploitation of human fears which had lasted for almost five centuries was suppressed by other practices imposed by the newly established Church of England. Purgatory evolved into an emblem of the corruption of the Catholic Church. However, the human imagination was already deeply possessed by horrible images which, strangely enough, seemed to be more appealing to it than the representations of heavenly bliss. The Anglican Church rejected it, but

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<sup>1</sup> Greenblatt lists bishops, abbots, priors, deacons, archdeacons, suffragans, priests, monks, canons, friars, pardoners, and summoners (Greenblatt 2002: 10).

Purgatory lodged itself in literature so that even Shakespeare resorted to the images of Purgatory knowing that the effect would be powerful.

The second question, about the significance and meaning of Purgatory today, is more difficult to answer, even if one is a practicing Catholic. The B.Th. thesis of Gareth Leyshon, *The Purpose of Purgatory: Expiation or Maturation?* (2005), can offer some basic insights into this matter. Following doctrinal requirements, Leyshon asserts:

- a) There is a *post-mortem* state in which souls *expiate* their debts.
- b) Truly penitent souls undergo ‘purgatorial penalties’ in lieu of the penances they were unable to complete while alive.
- c) Living persons may contribute suffrage towards this expiation by applying Mass, prayers or alms.
- d) In order to avoid this state, one must ask the Lord’s mercy before one comes to judgment.
- e) But one will only receive mercy to the extent one has been merciful to others. (Leyshon 2005: 41).

Evidently, all these elements of Catholic dogma have been preserved virtually unchanged from the earliest times of Purgatory. The living soul passes through the process of purification, and stays in Purgatory proportionally to the heaviness of its burden of sins and possibly the suffrage offered by those left behind. However, this period is not just a punishment, but a cleansing of the soul. Leyshon’s terminological equivalents for punishment and cleansing are expiation and maturation respectively, where maturation is part of the development of an individual soul, while expiation is a penalty justly imposed. Further, Leyshon proposes a new paradigm and introduces two new terms: Detention and Refinement. He relates Detention to expiation and Refinement to non-penal purification: “Detention, which is an expiatory state which effects maturation; and Refinement, which is purely for maturation” (Leyshon 2005: 50).

Making use of these distinctions, an interpretation of Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* will now be attempted.

### **3. Purgatory and Stoppard**

It seems that the title of this play has not been given full critical consideration. In *Hamlet*, these are the words with which the English ambassador informs

Horatio, since the King is already dead, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been executed. Stoppard chooses to quote these words as the title of his play and thus sets a clear context for its understanding: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead! They are not metaphorically dead, they will not die at the end of the play, their deaths are not impending, and they are not headed for death: they are dead but not quite gone. The fact that Stoppard does not repeat these words in the text of his play should not create any misunderstanding, though it evidently does. None of the many critics of the play, at least to our best knowledge, acknowledge the title, but read the text as signifying the main characters' fear of death, or the absurdity of life, or a metaphor for death.<sup>2</sup> We contend that the title is an integral part of the play and as such should at the start make the reader ask the logical question: if they are dead, and still the main characters of a complex play with a great deal of action, where are they situated?

It could have been expected that after Greenblatt published *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2002), his title would give rise to new interpretations of Stoppard's play, and answer the above question. The two plays are intrinsically connected, and their main characters find themselves in similar situations, but with one difference: Hamlet is in a metaphorical Purgatory seeking answers to his moral dilemmas while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in a real Purgatory, doing exactly the same thing. So, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, as the title indicates, and detained in Purgatory.

As much as Hamlet is a play about death,<sup>3</sup> *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is even more so. Although for the whole length of the play Ros and Guil keep avoiding the grim realisation that they are dead and in Purgatory, this seems to be the glaring truth. At the beginning of the play they are in

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<sup>2</sup> The authorial intention is as irrelevant as always. It seems that Stoppard intended the play to be a metaphor: 'The more doors there are for you to open, the better the play. Take *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, if the metaphor had been specific, the play would not have had the freedom to go where it wanted. Some students don't see it as a metaphor but a puzzle to which I have the answer, and if I were to impart it they would get an A.'

<sup>3</sup> An interesting reading of Hamlet sees it as a play about death: "Death pervades the play. Of the 11 principal characters, one is already dead (the Ghost) 8 die during the course of the play (Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet), one attempts suicide (Horatio, who is stopped by Hamlet) and one is responsible for the death of thousands (Fortinbras). Death is referred to or someone dies in 18 of the 20 scenes of the play. The exceptions are the scenes of Laertes departure (1.3) and Polonius with Reynaldo and Ophelia (2.1)

“a place without any visible character” (R&G: 2), passing the time tossing coins which keep landing heads up. The run of ‘heads’ is impossible, they are aware of the oddity of it, but they refuse to draw logical conclusions. Stoppard gives clear instructions: Guil “is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it” (R&G: 3). What is this ‘it’ and its implications that worry Guil, if not the fact that they are dead. The very place where they are denies description, it is not like any other place, and it does not resemble any place where they have ever been, for they have never been in Purgatory. In his brilliant 2011 production at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, Trevor Nunn places them in a void, on an empty stage, as the best approximation to the horror of Purgatory. There is nowhere to go; there is a lack of environment. It is an alternate universe where their existence is continued without their grasping what has happened, very much in the manner of the films *The Others* (2001) or *The Sixth Sense* (1999), with the difference that they remain unenlightened to the end.

The strangeness of the place is highlighted by the improbability of the lucky coin tossing which neither luck, nor the law of probability, the law of averages, the law of diminishing returns or any other law can explain. Guil subconsciously realises that speculating about these issues cannot be particularly rewarding because he fears that the spell of their illusion of being alive might be broken. He criticises Ros for not asking any questions, for not pausing to think, not having any doubts, and not being ready to go any further, while these are also his own shortcomings. He fears that their existence is not real in the worldly sense, and wants Ros to touch and hug him. Ros does not feel fear, the crack that might flood his brain with light, as Guil says, and he is the dumber of the two, since there is good reason to be fearful.

Further, the dimension of time also seems to be missing from the universe which they now inhabit. They seem to be tossing coins forever, not being able to remember when the game started, being unable to remember when the day started. Time has stopped dead, all things are forgotten, and Guil’s pseudo-scientific dithyrambs cannot fool even himself: “The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear” (R&G: 11). Various options which he explores are unconvincing, and however much he struggles, the strangeness of the

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Hamlet is obsessed with death. In every one of the 13 scenes in which he appears there is a reference to death or someone dies. ...The play ends on a final note of death, with the body of dead Hamlet and the others being carried off (5.2. 388-395).”

place and the things happening in it lead Guil to the conclusion which he will not explore, that all these must be indicative of something.

Finally, Ross's comment about the fingernails and the beard growing after death starts an exchange of deliberate misunderstandings whose purpose is to obscure the fact they have died. Guil is on the verge of realising this fact, but Ross always picks up a wrong reference and focuses on the irrelevant detail, trying not to give any significance to the fact that he cut his fingernails 18 times while he never cut his toenails. Guil entertains the idea that a mystical experience can become as thin as reality if witnessed by more people, which then takes away its startling dimension. Yet, he cannot exclude the option that they are now "within un-, sub- or supernatural forces" (R&G: 10), basically meaning outside the realm of ordinary experience. They try hard to understand how it all began and Guil remembers the messenger, which gives a clue to Ross to conclude: "That's why we're here" (R&G: 13). This conclusion is so terrifying that he must qualify it immediately: "Travelling."

All the scenes mentioned above take place at the beginning of Act 1, before the arrival of the players, and yet on these 15 pages Stoppard asks and answers all the important questions which will be developed over the course of the play. Further on, the evidence of Ros and Guil being in Purgatory accumulates, but that having been established, it is also important to see what the form of their suffering is. Traditionally, purgatorial purification takes the form of cleansing fires as the torments of purifying punishment. Leyshon adopts the traditional categories of duration (analogous to time on earth) and intensity (analogous to the heat produced by a fire):

In Purgatory, we posit, a soul endures a varying (but non-zero) intensity of purgation for a finite time. The purification required by a soul is determined solely by the state of detachment of its will at the time of death. The penalty depends on the sins and good works committed since baptism and the suffrage applied on behalf of the soul (Leyshon 2005: 14-15).

The form of purgation to which Stoppard exposes his characters is excruciating though it may seem to be milder than the flames. Throughout the play Ros and Guil are either exposed to or involved in events that they do not understand. It is like a carousel that spins faster and faster, people jump on it, interact with them, jump off, and leave them in ever

greater confusion. The first of these events is in fact the first memory that they manage to recall, that of the messenger waking them up to tell them they have been sent for. His arrival and their prompt departure are of the utmost significance because they mark the beginning of everything that came afterwards. It is easy to confuse this event as the beginning of the actual plot of Stoppard's play because it parallels the plot of Hamlet. However, Ross unintentionally gives us a clue that this is just a flashback, not something that is happening now. He first says: "Which way do we...?" meaning which way do we take now, but immediately corrects himself in order to follow the events as they really happened in the past: "Which way did we...?" meaning which way did we take, when they hastily left for Elsinore fearful lest they came too late to please the king. Both questions are interrupted and left unanswered because it would be too dangerous to answer them. The grammar would reveal the truth, and their existence then would become unbearable even more so than it already is.

These flashbacks are numerous and they constitute the plot of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Ros and Guil do not meet the Players but remember having met them on their way to Elsinore. They do not go to the court but remember watching *The Murder of Gonzago*. They never wonder how they got to be in all these different places, because there is no logical explanation for their teleportation. The flashbacks come in swift succession, Ophelia, Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, the Tragedians, the pirates; they enter and exit the stage many times, they cry, pray, act, and talk, the scenes change, the court, the road, the boat, and confusion mounts all the time until Ros feels so frustrated for living as though he were in a public park that he is on the verge of tears: "Never a moment's peace! In and out, and they're coming at us from all sides (R&G: 86)... Incidents! All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?" (R&G: 146). Ros and Guil are mentally tormented to the very end of the play by all these life-like mirages meant to communicate the truth they fail to grasp. Their world is without meaning, without logic, and their agony without end. They disappear into the dark only to begin a new cycle anticipated by Guil's words: "Well, we'll know better next time" (R&G: 155). However, the reader realises that this will not be the case, that the same hectic activity will be repeated again, the scenes acted out again without catharsis. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will remain in their permanent Purgatory.

#### 4. Shakespearean moral dilemmas

The crucial point of the purpose for which Stoppard places Ros and Guil in this horrible Purgatory where they are made to relive their lives over and over again pushes itself to the foreground. At the end of the play, the two of them are all alone on the stage/Purgatory as they have actually been all the time and the spotlights are above their heads, signifying the need for them to think. In his desperation, Ros asks the right question: “We’ve done nothing wrong! We didn’t harm anyone. Did we?” (R&G: 154). Finally he comes to the most important moral issue concerning the consequences of one’s acts, whose recognition may mark the beginning of the process of purification. One more 3D rewinding of the film of their lives would have allowed them to understand where they went wrong and who they harmed had they not been afflicted with moral amnesia. Guil’s answer is the easiest one, “I can’t remember” (R&G: 154), and at the same time the worst one for it will detain them in Purgatory.

Leyshon’s paradigm of Detention and Refinement can explain their present position. Refinement cannot apply to Ros and Guil because they do not qualify for it: “God provides a process of Refinement which has the sole purpose of maturation (purification), enabling those souls which need make no expiation to become sufficiently detached from all lesser goods to enjoy the totality of the Beatific Vision” (Leyshon 2005: 50). Ros and Guil are not “merciful souls who begged for God’s mercy during their earthly life” (Leyshon 2005: 50), for which reason they are not allowed non-penal purification in order to reach maturation. However, their implicit commitment to God allows them to go through the process of Detention and expiate their sins in the hope that this will effect maturation. Therefore, Stoppard keeps them in Purgatory and exposes them to the decision-making moments of their experiences which have influenced the course of their lives. The first one was when the messenger came to take them to the king. He was a foreigner and they could have refused to go even though he mentioned official business and no questions asked, but their remarkable obedience to figures of authority left them with no dilemma as to whether to go or not. They mask their submissiveness with the pursuit of duty. Throughout the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go back to that time realising its moral momentum: “He was just a hat and a cloak levitating in the grey plume of his own breath, but when he called we came. That much is certain – we came” (R&G: 38). All other uncertainties that follow begin

with this certainty, they came, knowing there are alternatives but believing there is no choice. That is when they begin to wear their daily mask.

The second decision-making moment happens at the court when the king and the queen ask them to spy on Hamlet. Ros and Guil willingly obey: “But we both obey, and here give up ourselves in the full bent. To lay our service freely at your feet, To be commanded” (R&G: 36). They are spurred by the promise of reward into forgetting that Hamlet was their childhood friend who trusted them most, and into disregarding the connotations of the king’s ominous words: “the need we have to use you...” (R&G: 35). Their compliance with this request disturbs the order of their previous existence, which cannot escape Guil. There was a kind of harmony and a kind of confidence which is recognised as nature so that acts deviating from it have to be treated as unnatural. Their loyalty to the secret wishes of the king is equivalent to their betrayal of Hamlet, thus the natural order is broken, very similar to the way the legal and natural practice was offended by king Claudius’ adultery, murder and throne usurpation. The loss of order also affects the breakup of the language. Consequently, Ros and Guil cannot compose a simple phrase, that they will be ‘high and dry’ soon because of the wrong decision they have made. The comedy of the scene cannot hide the tragedy of their situation even though Guil quickly comes up with a rationalisation: “To exchange one set for another is no great matter” (R&G: 38). When he refers to one set (of questions and answers), he alludes to the system of values they have shattered along with the stability of their existence. Contrary to his perfunctory conclusion, everything changes with this exchange of values. They lose all sense of direction, and are left with questions without any answers. From the first hasty and unwise decision to follow the messenger, they lose their authentic selves, everybody confuses them, and in the end they do not know who they are any more. Ros refuses any responsibility saying they do not owe anyone anything, but witty Guil has a better understanding of the human condition: “Your smallest action sets off another somewhere else, and is set off by it” (R&G: 39). What they are to do to Hamlet cannot remain without moral consequences. Still, he abuses his own intelligence and decides that it will be just a game they will play, asking the right questions and giving away as little as possible, as if playing with a person’s life equals playing a game. What makes this game morally reprehensible is the fact that they play it for money and not out of fear. Knowing all the facts of the injustice that occurred at court, they still play the part of the “two smiling accomplices – friends – two spies” (R&G: 99) who will probe Hamlet.



The third situation in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are guilty, of omission rather than commission, is when they finally meet Hamlet and fail to take his side and redress the previous wrong decisions. He welcomes them as the best of friends, while they clumsily try to find out his secret. Hamlet is naturally superior to them and not easily deceived, so it is with good reason that Ros and Guil feel ridiculous after this unsuccessful encounter which left them high and dry. The next time they see him, they have the idea of accosting him directly and asking him as friends what is going on. It is a perfect opportunity but they miss it because they now feel unnatural knowing that their spontaneity is part of somebody else's order, and the occasion passes. They confirm their submissiveness to the king when they set a trap for Hamlet with their belts and when they ask him where Polonius' dead body is, but Hamlet always outsmarts them, and leaves them frustrated.

The last time Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fail Hamlet by failing to make the right decision happens on the boat to England. Having opened the letter to the king, they dispel all uncertainty about its content and their role in the implementation of Claudius' plan. Without delay, the king of England should have Hamlet's head cut off which practically makes Ros and Guil Hamlet's executioners. In the natural order of things, this makes no sense, and Ros cannot comprehend it:

The position as I see it, then. We, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, from our young days brought up with him, awakened by a man standing on his saddle, are summoned, and arrive, and are instructed to glean what afflicts him and draw him on to pleasures, such as a play, which unfortunately, as it turns out, is abandoned in some confusion owing to certain nuances outside our appreciation – which, among other causes, results in, among other effects, a high, not to say, homicidal, excitement in Hamlet, whom we, in consequence, are escorting, for his own good, to England. Good. We're on top of it now (R&G: 138).

What will happen is neither logical nor just, but pragmatic Guil easily manages to convince Ros that this is the best course of action. His philosophical discourse on death serves only one purpose – to justify their cowardice, greed, and disloyalty. Guil hides behind the mask of a small ignorant man who is just a cog in somebody else's wheel, knowing that otherwise they would probably head for their own execution. After this brainwashing, Ros comes up with a different argumentation:

The position as I see it, then. That's east unless we're off course, in which case it's night; the king gave me the same as you, the king gave you the same as me: the king never gave me the letter, the king gave you the letter, we don't know what's in the letter; we take Hamlet to the English king, it depending on when we get there who he is, and we hand over the letter, which may or may not have something in it to keep us going, and if not, we are finished and at a loose end, if they have loose ends. We could have done worse. I don't think we missed any chance... Not that we're getting much help (R&G: 138).

Ros's logic is now relativistic, materialistic, evasive, hypocritical, egoistic, and opportunistic. The past is forgotten, responsibility either resigned or delegated, and the moral world seen as non-restricted and non-inhibited: "We can do what we like and say what we like to whomever we like, without restriction" (R&G: 143). They do not question, they do not doubt, they act in submission to another's authority. Their moral world becomes one-dimensional, and all room for dilemma is eliminated. This lack of mercifulness keeps them in Purgatory after they have been stabbed to death by the English guards. Unlike their friend Hamlet who was torn by many moral dilemmas, to be or not to be, to kill or not to kill, to love or not to love, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not see any alternatives. It is not a question of either him or us, and still they sacrifice Hamlet believing it is all beyond them and beyond repair. For this unmerciful act they are detained in Purgatory.

## **5. Conclusion: purgatorial rehearsals**

The doctrinal definitions of Purgatory listed by Leyshon are more than relevant in the case of Ros and Guil. What they cannot accept to the end of the play is their post-mortem state in which they expiate their wrongdoings for which they have not asked forgiveness in life. What is even more important is the fact that they are not even penitent souls for they do not realise they have sinned. They exist in a state of denial, downgrading and finding excuses for themselves: "Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths? (R&G: 152). Nevertheless, they have to undergo purgatorial penalties which in the play take the form of repeated exposure to the scenes of their wrong moral decisions. Leyshon clarifies that the

“Scriptural image of fire applies strictly to Refinement; its appropriateness for Detention is traditional but undefined” (Leyshon 2005: 43). Thus, the “salvific fire *may* be coterminous with the experience of seeing one’s poor works ‘burnt up’” (Leyshon 2005: 42). Not using this traditional imagery of purgatorial fires, Stoppard’s play in fact corresponds to Leyshon’s paradigm, and places Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Detention whose purpose is to make them realise where they went wrong and repent for their sins, so that their immoral choices are ‘burnt up’ and maturation reached. Since nobody is contributing suffrage towards their expiation, the length and intensity of their suffering in Purgatory depends exclusively on them. The focus of the play is individual responsibility which is as crucial in earthly life as it is in the post-mortem existence.

The final point to be made concerns the idea of a two-stage life after death and the possibility of the second death, explored by Keith Ward in his book *Religion and Human Nature* (1998). At the end of his study Ward claims that “temporality continues after death, both in the intermediate world, where time is needed for souls to progress (or regress) in understanding and purification, and in the resurrection world” (Ward 1998: 307). The intermediate world is the term he uses for Purgatory, where all souls still have the opportunity to repent and in that way progress. Further, progress in understanding or maturation enables one to see things as they are and to redeem the past by fully knowing it. Therefore, there is some time for possible development after death which allows the soul to make amends for its sins.

Being detained in Purgatory, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are given this extra opportunity to develop their potentiality for mercifulness which was frustrated on earth. They are made to relive their moments of moral failure in order to grasp their own shortcomings and reshape their characters so as to move on to the second stage of life after death by being released from Purgatory into the life in Heaven. They can still exercise their free will and choose good in this post-mortem existence, and yet they choose to turn a blind eye to the images of betrayal and to repeat the same mistakes. Keith Ward explains that “To relive that moment redemptively is not just to watch an old film of a violent event” (Ward 1998: 317), which is what Stoppard makes them do, as if in the hope that maturation is only a few rehearsals away. Although Guil cries: “No, no, no! – if we can’t learn by experience, what else have we got?” (R&G: 109), it seems that the repetition of experience will not be enough. Occasionally they both come

close to the full understanding of their condition, but quickly back away before surrendering to it. A new rehearsal begins in which they take part in all the painful moments of their lives, so that instead of being in Purgatory they feel almost like being in Hell: “Hell might be the disintegration of life into isolated moments of suffering and anguish” (Ward 1998: 317). The power of passivity is such that despite being warned of their imminent deaths unless they change their moral stand, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern still unmercifully persist in betraying their friend. The possibility of the ultimate refusal to repent is also an option, leading to the second death, the death of the soul, from which there is no return. Unless they learn how to live, which is what John Donne wished for, no purgatorial rehearsals can protect them from this infinite loss.

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Весна Лопичић

## ПОЗОРНИЦА КАО ЧИСТИЛИШТЕ: ШЕКСПИРОВСКЕ МОРАЛНЕ ДИЛЕМЕ

### Сажетак

Инспирација за овај чланак била је поставка драме *Розенкранц и Гилденстерн су мртви* у режији Тревора Нана, коју је лондонско позориште Ројал Хејмаркет изводило 2011. године. Као што се из представе, али и из наслова драме може видети, Розенкранц и Гилденстерн су задржани у Чистилишту после смакнућа у Енглеској. Циљ овог чланка јесте да истражи разлоге из којих их Том Стопард смешта у Чистилиште и непрестано из тера да преживљавају најзначајније тренутке свога живота на земљи. Неопходни теоријски оквир чини студија Стивена Гринблата *Хамлет у Чистилишту* (2002) и дипломски рад Гарета Лејшона *Сврха Чистилишта: испаштање или сазревање?* (2005). Дошли смо до закључка да сврха њиховог задржавања јесте сазревање, у смислу развијања способности да доносе морално исправне одлуке када се суоче са шекспировским моралним дилемама.

**Кључне речи:** позориште, чистилиште, Гринблат, Лејшон, Стопард, моралне дилеме



**Nataša Šofranac\***  
University of Belgrade  
Faculty of Philology  
Belgrade, Serbia

## **VISION IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC PLAYS: PERCEPTION, DECEPTION, DELUSION**

### **Abstract**

Visual effects are, naturally, conspicuous in theatrical performances, but even when we read Shakespeare we can internalise the experience of his characters and visualise the scenes. Vision is also important at another tier, that of his characters themselves, the way they see and experience other characters, the world and, very importantly, themselves. Sometimes because of distorted vision, sometimes because of malevolent input that works on their minds, or just because of inherent subjectivity of perception, the appearance of persons and things was substantially different from reality and that causes a tragic course of events and ultimate catastrophe. So, flawed vision was very much the tragic flaw of Shakespeare's heroes.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, tragedy, vision, eyes, sight, see, seem, perception, mind, error

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\* E-mail address: natashapixie@yahoo.co.uk

## 1. Eyesight, appearance and reality

*Those are pearls that were his eyes.  
(The Tempest, I.ii.)*

Of all the five senses, sight seems to be the most important for Shakespeare's tragic heroes. Not the tactile, because they could even "speak daggers" (*Hamlet*, III.ii.); not smell, although there is a lot of odour, mortality and brimstone in these plays too; and not auditory, although onomatopoeia, voices and music also play an important role. Words could be toxic like poisons poured into one's ear. But vision is what brings things home, what reassures or dissuades. "For she had eyes and chose me. / No, Iago, I'll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove", concludes Othello quite logically (III. iii.), not at all easily jealous or self-righteous. On the other hand, what is seen sometimes needs to be verified or challenged, like the Ghost of Hamlet's father or Cordelia's dead body. Vision is most telling and reliable, but many times things are not as they seem to be and, on the other hand, there is much of what "passeth show" within us. Images from the past often haunt us to the verge of insanity, like the primal scene that, according to many analysts, accounted for Hamlet's problematic attitude toward femininity, or the traumatic experience of the murdered victims that hovered over Macbeth's mind in the beginning, and his wife's in the end of this horror story. The inutterable, what was beyond description or comprehension. That is why Lady Macbeth writes and seals letters, mentioning the crimes only in fragments and allusions. In the beginning, the witches talk; in the end, they show the apparitions. When Hamlet swears to avenge his father and to wipe away all other memories from the "book and volume" of his brain, he also demonstrates this tangibly:

My tables, – meet it is I set it down,  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;  
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark:  
*Writing*  
So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word;  
It is 'Adieu, adieu! remember me.'  
I have sworn 't. (I.v.)



There are opposite examples, – no vision but words – when it was impractical to enact a scene, or indecent to show a bloodbath or an intimate act. *Titus Andronicus* is a play full of such atrocities and patent aggression, as if written by Kyd and not by Shakespeare. Hamlet's father talks about the murder and Hamlet's "prophetic soul" recognizes it as *déjà-vu*. Fratricide is not staged and neither is regicide in *Macbeth* – we get a succinct account of that; the death of Gloucester and Fool; Ophelia's report on Hamlet's frenzied visit at night, when he probably wanted to leave the impression of an insane person and make believe it was love-sickness; the Queen's heartfelt description of Ophelia's death as poetic and innocent, these are all conveyed by narratives, not enacted. Marjorie Garber called such a scene an "unscene", unseen but evoked meticulously and felt as seen by our own eyes (Garber, 2009: 221). Yet, the visual is a very strong tool in persuasion among the characters of this play, so Iago brings the newly emerged circumstances home to Brabantio with vivid pictures of "an old black ram tugging your white ewe" (I.i.), knowing that a visualization of these words would make a detestable picture in the father's mind, an effect identical to his devious account of Cassio's dream in Act III, Scene iii.

## 2. What seems and what is

Appearance versus reality – that is often a clash between good and evil, the genuine and the false. Iago makes it clear in the very beginning of the play that he will pretend just to serve his own "peculiar end", not his liege's, but he'll definitely wear his heart on his sleeve: "I am not what I am" (*Othello*, I.i.). Lady Macbeth taught her husband to be less transparent and to pretend:

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men  
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,  
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,  
Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,  
But be the serpent under't (I.v.)

just as Hamlet noted that in the dungeon of Denmark people may smile and be villains (I.v.). Well-taught by the time of the banquet, though still traumatised by the memory and guilt, Macbeth says:

Let your remembrance apply to Banquo;  
Present him eminence, both with eye and tongue:  
Unsafe the while, that we  
Must lave our honours in these flattering streams,  
And make our faces vizards to our hearts,  
Disguising what they are. (*Macbeth*, III.ii.)

The one who stood up against pretence and outward “strappings” of love and fidelity was banished and disinherited for doing so. Cordelia said she could not heave her heart to her mouth, counting that the obvious would prevail over hollow phrases. On the opposite side of Iago’s and Edmond’s feigned love and loyalty, Cordelia came across as much worse than she really was. Why Cordelia wanted to keep her feelings to herself and not “wear her heart on her sleeve” like her sisters or, like Iago, who used this phrase describing his strategy, may be rather obvious; she did not want to take part in the farcical contest; why Edgar did not want to be recognised but let his father die in ignorance, that is a more complex issue. Stanley Cavell called both “the avoidance of love” (Cavell, 2003: 512 ). It was Lear more than Cordelia who avoided love, for he feared the need and the rejection thereof. Disinheriting his favourite daughter and renouncing all blood ties has also been interpreted as his manoeuvre to keep her by his side.

Hamlet is disgusted by the hypocrisy and avarice that surrounds him. His mother’s suggestion that his grief seems so “particular”, provokes his response that heralds his future excessive and violent reactions:

Thou know’st ‘tis common; all that lives must die,  
Passing through nature to eternity.  
HAMLET  
Ay, madam, it is common.  
QUEEN GERTRUDE  
If it be,  
Why seems it so particular with thee?  
HAMLET  
Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not ‘seems.’  
‘Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
....

Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly: these indeed seem,  
For they are actions that a man might play:  
But I have that within which passeth show;  
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.  
(*Hamlet*, I.ii)

He abhors the word “seems” because it can coincide with another one he uses in the same reply: “play”. To do him justice, we can corroborate his view with a quote from Iago’s first soliloquy, sharing his tactics and intentions with the audience/readership:

In following him, I follow but myself.  
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,  
But seeming so, for my peculiar end.  
For when my outward action doth demonstrate  
The native act and figure of my heart  
In compliment extern, ’tis not long after  
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve  
For daws to peck at. I am not what I am. (I.i.)

Almost identically, another Machiavellian hero plots against his father and half-brother:

A credulous father! and a brother noble,  
Whose nature is so far from doing harms,  
That he suspects none: on whose foolish honesty  
My practises ride easy! I see the business.  
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit:  
All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit. (*King Lear*, I.ii.)

The verb “seem” appears 21 times in *Hamlet*, 17 times in *Macbeth*, 18 in *King Lear* and 18 in *Othello*. It is mainly associated with appearance, with what is not, but not only as erroneous perception, but also as deliberately imposed delusion, a misleading impression.

The personification of such intrigue and “motive-hunting motiveless malignity” (Coleridge, 1907: 172), Iago, identified Othello’s credulity as “free and open nature, / That thinks *men honest* that but *seem* to be so” (I.iii.).

Passing himself off as a loyal and generous friend, while subtly insinuating the infidelity of his victims who become caught in his web, Iago suggests to Othello, in a nutshell, that all that glitters is not gold. Using a binary system of thinking, Othello has a very simple division of people into honest and dishonest, Iago being most honest. Honesty, for men meant integrity and sincerity, and had an additional meaning for women – chastity. Thus, they judge Cassio:

IAGO

Men should be what they seem;  
Or those that be not, would they might seem none!

OTHELLO

Certain, men should be what they seem.

IAGO

Why, then, I think Cassio's an honest man.

and Desdemona:

OTHELLO

No, not much moved:  
I do not think but Desdemona's honest.

IAGO

Long live she so! and long live you to think so!

Such words are enough to shake Othello's firm belief:

OTHELLO

And yet, how nature erring from itself... (III.iii.)

### **3. To see is to believe**

“See” in different forms and tenses is used 90 times in *Hamlet*, 42 times in *Macbeth*, 75 in *King Lear* and 77 in *Othello*. Besides the physical sight, it often denotes intuition, premonition or the unconscious. “Methinks I saw my father”, says Hamlet. ... “In my mind's eye”. (I.ii.) Gloucester understands the world and its pitfalls better after the loss of his eyes: “I see it feelingly” (IV.vi.). Gertrude, as a character abandoned to a hedonism and

passion that Hamlet found detestable at her age, also managed to develop her “mental eyes”:

Oh, Hamlet, speak no more!  
*Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul*  
And there I see such black and grainèd spots  
As will not leave their tinct. (III.iv.)

On the other hand, it is precisely the physical, tangible, that is decisive for judgment: “I’ll see before I doubt”, says Othello (III.iii.), and this is quite reasonable and patient, unlike the rash and impetuous reactions of Lear and, sometimes, Hamlet. “Give me the ocular proof”, he demands in the same scene, and he is given one – a planted, false one, but a plausible one too. Just like the letter in the forged handwriting of his son Edgar presented to the guillable eyes of the Earl of Gloucester in Act I, Scene II, the eyes that will be plucked out by Lear’s daughters, but that will open new perspectives to him when blind. Incredibly enough, he takes it from the hands of his mendacious son Edmund whom he has never held dear or spoken highly of. But it sufficed. And then the villain staged a tragedy of errors, providing his father with a distorted insight into his honest son’s doings – like a twentieth century TV news editor manipulating with image and sound for propaganda purposes. That is what Iago does to Othello, enabling him to watch Cassio and Bianca, but placing it in a completely different “script”. Shakespeare was aware of the power of image, the ultimate proof and persuasiveness stronger than a thousand words. After all, the visual was the prevailing effect of his plays, composed for playing, not for reading or discussion.

There is something that prevents us from seeing clearly and makes us err, killing the wrong guy even when there is no arras between us. What caused Lear’s wrong judgment and *volte-face* in relation to his daughters, as if he did not know them well enough? What is the mental “arras” that blurs our vision even when nobody whispers poisonous words into our ears like Iago did into Othello’s? The echo of Brabantio’s words must have pounded in his ears when Iago started pouring his “medicine” into his ear: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (I.iii.). Iago picks up on this and builds a plausible argument:

She did deceive her father, marrying you;  
And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,  
She loved them most.

OTHELLO

And so she did.

IAGO

Why, go to then;

She that, so young, could give out such a seeming,  
To seal her father's eyes up close as oak-  
He thought 'twas witchcraft... (III.iii.)

But then, again, even Othello could have known Desdemona from a “lewd minx” (III.iii.) capable of infidelity and lies. Vanity, hurt feelings, worked up atmosphere – that is what prevents disambiguation and mists the vision. Lear refused to see the obvious, and subsequently to admit his sins and errors. His was a wilful blindness, perfectly mirrored in Gloucester's violent, physical loss of eyes, plucked out by the same malefactors who tricked Lear out of his kingdom and favourite daughter. Cupid is blind, but everybody else should keep their eyes wide open when it comes to the interpersonal – lest one get wrought and “perplex'd in the extreme”, or murdered in sleep. Macbeth did not want any star to shine that night, no eyewitnesses to his deed. His act horrified him and somehow he felt that, if not seen and mentioned, it had never happened. Vision is what confirms and incriminates:

Stars, hide your fires;

Let not light see my black and deep desires:

The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,

Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (I.iv.)

On the contrary, his wife in the end yearns for light, holds on to the candle though her eyes are closed, because “hell is a murky place” (Vi.) and she needs light.

Macbeth is said to be the most imaginative of all Shakespeare's tragic heroes, because of the hallucinations related to his future and recent sins, but it was Lady Macbeth who later saw blood spots on her hands and recapitulated all the agony in her somnambulism. Her husband was past that by the time, just as he was past fears and any human reaction or emotion, but it was he who saw blood on his murderous hands first:

What hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine eyes.  
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas in incarnadine,  
Making the green one red. (II.ii.)

Another sight will also hurt the eyes of now changed, arrogant and overbearing Macbeth – Banquo and the line of kings after the third apparition shown by the witches:

Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo: down!  
Thy crown does sear mine eye-balls.  
...  
Start, eyes! (IV.i.)

The following excerpt encompasses all the words relevant for this paper – *see, sight, vision*:

Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?  
(II.i.)

#### **4. In the eye of the beholder**

“I saw Othello's visage in his mind”, said Desdemona in Act I, Scene III. She loved Othello for the beauty of his soul, his integrity and courage, which was the beauty she needed. Just as many Shakespeare's plays have their counterparts in fairy tales, *Othello* is compared to *The Beauty and the Beast* for the physical discrepancy but harmonious relationship between the two. Iago is sure that this will not last, as

Her eye must be fed;  
and what delight shall she have to look on the  
devil? (II.i.)

When Iago started his infernal plot, eliciting suspicion against the most beloved and important persons in Othello's life, he suggested that this fascination could vanish fairly soon and Desdemona's perception of Othello might become much more realistic:

But pardon me; I do not in position  
Distinctly speak of her; though I may fear  
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,  
May fall to match you with her country forms  
And happily repent. (III.iii.)

Looks do matter, too: it is not by chance that King Hamlet is handsome and comely, while Claudius and Osric look unappealing and disreputable:

This was your husband. Look you now, what follows:  
Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear,  
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?  
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,  
And batten on this moor? Ha! have you eyes?  
(III.iv.)

In the same scene, the Ghost enters the chamber, but Gertrude fails to see it, despite Hamlet's desperate attempts to make her see him, even talking to Hamlet, not just showing up:

HAMLET  
Do you see nothing there?  
QUEEN GERTRUDE  
Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.  
HAMLET  
Nor did you nothing hear?  
QUEEN GERTRUDE  
No, nothing but ourselves.  
HAMLET



Why, look you there! look, how it steals away!  
My father, in his habit as he lived!  
Look, where he goes, even now, out at the portal!  
*Exit Ghost*  
QUEEN GERTRUDE  
This the very coinage of your brain:  
This bodiless creation ecstasy  
Is very cunning in.

The “coinage” of one’s brain is yet another illusion as deception of a disturbed mind, not of blurred sight. Yet, it is not very likely that Shakespeare wanted us to believe that the Ghost was just Hamlet’s hallucination, because Horatio and the guards saw him in the beginning of the play and that preceded Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost, who would talk to no one else but him. When the Ghost came to “whet Hamlet’s almost blunted purpose”, but also to intervene and placate his son’s fury after the dumb show (“step between thy mother and her fighting soul”), Gertrude has got what Hugo Klajn called “negative hallucination” (Klajn, 1964: 499): absence of vision, not seeing the obvious, as incapability or, rather, refusal to see and admit to the incontestable. Sin is unseen, but it gnaws the soul and necessitates purification:

Mother, for love of grace,  
Lay not that mattering unction to your soul,  
That not your trespass, but my madness speaks:  
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,  
Whilst rank corruption, mining all within,  
Infects unseen. (III.iv.)

The word eye(s) is used 40 times in *Hamlet*, 23 times in *Macbeth*, 53 in *King Lear* and 24 in *Othello*. Besides the primary function, and that of mirroring the soul, eyes also signal life. Macbeth is sure that Banquo is dead and harmless when his ghost appears, because

Thou hast no speculation in those eyes  
Which thou dost glare with! (III.iv.)

The eye is also a metaphor of intelligence and wisdom. When Ophelia laments over Hamlet's noble mind overthrown, she says that he was

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;  
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
The observed of all observers, quite, quite down! (III.i.)

Kent wants to stay with Lear, despite the King's degrading treatment:

See better, Lear; and let me still remain  
The true blank of thine eye. (I.i.)

Ross informs Malcolm, exiled in England, of the situation in the country, saying: "Your eye in Scotland / Would create soldiers, make our women fight,..." (IV.iii.) Eyes are taken for a lower level of perception when the subject is going by appearances, populism or impressionability. Thus, Claudius underrates Hamlet's reputation and popularity with his people, calling them "the distracted multitude, / Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes". (IV.iii.)

When Iago tries to talk Cassio into confession of his love for Desdemona, he suggests

What an eye she has! methinks it sounds a parley of  
provocation.  
CASSIO  
An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest. (II.iii.)

Also, eyes are viewed as depths similar to the womb where life is begotten and sin committed. Thus, when Gloucester's eyes are gouged out, he will identify the black void with the place of sinful conception, both being synonymous of "nothing" in several of Shakespeare's plays. As the main plot and the sub-plot are parallel and the loop of deception and tragic error unfurls on two tracks, in the bitter *anagnorisis*, no wonder there are many common denominators between the two. Much before Gloucester's eyes were plucked out by Lear's daughters, the King felt the same about the betrayal following his fatal error:

Old fond eyes,  
Bewep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,  
And cast you, with the waters that you lose,  
To temper clay. (I.iv.)

He was emotionally and rationally blind, just like Gloucester with his children, but the latter gained insight, having lost his eyesight: "I stumbled when I saw" (IV.i.). When Regan tortured Gloucester in his own house, asking why he had sent the King to Dover, he said "because I would not see thy cruel nails / Pluck out his poor old eyes (III.vii.). And she plucked his.

When they reconvene in the fields near Dover, the mad Lear and the eyeless Gloucester, the King asks the Earl to read

GLOUCESTER

What, with the case of eyes?

KING LEAR

O, ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light; yet you see how this world goes.

The King's reply is "reason in madness", as Edgar put it: "Get thee glass eyes; / And like a scurvy politician, seem / To see the things thou dost not." (IV.vi.)

Nature is like a whimsical monarch, furious, merciless and blind to the wretched ones, reflecting the storm in Lear, who:

tears his white hair,  
Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,  
Catch in their fury, and make nothing of... (III.i.)

Eyes are Homerically attributed to inanimate forms, like the "dark-eyed night" in *King Lear* (II.i.), or the Cyclops-like "green-eyed monster" in *Othello* (III.iii.). They are the routes of outward stimuli to one's mind, but also the channel of effluent feelings and thoughts, often betraying the one they belong to. Thus, King Lear thought that Regan could never wrong him the way her sister did:

No, Regan, thou shalt never have my curse:  
Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give  
Thee o'er to harshness: her eyes are fierce; but thine  
Do comfort and not burn. (II.iv.)

Though Hamlet used the following conversation to deride Polonius, it still shows the undeniable truth that perception is subjective and arbitrary:

Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?  
LORD POLONIUS  
By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.  
HAMLET  
Methinks it is like a weasel.  
LORD POLONIUS  
It is backed like a weasel.  
HAMLET  
Or like a whale?  
LORD POLONIUS  
Very like a whale.  
(III.ii.)

Hamlet played with Polonius' ingratiating attitude, baffling the old man to humiliation. But, again, he demonstrated how "nothing is but what is not", to quote his inverted twin Macbeth (I.iii). Just as the foul can be fair, or, to go back to Hamlet, "nothing is good or bad, but thinking maketh it so" (II.ii).

## 5. Conclusion

Not everything is supposed to be accounted for or illucidated. Much of the popularity and universality of Shakespeare's plays is rooted in the "negative capability", as Keats called the untold, unexplained or open-ended in poetry (Keats, 1817). That leaves us with enough wiggle room to play with different scenarios, choose different endings, like in postmodernist novels and rewrite the plays together with Shakespeare and his editors. In these terms, the Keatsean term correlates to Klajn's "negative hallucination" because both are about absence and negation. One thing is

for sure, though: Shakespeare's characters are part of a grand scheme of humanity, like spokes to the hub. But they are also individuals, sometimes unruly and unpredictable, independent from their creator. In what they saw, imagined or were made to believe, we find endless ways of reading and subaudition, through the looking glass of our own time, civilisation, science and various theories, but always bearing in mind the Renaissance man who still believed in the supernatural, who wanted to see a good show and a fight, who was susceptible to fears and superstition. Truth is often multi-faceted and this is why we will not find any Manichean character or idea in Shakespeare's works. Even the villains sometimes repent, even the monsters are sometimes pitiable. So, what Shakespeare saw, what he wanted the spectators to see, what they thought they saw and what we see now, after all the dramatic and turbulent history that lies between us, all converges in a confluence of visual cacophony and brings us back to the original Shakespeare, to close-reading of the timeless lines.

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Наташа Шофранац

ВИЂЕЊЕ У ШЕКСПИРОВИМ ТРАГЕДИЈАМА:  
ПЕРЦЕПЦИЈА, ОБМАНА, ИЛУЗИЈА

**Сажетак**

Визуелни ефекти су, наравно, истакнути у позоришним изведбама, али чак и док читамо Шекспира можемо да поунутрашњимо искуство његових јунака и визуализујемо сцене. Виђење је важно и на још једном нивоу, на нивоу самих јунака, у смислу начина на који виде свет и, пре свега, себе. Понекад због искривљене слике, понекад због злонамерног утицаја на њихов ум, или само због урођене субјективности доживљаја, они људе и догађаје виде суштински другачијим него што су у стварности и то доводи до трагичног следа догађаја и катастрофе на крају. Дакле, грешка у виђењу чинила је знатан део трагичне грешке Шекспирових јунака.

**Кључне речи:** Шекспир, трагедија, виђење, очи, вид, видети, изгледати, перцепција, ум, грешка

**Danijela Kambasković\***

University of Western Australia  
Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence  
for the History of Emotions 1100-1800  
Perth, Australia

## **‘TO DO A GREAT RIGHT, DO A LITTLE WRONG’: *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* AND ITS ETHICAL CHALLENGES\*\***

### **Abstract**

When Bassanio urges Portia to break the law in order to thwart Shylock— ‘to do a great right, do a little wrong’ (4.1.213)— she at first refuses, on the grounds that to do wrong is always immoral; but despite her words, her actions show her ready and willing to do just that. Critics usually explain Portia’s actions with reference to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and the principle of equity—an open-handed, individualised approach to justice when hard legal questions exceed the scope of the law; but the misalignment between Portia’s words and her actions indicates that the question of justifying any ‘little wrong’ with ‘the greater right’ is more complex than it may at first seem, particularly if the ‘greater right’ is defined by one’s own interests. This signals the presence in the play of a different, non-Aristotelian ethical framework: that of Nicolò Machiavelli’s post-Epicurean teleological utilitarianism. Shakespeare’s moral considerations in *The Merchant of Venice* are compelling

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\* E-mail address: danijela.kambaskovic-sawers@uwa.edu.au.

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precisely because they routinely juxtapose Machiavellian utilitarian ethics with principles of deontological ethics, to explore a crucial question: is expediency more apt in real life, than principles not defined by expediency? Applying this question to the main themes of *The Merchant of Venice*— cultural and religious difference, stereotyping, discrimination, scapegoating, gender equality and spin, themes no less relevant and divisive in Shakespeare’s time than they are in our own— holds particular didactic value in the twenty-first century classroom.

**Key words:** The Merchant of Venice, Aristotle, Machiavelli, ethics, deontology, utilitarianism, teaching Shakespeare

Decoding texts is a moral process. Growing up as readers or viewers, we learn to hunt for clues to help us distinguish protagonists from antagonists, good characters and bad, and adjust our responses. We have this tendency in common with the audiences in William Shakespeare’s own time, as well as any other audience in time and space: it is part of being human. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare challenges our need for ethical certainties. While all Shakespeare’s “problem plays” reveal a profound preoccupation with ethics — a philosophical discipline concerned with values governing human conduct, the rightness or wrongness of motives, ends and actions—*The Merchant of Venice* makes it particularly hard to take sides, yet even harder not to. The play’s moral landscape shifts frequently between deontological ethics (ethics in which actions are deemed good or ill inherently, rather than by reference to their consequences) and utilitarian or teleological ethics (ethics in which actions are deemed to be good or bad on the basis of the expediency (often interpreted as morality) of their consequences). In plain terms, we are made to believe people are good, then watch them perform actions which have bad consequences, and vice versa. The ethical challenges posed by *The Merchant of Venice* are useful to us in that they encourage examination of core values which may have been taken for granted but for this challenge.

Elizabeth Wheeler recognized the debt that *The Merchant of Venice* owes to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* when it comes to the play’s central structure, as well as articulation of Aristotle’s main theme—the achievement of happiness (ευδαιμονία) and the subsidiary questions of pleasure, virtue, the mean, choice, equality, justice, and friendship, themes which underpin the play’s plot, characterization, and language. No less important to the play is the concept of “wealth”, which can also be interpreted morally, or, as Wheeler writes:



It is often supposed that *The Merchant of Venice* is about the proper use of wealth. This is in part true. But [...] wealth in the sixteenth century meant both 'riches' or 'goods' and also 'welfare' in the sense of spiritual prosperity or happiness. The most apposite example of wealth used to mean 'happiness' is furnished by John Wylkinson's translation (1547) of Aristotle's *Ethics*: "Then is beatitude the greatest welth and the most soverai[n]e thing a man can have."<sup>1</sup> Indeed Wylkinson's choice of "welth" either to translate or to define εὐδαιμονία is particularly apt since Aristotle virtually identifies this concept with 'the good life' or 'doing well' (*Nic. Eth.* I. iv. 2, viii. 4), [...so that] εὐδαιμονία, usually translated as 'Happiness', "would perhaps be more accurately rendered by 'Well-being' or 'Prosperity'" (Wheater 1992: 467).

But Shakespeare's considerations of moral questions in *The Merchant of Venice* — and this is insufficiently recognized—go beyond first Aristotelian questions into more uncomfortable, utilitarian (teleological) ethical explorations concerned with the expediency of the consequences of one's actions. The play's moral landscape raises some uncomfortable questions which are highly relevant to us as we negotiate life in our complex twenty-first century societies. They concern cultural difference (particularly conflicts between religious and cultural paradigms and personal ethics, cultural stereotyping, (perceived) discrimination of the minority by the majority or (perceived) harassment of the majority by the minority); gender discrimination within relationships, marriage and society at large; individual need for social acceptance and the unstable nature of truth in society (does our society value words more than it values actions?). Shakespeare's themes are as divisive in our own times as they would have been for his pre-modern Christian audiences.

*The Merchant of Venice* is renowned for supporting conflicting ethical interpretations equally well. Perhaps because of this quandary, the play has proven attractive to directors. It was performed forty-seven times at Stratford-upon-Avon in the hundred years between 1880 and 1980; in London, it appeared thirty-five times in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the First World War; it is popular on Broadway; and the Internet Movie Database records seventeen film and television

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<sup>1</sup> (Aristotle and Latini 1547, sig. Avi), compared with *Nic. Eth.* i. vii. 7, viii. 14, ix. 2-3, and xii. 4, cited in (Wheater 1992: 469, note 3).

versions between 1908 and 2004. Since *The Merchant of Venice* shares with *Othello* the unlikely distinction of having a villain, not a protagonist, who attracts the best talent, it is the memorable character of Shylock who represents the greatest attraction to lead actors, and the way the character is interpreted gives the production its ethical “tone”. Shylock has been played as a representation of monstrous evil, in the comedic vein, or, as became fashionable in the nineteenth century with Edmund Kean, sympathetically — and it is this interpretation that made Edmund Kean’s reputation as a character actor, and paved the way for most great Shylocks after him to be played sympathetically, with an eye on the moral complexities of the character. Henry Irving’s dignified, aristocratic Shylock, for instance, played in 1879 to Ellen Terry’s Portia, was considered one of the summits of his career. In the early twentieth century, Jacob Adler prophetically played the role in Yiddish within an otherwise English-language production played in New York.

The adaptability of this character to divergent moral interpretations is uncanny. In 1933, *The Merchant of Venice* was staged no fewer than 20 times, with Shylock played as a character representing straight evil and the danger that Jews would bring to the fledgling Nazi world order. (Makaryk and McHugh 2012; see also Whaley 2011). How could this be done, one might ask, when even one glimpse of Shylock’s famous “hath not a Jew eyes” speech is enough to win the viewer over to Shylock’s point of view?:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?  
Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses,  
affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with  
the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed  
by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same  
winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us  
do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If  
you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us  
shall we not revenge? (3.1.54-62)<sup>2</sup>

The undeniable power of the speech and the moral dilemma posed by it were represented in the Nazi versions of the play as precisely the diabolical challenge which is likely to be posed by Jews to the sacred moral resolve

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<sup>2</sup> All citations from *The Merchant of Venice* are taken from (Shakespeare 1998).

of young Nazis. Viewers were urged to steel themselves against such pleas and be resolute in the knowledge that their victims were sub-human, and that, consequently, their arguments should not be given the same consideration as arguments advanced by a German (for more on this, see Bonnell 2010).

Much has been made in critical literature of Shakespeare's alleged anti-Semitism; but although Shylock happens to be Jewish, and Antonio Christian, their particular religions are immaterial, and a different constellation of religions could be imagined (Shylock Muslim, Antonio Jewish; Shylock Christian, Antonio Muslim, etc.) without loss of either narrative or ethical import. This play's most important discussion concerns the relationship between the "I" and the "Other": two members of two different normative groups who view each other as antagonistic. Shakespeare juxtaposes the opposing world-views of these groups, and the fundamental questions the play raises apply equally well to any cultural paradigms in which two groups judge one another, in Shakespeare's time as well as ours.

The Nazi affection for productions of *The Merchant of Venice* vilifying Shylock caused a general shift of sensibility, and after World War II there was a rise in the awareness of this play's ethical complexity. This is reflected in the two filmic productions of the 1940s, Ernst Lubisch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) and Elia Kazan's *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1946), both of which use Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech in their films to plead for common humanity. Trevor Nunn's 2001 restaged and filmed-for-television version and Michael Radford's film version, made in 2004, stem from this school of thought. Directors, as readers or viewers, often take one point of view; but as far as the text is concerned, the very fact that Nazi and pro-Jewish versions of the play can exist without changes of text taking place, shows (as do other texts) that Shakespeare is adept at writing text that supports both points of view. Each reader will have to make up his or her own mind about where their allegiances lie; or at least to see clearly and impartially the allegiances (and criticisms) that we owe each side.

Shakespeare's main plot guides the audience firmly towards a feeling of pity for Antonio. A wealthy merchant and a respected member of the Christian community, Antonio is a symbol of entrepreneurial spirit and the value of honest, hard work. He is an unusually generous friend: not only is he willing to help his friend Bassanio financially at his time of need, but also goes further — he will help him at a time when he has no money of his

own, and needs to borrow money to help: something very few friends are willing to do. And, if that were not enough, he is also prepared to accept the creditor's (Shylock's) macabre condition to offer a pound of his own flesh as surety for the debt. Once the debt is forfeited and we find that Shylock actually wants to pursue his right and have the pound of flesh cut out of Antonio, we, the audience, fear for him and do not want such a good friend to die.

Siding with Antonio is made even easier as Shylock, the man who threatens Antonio, is not easy to like. To begin with, Shylock is old, rich and stingy — a character type straight out of ancient literary traditions that demand that they be ridiculed and swindled by younger and cleverer characters. He cries about the loss of his daughter Jessica and the loss of his ducats in the same sentence, and would, in fact, rather lose Jessica than his valuables: "I would my daughter were dead at my / foot and the jewels in her ear!" he says. (3.1.82-3).

Second, Shylock makes his living as a usurer. Usury, lending money at interest, may be how banks run their business today; but in Shakespeare's time, there were very few professions with a worse reputation. Chaucer thought the practice as bad as fornication, defamation and witchcraft (*The Friar's Tale* 1. 1301-10, in Chaucer 1957: 90; see also Bond 1985) and, throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, usury remained a phenomenon forbidden, denounced and repudiated, although economically necessary and continually practiced. Shakespeare explored ethics of usury in his other works, such as *The Sonnets*, and, in the context of Platonic ethics, *Timon of Athens* (Kator 2012: esp. 139). Lending money at interest remains morally ambiguous to this day.

Further, Shylock openly denounces Christians. He laments his daughter Jessica's marriage to a Christian as the worst fate on Earth. He has nothing good to say about Antonio, and refuses to dine with him in good faith when invited. He bears long grudges. He is officious and pompous, as well as bloodthirsty and stubborn. When it seems he might be getting his revenge, he shows no remorse or reason. None of this will have endeared him to a Christian audience. But none of this aversion-building is an accident. If Shakespeare wants us to loathe Shylock, it is not because he is an anti-Semite — but so that we could be aware of the disappearance of our reserve, and the unexpected power of pity and understanding which we will, inevitably, be brought to feel for Shylock.

In the course of his time on the stage, Shylock is quick to complain and to curse. Yet, much like Caliban's ranting in *The Tempest*, Shylock has the power to change our point of view. To begin with, we discover that Antonio – that selfless, generous friend – has repeatedly mistreated Shylock. Antonio has explicitly insulted his religion, insulted him personally, hindered his business efforts and even spat on him. We may not like Shylock, but we find ourselves baulking at this treatment. And by the third act, when Shylock starts waving his knife around and calling for a pound of Antonio's flesh, we may find ourselves thinking: "Perhaps I would behave like Shylock, if someone had treated me that way." Our moral allegiances have shifted, and Shylock's rage is a thing of darkness we acknowledge to be ours.

As for the softly spoken and genteel Antonio, his life is in danger because of a generous gesture he made to help his friend, and we feel for him. But we can also see that Antonio never acknowledges that he has hurt Shylock. Shylock will complain against him, but Antonio never once retorts; he simply never gives Shylock's grievance the dignity of a response. Antonio claims the privilege of the majority to ignore the complaints of the minority, treating the claimant as too preposterous to warrant serious engagement. Such tactics are prevalent in our society and often mistaken (usually by the majority) for politeness; yet can be deeply offensive. Modern-day socio-legal studies have found that apology and acknowledgment of wrong-doing (of one group against another, or one individual against another) must happen before the wrong-doing can be forgotten. Holocaust survivors consider absence of acknowledgment and apology particularly offensive, and Holocaust and genocide denial is illegal in a number of European countries (Balint 2002). Once we notice and ponder the silence which meets Shylock's pleas, it is very hard to return to seeing Antonio simply as the wronged friend.

In addition, some traits that Shakespeare has given Shylock make him look conspicuously good. Throughout the play, Shylock is unwavering in his faith and, regardless of the difficulties he is exposed to, remains true to his identity. Unlike his daughter, within the moral parameters of his religion and culture, Shylock is scrupulously honest. He displays touching loyalty to the memory of his late wife: it can hardly be an accident that Shylock, who has treasured the ring his wife had given him in her youth, passes the very test of faith which the two Christian husbands in the play fail so abysmally. And Shylock shows dignity when defeated: his final words, "I am content" (4.1.391) are a more disturbing and poignant comment on

the justice he has received in a Christian court than any prolonged speech could ever have been. If the main plot favours Antonio, the subplot favours Shylock, and the moral conflict generated between their two world-views lies at the heart of the play.

In his 2004 filmic version of *The Merchant of Venice*, Michael Radford tones this moral conflict right down. From the outset, he picks his agenda, and his directorial perspective is scrupulously sympathetic to Shylock's viewpoint. In an interview, Radford explained this by the need to create a clear moral vision favouring the underdog, with which today's audiences can identify. Radford recognized the greatness of Shakespeare's plots and stories (which, one may argue, are great precisely *because* ethical views are never spoon-fed), but wanted to make the ethical bottom line, as it emerged for him, more transparent and attractive to young audiences today (Canavese 2004). Radford therefore foregrounds the moment when Antonio spits on Shylock by moving it from the middle of the play to the beginning of the movie, making the spit a prominent visual emblem of Shylock's life as a Jew in Renaissance Venice. We are shown the frightening Jewish ghetto, as well as scenes of book burning in a clear reference to the gruesome tendency of the strong, so-often repeated moment in history from Savonarola to Nazi Germany and the recent Balkan wars, to destroy the written culture of the nation they seek to humiliate.

If you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (3.1. 61-2)

The truth of everyone's fundamental humanity, equal amidst the differences of religion, culture or financial status, is a truth as often forgotten in Shakespeare's world as it is in ours. Al Pacino's delivery of this speech is profoundly moving; Michael Radford gets sensationalist value out of this. But the question we find in Shakespeare's play, if not in Radford's film, is: if we always revenge, when will the cycle of violence stop?

Gender injustices are explored in *The Merchant of Venice* within its broader discussion of cultural inequities and examination of utilitarian ethics. The inferiority of women was a notion broadly held in pre-modern England, and Shakespeare examines it in most of his plays, most notably in *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *As You Like It*. St Augustine believed that woman was not created in the image of God, and that there is no reason for her existence other than the bearing of children:

Woman together with man is the image of God, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she has the role of helpmate, which pertains to her alone, she is not the image of God. But with regard to man alone, he is the image of God, just as fully and completely as he is joined with the woman into one. (St Augustine 2002: 12.7.10)

If one rejects giving birth to children as the reason why woman was created, I do not see for what other help the woman was made for the man. (St. Augustine 1982: 9.5.9; see also Matter 2002).

The medical views of Aristotle and Galen, propagated by many influential Renaissance books, was that a woman's gender was the result of faulty gestation, and the very things that make her female, also make her stupid:

...when a woman is born, it is a defect and mistake of nature, [...] as is [...] one who is born blind, or lame, or with some other defect. (Castiglione 1959: III: 11)<sup>3</sup>

"She [Woman] was by God created cold and moist, which temperature, is necessarie to make a woman fruitfull and apt for childbirth, but an enemy to knowledge". (Huarte y Navarro 1604: 270)

Eve was believed to have caused Adam's fall from God's grace (not without debate initiated by intelligent women, see Speght 1617); and medieval and early modern ideas on female education suggested that a woman's place was in the home. In addition to what their mothers taught them, most women needed merely to receive religious and ethical instruction from their husbands to the point deemed necessary (Vecchio 1992: 118-

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<sup>3</sup> Here Castiglione is citing Galen. Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* [Book of the Courtier] was originally published in 1528.

121).<sup>4</sup> In other words, the inferior position of women was seen as part of natural law, and women were expected to live within its precepts.

Since we know how highly intelligent and capable Portia is, as well as being a rich heiress, we may feel sad that she is treated as an inferior out of tradition. Her father has given her no voice in choosing her own husband. And once she was chosen by a husband who is significantly poorer and less intelligent than she is, she is forced to assume a submissive role or employ strategies which conceal her agency. When she falls in love with Bassanio (3.2), she signals love by giving a highly eloquent speech claiming lack of eloquence. This is deliberately ironic: Portia knows exactly whom she wants, and she has ample means to get him, but she must be covert about it. It is necessary for her to work within acceptable codes of behavior, according to which “a maiden hath no tongue but thought” (3.2.8). By professing herself “unschooled”, “unlessoned” and “unpractised” (3.2. 159), Portia also sends signals that she is sexually chaste, pandering to perceptions of uneducated, “clean-slate” women as sexually and biologically attractive. Sexual inexperience aside, it is quite clear that Shakespeare’s Portia could not be further from the notions of “unschooled” and “unpractised” when it comes to articulateness, intelligence and ingeniousness; so her ebullience, much like Juliet’s and Desdemona’s, is both endearing and confronting. As she is a comedic character, however, Portia’s verbosity will not become a tragic flaw, but merely serves to foreshadow her virtuoso legal performance in the court scene. Her verbal facility is tempered not only by conformity with the tenets of Renaissance views of ideal women as obedient and silent (on this see Boose 1991, Smith 2002, Smith 1995, and Phillippy 1998), but also the tenets of the sixteenth century law on marriage, which specified that “That which the husband hath is his own” and “that which the wife hath is the husband’s” (Doddridge and I. L. 1632: 144).<sup>5</sup> On marriage, the wife lost her right to own property, even if before marriage it was all her own. Portia professes Bassanio to be her king, adding “myself and what is mine, to you and yours / is now converted (3.2.166-7). Viewing these words as an expression of generosity would be anachronistic. In Shakespeare’s lifetime, a woman bestowing all her money on a man was not acting on a generous impulse, but simply within the law.

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<sup>4</sup> The idea had a classical lineage. In [Aristotle’s] *Economics* and in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* it is proposed that a husband educate his wife as household manager.

<sup>5</sup> *The Lawes resolutions* were printed in 1632, but thought to have been written at the beginning of the sixteenth century.



Nevertheless, Portia's submission of her person and her property can also be symbolically interpreted as emotional and sexual surrender. Expressions of gender have a crucial role here. "But now," says Portia,

...I was the **lord**  
Of this fair mansion; **master** of my servants,  
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,  
This house, these servants, and this same myself  
Are yours, my lord's." (3.2.167-171, *emphasis mine*).

Lord, not lady; master, not mistress. Portia conspicuously trades her habitual control of her estates, which she genders masculine, in return for wifely submission appropriate to her femininity. (Thankfully, Shakespeare allows her to reclaim a little dignity when she reminds the audience of who will have done the husband-buying, when she tells Bassanio: "Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear." (3.2.311).) Feminine submission is, of course, most seriously interrogated when Portia dresses up and poses as a lawyer. The court scene, in which Portia reclaims the masculine voice of control and public power, never fails to delight the audience and offers unique challenges for actors, making Portia one of Shakespeare's most sought-after female roles. When she performs in court, Portia is finally in her element. She shines; and we are happy that she finally speaks without needing to mince words, or to self-deprecate for the sake of conforming to cultural expectations associated with her gender. Her performance in the court scene is so brilliant that it must make any viewer re-consider the magnitude of exactly what Portia will be sacrificing by submitting to her husband and society's expectations. As an indication of the limitations that the pre-modern society placed on individuals, however intelligent and talented, because of their gender, Portia's brilliant court performance retrospectively adds poignancy to her submission speech.

On the other hand, however, within the ethical framework of her own society, Portia did what she did without a right to do it, and broke a number of relevant laws. By wearing male clothes, Portia acted against the Biblical prohibition forbidding honest women to wear male clothes (Lev 13:45; Vows; Deut.22:5, Prohibitions (Idolatry)). "Commandments, The 613 in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1971: 772), the same laws that prevented women from acting on a public stage in Shakespeare's time. She broke Renaissance laws which indicated that the purpose of clothing was to show clearly who

you are and to what rank you belonged (Ruggiero 1993: esp. 25), in this, she is a match for Bassanio, who broke the same law in order to woo her. Finally, appearing in court without licence was, and remains to this day, a grave criminal offence.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, swept along in the main plot, we want Bassanio to marry Portia, so we barely give credit to her comment on the unsuccessful suitor who preceded Bassanio, who was black. When he fails, she is relieved: “Let all of his complexion choose me so.” (2.7.79). The casual racism of this comment compares to Iago’s at the beginning of *Othello*, and it is particularly cruel if we remember that, according to the dictates of Portia’s father’s will, a failed suitor must never come back, or marry again. (Characteristically, in his film, Michael Radford cuts out the danger inherent in the prince’s wrong choice, and minimizes the racism of Portia’s comments.)

Jessica’s character and behavior are ethically equally divisive. On one hand, she betrays her father for love; we condone this, as it is something we have been taught young women in stories must do. After all, Juliet and Desdemona have done the same, and we have applauded them. We know it takes great courage to confront or hurt your father, and abandon everything for the man you love. But there is something about the way Jessica does it that seems wrong. For instance, she could have escaped without stealing her father’s money and valuables, and she could have made her own fortune with her new husband. If she needed money, she could have taken only what she needed, without stealing the ring his late wife had gifted him — she must have known how much Shylock loved that ring — surely something that a loving daughter, or even just a decent person, leaves behind. *The Merchant of Venice* directed by Jack Gold for the BBC in 1980 presents a rebellious and heartless Jessica, more interested in escape and her father’s money, than in Lorenzo. Trevor Nunn and Christ Hunt’s masterpiece, a restaged and filmed Royal National Theatre production of *The Merchant of Venice* (2001), sets the story in the 1920s, the time of rising anti-Semitism, focuses, for instance, on the cultural conflict between traditional and modern viewpoints. Their production highlights

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<sup>6</sup> For example, many laws govern the legal profession and the practise of law in Western Australia, such as the *Legal Profession Act 2008*. Under this Act, The Supreme Court or Legal Practice Board have a responsibility to protect the public interest in the proper administration of justice by ensuring that legal work is carried out only by those who are properly qualified to do so by issuing and enforcing solicitors’ “Practising Certificates”. A “Practising Certificate” is a licence which allows a solicitor to provide legal services (Government of Western Australia 2008).

the cultural contrast between the cabaret world of the Christians and the traditional setting of the Ghetto. Shylock speaks English when speaking to Christians, but Yiddish when addressing a dowdily dressed Jessica, represented as a frustrated young woman who cannot wait to escape a tyrannical father. In Michael Radford's film, this complexity of Jessica's character is simplified to cater to modern audiences. In the final scene, in one of the most significant feel-good whitewashes of the original text, Radford shows that Jessica is eaten away by guilt for taking her father's ring: the pretty Zuleikha Robinson's Jessica, directed by Michael Radford, is much easier to forgive than Shakespeare's Jessica. Shakespeare's text easily supports the differing versions of this character.

On close inspection, Lorenzo behaves strangely as well. Lorenzo says he loves Jessica, but has an uncanny knack of complimenting her in the same breath as insulting her cultural heritage and origins. He says to her, for instance,

If e'er the Jew her father come to heaven  
It will be for his gentle daughter's sake:  
And never dare misfortune cross her foot,  
Unless she do it under this excuse:  
That she is issue to a faithless Jew. (2.4, 33-37)

Is there a woman alive, who, having left her faith and her father for her love, would hear such praise from the lips of her future husband without re-examining her decision? Other characters put her down as well, but she seems not to notice. Jessica may be foolish and too eager to please; she could be positive; she could deliberately ignore her doubts. Shakespeare is highlighting the risk that women took when eloping for love: the Marriage Law makes Jessica as vulnerable to Lorenzo as Portia is to Bassanio. In a production of *The Merchant of Venice* directed by Gorčin Stojanović in Belgrade in 2010, Jessica and Lorenzo's love was portrayed as having gone sour: the minute they were married, Lorenzo broke his promises, took brutal control of her money and started to taunt and verbally abuse Jessica (Stojanović 2010). Yet this heart-breaking menace was portrayed on stage only by the gestures and facial expressions of the actors, *without a single word of Shakespeare's text being changed*. In contrast, Michael Radford chooses not to make use of this depth. In his film, Lorenzo is a simple, warm-hearted, gorgeous lout in love, and his relationship with

Jessica unfolds in conventional terms. But the fact that Shakespeare's text is ethically ambiguous enough to be used as a basis for a convincing stage representation of marital happiness, as well as marital unhappiness, must give us pause.

What is true love? Is it reflected in words, or in actions? In emotions, which are by their nature ephemeral, or in commitment? This play offers us several practical tests for answering this question. Would we borrow money we do not have, to give it to someone else? Would we pledge a pound of flesh for someone? If so, for whom?

And there is our answer. Antonio pledges this for Bassanio. In a play about multiple lovers, the only person whose actions clearly recall the words of Gospel according to St John, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John 3:18, in Coogan, ed. 2007: 410), is a man who shows love for another man. The ultimate love-test of the play — the lead casket with which Bassanio wins Portia—conceals a message which says that, to win love, one must risk, "give and hazard all he hath" (2.29.20); once again, the only person in the play who lives by this precept is Antonio, acting for Bassanio. The viewer must reach his or her own conclusions as to the comment that Shakespeare is making here. *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Jonathan Miller and John Sichel in 1969, the National Theatre version videoed by Precision Video was boldly the first to place an emphasis on the potentially homoerotic relationship between Bassanio and Antonio. The version is set in the nineteenth century, and Laurence Olivier plays Shylock with a particular awareness of the underhanded nature of racism, which seemingly accepts members of the minority, only to reveal prejudice hidden away beneath the surface. Michael Radford's film also simplified potential homosexual overtones to explain Antonio's extraordinary generosity to his friend. Antonio (Jeremy Irons) and Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes) employ *double entendres*, laze around on a four poster bed, and Antonio is often filmed in close-ups directing long and tearful gazes at Bassanio. When, after the court scene, Fiennes' Bassanio tells Portia "Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow." (5.1.284), this is done in a way that links with the homosexual undercurrent in the play.

And yet, the same utterly selfless, loving man who goes above and beyond the call of duty to help his friend, is capable of spitting at another man, because he is Jewish. Shakespeare's lesson here is as striking and thought provoking, as it is relevant to our own times. Love and kindness towards a member of one's own group do not mean that we will be equally

kind to those whom we see as different (“the Other”). By making a loving friend of one the abuser of another, Shakespeare proposes that, however selfless it may seem, love is, at its root, a possessive and selfish emotion — or at least one that is particular, and by no means universal. The capacity to love one’s own should not be confused with genuine, disinterested goodness, or even with social responsibility.

The discussion the play offers of the relationship between ends and means is also consistently challenging. Consider, for instance, the relationship of money and truth. Bassanio is handsome, young, and the play’s romantic hero, so it is easy to forget that he is penniless and brazen enough to ask his (also penniless) friend for money so that he can represent himself as richer than he is, in order to impress an heiress. Whatever Portia’s gifts of beauty, wit and loyalty, Bassanio had never met her before he went to woo her, and his initial motives are solely financial. Even once he has met her and fallen in love with her, Bassanio continues to praise her money along with her other qualities. Since, according to the law of marriage, Bassanio stands to win Portia’s fortune along with her hand, the money he borrows from Antonio in order to impress Portia should be seen simply for what it is—an investment.

Bassanio has a way of keeping his eye on the prize, regardless of the price others have to pay to help him get to his goals. He is happy to ask Antonio for a loan when Antonio has no money, presumably because the prize will be worth it for him (not for Antonio). This is an example of thinking about actions in terms of expediency (utilitarian ethics), not of their inherent (deontological) ethics. In the court scene, Bassanio asks of Portia to “Wrest once the law to your authority. / *To do a great right, do a little wrong,*” (4.1.212-3, my emphasis). Portia refuses. Isabella Wheeler reads this request, together with Portia’s refusal, as reference to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and its postulates of moral and fair dealing as the basis of prosperity, and its opposite, a misfortune (Wheeler 1992: 487). The principle of equity — a more open-handed, individualised approach to harder legal questions requiring that the spirit, rather than the letter of the law be upheld—is also a concept derived from *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Hadfield 2014: 159). It is, however, crucial to note that Portia initially offers Bassanio *verbal refusal* to engage in creative interpretations of the law on the grounds that this would be immoral, but proceeds to *actions* whereby she does exactly as Bassanio asked—wrong, in order to do what they both believe is right. The fact that Portia’s actions and

her words are in misalignment clearly signals introduction of a different ethical framework at play here, the originally Epicurean, utilitarian ethics of Niccolo Machiavelli: “A ruler who wishes to maintain his power must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary.” (Machiavelli 1998<sup>7</sup>: 55; see also Pearce 2010: 99-100, Wells 2005: 56-57, and Rosenblum 2006: 138). Bassanio defines his interests here as “the greater right”, and judges Portia’s morality on the basis of whether her actions will support his interests.

Portia’s behavior throughout the play is also an exemplar of utilitarian ethics, a philosophical signal that she is a perfect match for Bassanio. Like Bassanio, she is likeable. She is fiercely intelligent and shows the ability to love deeply and selflessly. Her facility with the argument in the legal scenes is elating, and she enjoins Shylock to be merciful in eloquent and unforgettably moving terms. She offers him three opportunities to be merciful; to fetch a surgeon; to accept double his forfeit. He refuses, and he is punished, so we cannot blame Portia. Or can we? Portia has shown herself to be a racist early in the play, when she dismissed a dark-skinned suitor. She refers to Shylock almost always as “The Jew”, without using his name. Of all the participants in the court scene, Portia is the only one who has true power; she knows, long before the scene ends, how things will play out for Shylock if he refuses to be merciful. Her own injunctions to Shylock to give mercy freely do not apply to her; her own mercy is not free, but depends on Shylock’s. As a lawyer, Portia promises justice with promises that sound like threats: “the Jew shall have all the justice”; “For as thou urgest justice, be assured / Thou shalt have justice more than thou desir’st”; (4.1.318; 4.4.313-4). She achieves her victory by breaking the law and disregarding the rules. Shakespeare may have been accused of anti-Semitism, but his Christians, who spit on Jews, hinder their business efforts, withhold citizenship even when Jews have lived in their midst for generations and prefer legal loopholes to true justice, do not look much better.

There is no doubt that Shylock is Shakespeare’s villain. He is miserly, horrible and, even when offered double his forfeit, irrationally stubborn and bloodthirsty in his desire for revenge. But Shylock can also be said to be a representative of the older framework of deontologist ethics, as he is merely using legal means to fight to punish a man who amply deserves punishment. He asks no more and no less than what the law entitles him

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<sup>7</sup> *Il Principe* [The Prince] was originally published in 1532.

to; he asks no more than what the state says, and he believes, is right. He continually calls for justice. Who shall determine what is right and what is wrong? While we must agree that for Antonio to die for Shylock's version of justice is too harsh a punishment for his offences, to do so would be to be utilitarian; and deontologically speaking, we cannot question Shylock's motives. Neither can we condone that it is just for Shylock to die instead. It is impossible for us to condone the fact that the legal loophole which saves Antonio is the fact that the Venice law regards Shylock as a legal alien, although he has lived in Venice all his life -- a law singularly lacking in inherent justice and reminiscent of the plight of long-term refugees in our own world, Palestinians in Lebanon or, before 2004, Croatian Serbs in Serbia, people without the right to citizenship of their host countries even after decades of forced exile (see Moor 2010, and Štiks 2013: 30-32). And then, as an additional "mercy", instead of being killed — since no one must die in comedies — Shylock is to be baptized, a fate which we already know is worse for him than death itself. He will also be humiliated before his daughter and stripped of his money, which means that— as a money-lender—or, in today's terms, a banker—he is also being stripped of his livelihood, expertise and identity.

Portia's success in the court scene teaches her viewers two single most important utilitarian lessons of the play:

- One: What is legal is not always just, and what is just, not always legal.
- Two: Breaking the rules pays, if you think your objective is justified, and if you manage not to get caught.

Should these lessons be believed, and applied to real life? The difficulty at the heart of this play is that it asks of every reader and viewer to make up their own minds about that question. If the answer is yes, the viewer has become an adherent to utilitarian ethics. If the answer is no, the viewer has become an adherent of deontological ethics. A choice must be made, and each group will be vehement in justifying their choices.

Regardless of the choice we make for ourselves, we must learn to *value the uncertainty* we feel when we contemplate the implications of this choice. It is this uncertainty that is the unique gift of thinking human beings.

Katharine Eisaman Maus ends her Norton introduction to this play by talking about its ability to annihilate dangerous dualities by emphasizing the distance between its charmed fictions and real life.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, I suggest that the play emphasizes dualities, which have enormous value in teaching applied ethics. The only way for our children to succeed morally in the world we have created for them, is to learn to think like the “I” and the “Other”, as well as like a deontologist and utilitarian, simultaneously.

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<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, Introduction to *The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice, Or Otherwise Called the Jew of Venice*, ed. Katharine Eisaman Maus, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).



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Данијела Камбасковић

“УЧИНИ МАЛО ЗЛА РАДИ ВЕЋЕГ ДОБРА”:  
ЕТИЧКИ ПРИСТУП МЛЕТАЧКОМ ТРГОВЦУ

**Сажетак**

Када Басанио затражи од Порције да прекрши закон да би осујетила Шајлокове намере (“да учини мало зла ради већег добра”, 4.1.213), она то испрва одбија, тврдећи да је чинити зло увек неморално. Упркос том вербалном исказу, међутим, Порција својим делима јасно показује да је спремна да то учини. Критичари обично објашњавају Порцијино понашање принципом равнотеже (equity) из Аристотелове *Никомахове етике* — отвореним, појединачним приступом постизању правде у ситуацији када компликована правна питања превазилазе слово закона. Међутим, несразмера између Порцијиних речи и дела указује на то да је оправдавање “малог зла” “већим добром” етичко питање које је комплексније него што изгледа на први поглед, а нарочито онда када се “веће добро” дефинише сопственим интересима. Ова несразмера скреће пажњу на присутност у драми филозофско-етичке поставке другачије од Аристотелове: телеолошког прагматизма Никола Макијавелија. Шекспирова морална расправа у *Млетачком трговцу* упечатљива је управо стога што редовно супроставља Макијавелијев прагматизам делеонтолошкој етици, постављајући кључно питање: да ли је експедитивност примеренија као приступ свакодневном животу него дубоки принципи који се не дефинишу експедитивношћу? Јасно постављање овог питања у контексту дискусије о главним темама Млетачког трговца— а то су културне и религијске разлике међу људима, питање идентитета, стереотипи, налажење жртвених јараца, питање полне једнакости и манипулација идеја у јавности, теме које нису ништа мање узнемирујуће данас, но што су то биле у Шекспирово време— има посебну дидактичку вредност у савременој учионици.

**Кључне речи:** Млетачки трговац, Аристотел, Макијавели, етика, делеонтологија, прагматизам, Шекспир, методологија

**Milica Spremić Končar\***

University of Belgrade  
Faculty of Philology  
Belgrade, Serbia

## **“A FORTNIGHT HOLD WE THIS SOLEMNITY”: THE ELIZABETHAN ANNUAL CYCLE IN SHAKESPEARE’S MAJOR COMEDIES**

### **Abstract**

In *Shakespeare’s Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage* François Laroque analyses festivity and its literary and imaginary representation in Shakespeare’s England. He holds that the Elizabethan year is essentially simple and logical as it is divided into two halves. The first half starts on the winter solstice of 24 December and ends on the summer solstice of 24 June, including the twelve days of Christmas celebrations and a group of moveable feasts such as Easter and Whitsun and Laroque adopts for it the name of the ritualistic half of the year. The second half, which begins on 25 June and ends on 24 December, is marked by a lack of important religious festivals, the presence of a few fixed festivals and a greater number of working days over holidays, so it is known as the secular half of the year. Based on Laroque’s insights, this paper argues that Shakespeare’s major comedies – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night* – bring to life the secular half of the Elizabethan year in such a way that each play seems to evoke its particular period and a set of activities peculiar to it.

**Key words:** Shakespeare, festivity, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *As You like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*

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\* E-mail address: mspremic@eunet.rs

## 1. Introduction

In his influential study *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage* François Laroque analyses festivity, “a social manifestation linked with natural and seasonal cycles and rooted in a so-called archaic vision of time and the cosmos” (Laroque 1991: 3), and its literary and imaginary representation in Shakespeare’s England. He has limited the scope of his book to the period of Shakespeare’s dramatic activity, that is, to the time span between 1590 and 1613, as he has detected “the close relationship between festivity and literature during this period” (Laroque 1991: 5). Laroque’s study is divided into two parts: the first provides a detailed survey of the festive calendar of Shakespeare’s time while the second deals with festive motifs and images in Shakespeare’s plays.

It is held in *Shakespeare's Festive World* that the festivity in Shakespeare’s England is a complex phenomenon, considerably different from the medieval times from which it originates. The difference predominantly stems from the Reformation and the changes it brought about, changes which seriously impaired the area of festivity and dramatic performances as its integral part. The Tudor monarchy and its officials saw to a general anglicanization and simplification of the liturgy, services and ceremonies of the Church and a reduction in the number of the feast days. Consequently, the two feast days most closely related to dramatic performances and processions, Corpus Christi and Saint John’s Day (the Midsummer Watch), were among those abolished during the first half of the sixteenth century (Laroque 1991: 7). The truth is, however, that the celebrations of Corpus Christi and Saint John did not disappear the moment they were banned, that the opposition to such bans was strong, particularly in the remote parts of the country, and that it took several decades for the new regulations to be fully adopted. Together with imposing prohibitions on what had hitherto constituted people’s annual experiences, the Tudor authorities took care to offer their subjects new celebratory occasions by inaugurating new holidays. The two best-known are the celebration of the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth’s accession to the throne on 17 November and the commemoration of the Gunpowder Plot on Guy Fawkes’ Day, 5 November (Laroque 1991: 8). It is also important to note that not all the holidays from the pre-Reformation period were irrevocably abolished – some were transformed into new ones and celebrated on different dates in the calendar. The Midsummer Watch,

for example, was replaced by the Lord Mayor's Show and celebrated on 28 November instead of 23 June.

It should be mentioned here how Laroque takes good care to point out that his work has nothing to do with new historicism from which he implicitly distances himself and how, at the same time, some of his shrewdest observations are reminiscent of Stephen Greenblatt. Writing, for example, about the decline of medieval festival pageants in Tudor England and the consequent disappearance of "the guilds and corporations that used to be responsible for financing and organizing religious festivals and performances", Laroque astutely observes that "it was at this juncture that, thanks to aristocratic or royal protectors [...], permanent troupes of players and professional artists sprang up and began to cater for a paying public by putting on daily performances which took the place of the erstwhile seasonal religious spectacles" (Laroque 1991: 10). In other words, that which was no longer acceptable in reality, particularly the Catholic festivities, their paraphernalia and symbolism, moved under the auspices of professional players and the then emerging theatre. This remark is in accordance with and similar to Greenblatt's ideas about another kind of remnant from the Catholic times – the ghosts – which, he argues, moved to the theatre after they had been evicted from reality: "The theater", writes Greenblatt "is the place, as Shakespeare understood, where those things are permitted that the authorities have ruled illicit and have tried to banish from everyday reality" (Greenblatt 2001: 203). It can be rightfully said that Laroque's understanding of festivity by and large coincides with Greenblatt's views on the theatre. This affinity can be detected throughout his study and a good illustration would be the point he makes discussing different kinds of festivals and their manifold meanings: "This provides us with a particularly striking illustration of the ambivalence of the festival: sometimes it served as a solemn ratification of boundaries, points of reference and dividing lines; at other times, it gave a community licence to transgress those boundaries and abolish those dividing lines" (Laroque 1991: 14). This is very similar to Greenblatt's notion of the theatre which he sees at once as a subversion of the dominant order and a safety valve indispensable for the sustainability of that same order.

Laroque points out that regardless of a large number of different local festivals, the Elizabethan year is essentially simple and logical as it is divided into two halves. The first half starts on the winter solstice of 24 December and ends on the summer solstice of 24 June (Saint John's or

Midsummer's Day). It includes the twelve days of Christmas celebrations and a group of moveable feasts – Candlemas, Shrove Tuesday, Easter, Saint George's Day, Whitsun and Corpus Christi – and Laroque adopts for it the name of the ritualistic half of the year (Laroque 1991: 81). The second half, which begins on 25 June and ends on 24 December, is marked by a lack of important religious festivals, the presence of a few fixed festivals and a greater number of working days over holidays, so it is known as the secular half of the year. It should be mentioned, though, that the second half was invariably marked by local festivals such as the sheep-shearing festival, the rush-bearing festival, the harvest festivals and parish festivals, celebrating the completion of certain agricultural works (Laroque 1991: 82). The only big parade in this half of the year was the Lord Mayor's Show, while smaller-scale ceremonies were organized by the guilds upon election of the new masters.

It follows from Laroque's study that the Elizabethan year was a firmly established and dynamic sequence of working days and festivity, equally observed by the court circles and ordinary people. As has been already mentioned, Christmas festivities at the court lasted for twelve days and included entertainments such as music, dancing and theatrical performances. When the celebrations were over the court would move from the palace of Whitehall to Hampton Court, Greenwich or Richmond and stay there during the time of Lent. Saint George's Day would be celebrated at Windsor where the Queen would receive the knights of the Order of the Garter. The secular part of the year seems to have been famous for the summer visits the Queen paid to the countryside and her most prominent subjects there at whose houses she would stay for a few weeks. Her notable hosts would do their best to make each of the Queen's stays a memorable occasion by taking care to organize "mythological and pastoral entertainments, fireworks, water pageants, banquets followed by Masques, hunting and other rural pastimes" (Laroque 1991: 69). For ordinary people the secular part of the year meant hard work as this was the time of major agricultural tasks in the fields, the completion of which they would celebrate in their local communities. Laroque points out that the great annual fairs such as the fairs of Saint Bartholomew, Saint Luke and Saint Giles were also held in the summer or early autumn, the period without many festivals (Laroque 1991: 83). He sums up his discussion on the Elizabethan annual cycle by arguing that the ritualistic half of the year is characterized by festivals involving fire (Christmas candles,



the bonfires of Saint John's Day) and by prohibitions, dietary and sexual (which were preceded and followed by periods of indulgence) and adds that "[I]f the first half of the year was marked by behaviour and symbolism that belonged to a ritualistic and sacred concept of the world, the secular half was devoted to the economic side of life as opposed to the religious, the private as opposed to the public and the rational as opposed to the mystical" (Laroque 1991: 83-84).

Laroque's task in the second part of his study, as he defines it, is "to see how our findings on the place and functions of festivity apply to an artistic production as highly elaborated as Shakespeare's plays" (Laroque 1991: 179). He holds that a play never represents reality exactly and that none of the concrete forms of festivity such as a Morris dance or a May game is transposed to a dramatic text. What Shakespeare's plays do contain, however, is an air of festivity shaped for dramatic purposes. On a concrete level this kind of festivity may manifest itself as singing, dancing and music, but there is more to it than that. The atmosphere of rejoicing, confusion and role-switching, surprising turns in the course of events, moonlight, leisure, freedom, noise and frivolity are images of festivity echoing traditional celebrations, both those still vividly present and those not any more acceptable in Shakespeare's England.

Taking into account Laroque's findings on the Elizabethan calendar I would like to argue that four of Shakespeare's plays known as the major comedies – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night* – bring to life the secular half of the Elizabethan year. They do it in such a way that each play seems to evoke its particular period and a set of activities peculiar to it. Thus, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be said to recall its beginning, usually marked by weddings and the Queen's visits to aristocratic homes in the countryside; *As You Like It*, with nature as its predominant setting, appears to be related to agricultural labour in the fields and celebrations of its completion in high summer; *The Merchant of Venice* with a serious topic and dark colours in which Venice is depicted seems to refer to autumn and the economic side of life, and *Twelfth Night* to the winter festival itself, which marks the end of the secular and the beginning of the ritualistic half of the year.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For that reason the order in which the comedies will be analysed in this paper differs slightly from the accepted chronological order in which they were written and staged. Namely, *As You Like It* will be dealt with before *The Merchant of Venice* because the kind

## 2. The Major Comedies

Laroque labels *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a comedy whose major theme is festivity (Laroque 1991: 198). The Midsummer Night from the title and the prospect of Theseus' and Hippolyta's royal wedding signify a joyful, clamorous and passionate beginning of the secular half of the year. Theseus is impatient as he has to wait for another four days before "our solemnities" (1.1.11) and assures his future wife that the grandiose celebration the preparations for which are well underway will be a unique event in his otherwise warrior-like life:

Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,  
And won thy love doing thee injuries;  
But I will wed thee in another key,  
With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling.  
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1.16-19)

Theseus wants all Athenians, especially the young, to take part in merriment and revelry. At the same time he takes good care to get rid of any disposition inappropriate to the festive moment, when he orders Philostrate, his Master of Revels: "Turn melancholy forth to funerals: / The pale companion is not for our pomp" (1.1.14-15). Theseus' words illustrate in the best possible way Laroque's attitude that "[I]n the world of comedy, the ceremonies for weddings and those for funerals are placed in a mutually exclusive relationship" (Laroque 1991: 236). And truly, Theseus not only wishes all his subjects to enjoy themselves, but he casts away the very thought of sadness. Thus, when worried Egeus comes in front of the Duke and presents him with his trouble – his daughter Hermia's disobedience in regard to Demetrius, whom Egeus has chosen for her husband – Theseus is authoritative but somehow meek and gentle at the same time while he explains to Hermia what awaits her if she ignores her father's will. As is well-known from the storyline, Hermia and Lysander are in love and want to get married, but as Egeus refuses to bless their love they decide to elope from Athens, to the place where Lysander's aunt lives and where Athenian laws do not apply, in order to get married. Hermia reports their secret to her best friend Helena who ardently loves Demetrius and hopes

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of festivity it evokes seems to take place in high summer, whereas *The Merchant of Venice* is more of an "autumnal play".

to win back his love. Helena decides to reveal Hermia's and Lysander's plan to Demetrius and when he leaves Athens to pursue Hermia, to follow him. When the four lovers enter the forest outside Athens, the action starts unrolling at a faster pace. The forest is the "green world" of Northrop Frye but it also resembles the forest of medieval romance, a "limitless, uncultivated space" packed with "hidden menaces" and the "atmosphere of mystery and fear" (Whitaker 1984: 54-55).

Oberon and Titania, the King and Queen of fairies, with their respective attendants are to be met there, as well as a group of amateur actors rehearsing the play on Pyramus and Thisbe they want to show on Theseus' wedding day. Oberon's and Titania's quarrel over the Indian boy is a serious matter as it causes commotion in the natural world, but Oberon's way of resolving it, although ironic and not so flattering for the Queen, is essentially harmless and benevolent as the King is well versed in magic and aptly controls its use. His skill is equally unquestionable when a mistake such as the one Puck has made occurs and causes frenzy among the enchanted lovers. Oberon easily corrects it and, having been handed over the Indian boy, releases Titania's eyesight of foolish affection as well, thus bringing back peace and pleasure both to the fairies' world and to that of the mortals. It is hardly necessary to point out to the benevolence and kind-heartedness of the simple Athenian craftsmen who enthusiastically engage their modest acting skills in order to contribute to the happy occasion. Their poignantly naïve, meticulous care not to frighten anyone by staging a tragic love story adds up to the general air of wishing well that permeates the comedy.

It is generally agreed among Shakespeare scholars (for example, Wilson 1962: 194; Greenblatt 2004: 47) that Oberon's remark about "a fair vestal thronèd by the west" (2.1.158) whom Cupidon's shaft has missed refers to Queen Elizabeth and her visit to the Earl of Leicester at Kenilworth in July 1575 during which, among many kinds of entertainment, the Queen watched a spectacular water pageant with "a mermaid on a dolphin's back" (2.1.150). In his happiest festive comedy Shakespeare seems to have alluded to a contemporary festivity he might have even witnessed himself as a boy of eleven (Greenblatt 2004: 43). The implications of the Queen's famous three-week stay at Kenilworth relate to the royal wedding as the principal topic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in that the Earl of Leicester is known to have courted the Queen, albeit unsuccessfully, at the time.

The festive, harmless, light-hearted atmosphere which implies that Shakespeare's aim in this comedy is what J.D. Wilson calls "consummation in happiness" (Wilson 1962: 186) is best summarized in the famous words of Oberon's blessing:

Now until the break of day  
Through this house each fairy stray.  
To the best bride-bed will we,  
Which by us shall blessed be;  
And the issue there create  
Ever shall be fortunate.  
So shall all the couples three  
Ever true in loving be,  
And the blots of nature's hand  
Shall not in their issue stand  
Never mole, harelip, nor scar,  
Nor mark prodigious, such as are  
Despisèd in nativity,  
Shall upon their children be.  
With this field-dew consecrate,  
Every fairy take his gait  
And each several chamber bless  
Through this palace with sweet peace;  
And the owner of it blessed  
Ever shall in safety rest.  
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.379-398)

Speaking of festivity as a prominent theme of Shakespeare's comedies, Laroque defines *As You Like It* as the play "at a kind of crossroads", between those comedies in which festivity is a major theme and those in which it is a minor one (Laroque 1991: 198). Its major part, as is well-known, takes place in the Forest of Arden, to which Duke Senior flees with his attendants after being overthrown and banished by his brother, the usurper Duke Frederick, and to which arrive other decent and benevolent people such as Rosalynd, Celia, Orlando and Adam when Duke Frederick's malice and murderous intentions make it impossible for them to survive at his court. Laroque quotes Janet Spens' argument that *As You Like It* "reflect[s] the traditions and amusements of the summer period" (Laroque 1991:

192), while Agnes Latham similarly holds that the play discloses "a good deal of the holiday spirit" and "the very real joy of summer days in the country" (Latham 1975: lxix, lxxxvi).

Logically enough, from times immemorial, the "joy of summer days in the country" has been connected to the bounteous harvest season and the completion of the various phases of agricultural activities which would be marked by large communal celebrations. The atmosphere at Duke Senior's banquet deep in the Forest of Arden (2.7) seems to mirror such lavish celebrations, as the meal is set out, the host is there with his lords and attendants, the air is festive and those present at the feast are high-spirited and willing to listen to Jaques' reflections on his meeting "a worthy fool". Free from obligations of courtly life, they are relaxed and easy-going because "...this our life, exempt from public haunt, / Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything" (2.1.15-17). When Orlando shows up with a drawn sword, ready to fight for food in order to save old Adam's life, the Duke ignores the potential threat and greets him saying: "Sit down and feed, and welcome to our table" (2.1.105). The air of hospitality which permeates the Forest of Arden points to an all-encompassing sense of community typical of summer celebrations in the country, celebrations to which everyone is welcome and entitled to basic provisions. A refugee from the oppressor's world, Orlando can hardly believe he has met generous and caring people who even promise not to start eating until he returns with old Adam. Although much older and better experienced in human indecency, the Duke himself seems surprised on meeting Orlando, as he says to Jaques:

Thou seest, we are not all alone unhappy:  
This wide and universal theatre  
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene  
Wherein we play in.  
(*As You Like It*, 2.7.136-139)

The first shepherds to be met in the Forest of Arden are Corin and Silvius. Rosalind disguised as Ganymede and Celia as Aliena run into them as they enter the forest, hungry and exhausted. Silvius is a young shepherd in love with Phoebe who refuses his advances and he, obsessed with his passion, is slightly alienated from the outside world. Older and wiser Corin, on the other hand, can be of some help to the banished girls who ask him where

they can find food and lodging “in this desert place”. From his answer we get a glimpse of a simple life of a good man and his hard work for an ungenerous master:

Fair sir, I pity her,  
And wish, for her sake more than for mine own,  
My fortunes were more able to relieve her;  
But I am shepherd to another man,  
And do not shear the fleeces that I graze  
My master is of churlish disposition,  
And little recks to find the way to heaven  
By doing deeds of hospitality.  
(*As You like It*, 2.4.73-80)

Corin’s conversation with Touchstone shows in more detail the shepherd’s decent, modest and unpretentious view of the world: “Sir, I am a true labourer: I earn that I eat, get that I wear; owe no man hate, envy no man’s happiness; glad of other man’s good, content with my harm; and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck” (3.2.71-75). These two examples of Corin’s speech make a powerful image of the annual cycle in the life of Elizabethan shepherds, an image which cannot be discerned either from Silvius’ and Phoebe’s artificial and exaggerated reflections on love or from William and Audrey whose utter simplicity makes them caricatures (Latham 1975: lxxvii).

The very end of the play, albeit often criticised for lack of plausibility and an abrupt resolution of the many entangled storyline ends, is another clear example of the festive occasion in the countryside. Having undergone a harsh and potentially baleful ordeal, Duke Senior invites those present in the Forest of Arden who have also experienced their share of trouble consequently gaining love, wisdom, knowledge and awareness, to take part in the merrymaking:

Meantime forget this new-fall’n dignity,  
And fall into our *rustic revelry*.<sup>2</sup>  
Play music, and you brides and bridegrooms all,  
With measure heap’d in joy, to th’measures fall.  
(*As You Like It*, 5.4.175-178)

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis mine.

The forest celebration in high summer, with the sun shining on the four couples soon to be joined in wedlock and the table rich in nature's ripest produce remains a potent picture of the secular part of the year's zenith.

Laroque considers *The Merchant of Venice* a comedy in which festivity is a minor theme (Laroque 1991: 198). Its two principal venues – Venice and Belmont – stand in stark opposition to the very notion of festivity. Venice is the city of capital, commerce, interests and usury, a place where people like Shylock are hostile towards festivity, while others, like the young Venetians, consider it not just an occasion for a harmful disguise and revelry but also for robbery (Laroque 1991: 257). Shylock famously orders Jessica to lock up the doors and close the windows of his house when the "masques" begin and strictly prohibits her to take part in the entertainment by watching it:

What are the masques? Hear you me Jessica,  
Lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum  
And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife  
Clamber not you up to the casements then  
Nor thrust your head into the public street  
To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces:  
But stop my house's ears, I mean my casements,  
Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter  
My sober house. By Jacob's staff I swear  
I have no mind of feasting forth to-night.  
(*The Merchant of Venice*, 2.5.28-37)

The pressure on the part of her father and the love she feels for Lorenzo spur Jessica's decision to elope with her beloved who comes to her house disguised in the midst of the festival, with Bassanio and Gratiano, and takes her away. But Jessica is not his only reward, as she robs her father upon leaving the house and brings ample revenue to her future husband. While in Venice we witness an opposition to festivity and its inversion into a theft, Belmont seems like the archetypal centre of festivity.<sup>3</sup> Not much is known about what Belmont looks like, but it must be a spacious and beautiful manor far enough from the corrupt and cruel Venice. It is the

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<sup>3</sup> This idea is inspired by Muriel Whitaker's remark on Camelot as the archetypal center of the chivalric milieu (Whitaker 1984: 41).

home to charming and witty Portia where she feels utterly happy only when Bassanio chooses the right casket and marries her. At that very moment Belmont becomes the place of mirth and joy, whereas before Bassanio it was more like a prison to Portia where she welcomed and saw off the suitors coming to try their luck according to the provision of her father's will. When its mistress achieves love and happiness Belmont turns into a *locus amoenus* of the comedy, the place where Bassanio's Venetian friends are also welcome, where generosity and good humour rule and where moonlit nights are the most beautiful in the world, just like in Lorenzo's words:

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!  
Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music  
Creep in our ears – soft stillness and the night  
Become the touches of sweet harmony:  
Sit Jessica, – look how the floor of heaven  
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold,  
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st  
But in his motion like an angel sings,  
Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins;  
(*The Merchant of Venice*, 5.1.54-62)

It should be noted though that *The Merchant of Venice* predominantly deals with the economic side of life and that “[L]ove and festivity are both circumscribed by economics” (Laroque 1991: 258). In order to go to Belmont and try to win Portia, Bassanio needs Antonio's money. As Antonio does not have ready money he borrows it from Shylock and agrees to sign a monstrous bond by which the Jewish usurer is entitled to cut a pound of Antonio's flesh if the latter cannot pay him back the debt in due time. The scenes that happen in Venice resound in economic terms – merchandise, fortunes, credit, money, bond, usurer, lend, borrow – and are fraught with utmost tension. As the play unfolds it becomes evident that there is much more to the conflict between Antonio and Shylock than mere money lending. Their hostility is not private but overwhelming and spread across their two communities – Christian and Jewish – which become belligerent parties. The exciting court trial scene resolves the conflict which has brought *The Merchant of Venice* to the very verge of tragedy – the famous drop of Christian blood which is not to be found in the bond saves Antonio's life



and makes it possible for the Venetians to punish and humiliate Shylock. Victorious Christians and defeated Shylock who leaves the stage never to show up again until the play's closure make such a grim and distressing impression that Venice becomes an unbearable place to stay in. From the distorted and venal world of trade and economy the action moves to the enchanted Belmont and there reaches its end in a joyful and festive place whose charm is breathtaking. The fact that *The Merchant of Venice* ends with its characters' *departure* to the green world and not *return* from it as is the case in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It* seems to imply that conflicts between parents and children as well as sibling rivalry can be settled once and for all if people are willing to change and mature, whereas in the stressful world of business and conflicting interests one has to have a peaceful resort to regularly return to and relax before going back to the economic side of life which owes its existence to unpredictability and pressure. It further points out to the necessity of an age old, dynamic sequence of working days and festivity.

According to Laroque, the major theme in *Twelfth Night* is festivity (Laroque 1991: 198); he claims that both its title and contents suggest it functions itself as a festival (Laroque 1991: 196). In the Elizabethan annual cycle the Twelfth Night marked the end of the winter festival which started at Christmas, so Shakespeare scholars generally agree that the play's title, which does not reveal anything about its contents, conveys the prevailing air of festivity typical of this time of the year.

Shakespeare's last major comedy takes place in Illyria, a strange, lethargic country whose Duke Orsino is "lover of Love" and his beloved Olivia is "lover of Sorrow" (Wilson 1962: 169). Orsino dreams about Olivia in his palace, apparently enjoying music, poetry and the notion of love more than trying to win Olivia, while she spends time cloistered in *her* house, having vowed to a seven-year period of mourning for her recently dead brother. The shipwreck which has separated Viola and Sebastian, twins closely resembling each other, brings them both to Illyria but neither of them knows the other one has survived. Viola arrives first in a boat with sailors and Sebastian reaches the shore later with Antonio, the captain of the ship. Viola, disguised as a boy called Cesario, becomes Duke Orsino's page and causes the action to move at a faster pace. She visits Olivia on behalf of Orsino, courts her for him and provokes confusion as Olivia, fascinated with the gentle and well-mannered "boy", falls in love with Viola. Sebastian's arrival resolves the situation on the verge of chaos as Olivia

takes him for Cesario and marries him immediately while disappointed Orsino turns his affection to Viola who has fallen in love with him the moment she took service as his page.

*Twelfth Night*, with its famous sub-plot, can also be said to show festivity in extremity as the revelry at Olivia's house never ends and is an aim to itself. The revellers are Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's uncle, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, his friend, and her clown Feste. Maria, Olivia's waiting woman, keeps them company but also scolds them on behalf of her mistress when their noise becomes unbearable. Malvolio, Olivia's steward, is a strong enemy of festivity who tries to make her house a cosy and quiet place in line with his mistress' vow to seven years of mourning and seclusion. He considers himself entitled to teach the revellers a lesson:

My masters, are you mad? Or what are you? Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do ye make an alehouse of my lady's house, that ye squeak out your coziers' catches without any mitigation or remorse of voice? Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?

(*Twelfth Night*, 2.3.75-79)

Malvolio's haughty bearing is so humiliating and irritating that Maria decides to take revenge on him while Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and the clown eagerly join her. She writes a letter imitating Olivia's handwriting with hints of Olivia's affection for Malvolio and drops it in his way. The moment Malvolio discovers it his already extant ambition increases dramatically as it occurs to him that by marrying Olivia *he* could become the master of her property. In order to please her he starts behaving in such a foolish and presumptuous way (allegedly demanded by Olivia) that he is eventually imprisoned as a madman. When the joke is explained to Olivia, she has him released but Malvolio is so resentful that he leaves the stage in fury, promising to retaliate against them all.

It should be noted, however, that the air of festivity which undoubtedly dominates the play does not entail a perfectly joyous atmosphere. Apart from the tender but vivid and energetic Viola, the main plot is also remembered for the melancholic characters – Duke Orsino and Olivia – and Feste's melancholic songs which introduce a note of sadness into the Illyrian setting:

Come away, come away, death,  
And in sad cypress let me be laid.  
Fie away, fie away, breath,  
I am slain by a fair cruel maid;  
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,  
O prepare it.  
My part of death no one so true  
Did share it.  
Not a flower, not a flower sweet,  
On my black coffin let there be strawn;  
Not a friend, not a friend greet  
My poor corpse, where my bones shall be thrown:  
A thousand thousand sighs to save  
Lay me, O where  
Sad true lover never find my grave,  
To weep there.  
(*Twelfth Night*, 2.4.49-64)

Such an example of *memento mori* is not to be found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, where happiness is complete and sadness non-existent because officially banished by Duke Theseus. If *Twelve Night* functions itself as a festival, the note of sadness it certainly possesses may be explained as either coming out of the surplus of leisure and lethargy or of an awareness that the festival must eventually come to an end. The sub-plot and its rollicking characters also testify to the impossibility of an everlasting festival because unbridled festivity inevitably turns into disorder and violence.

### 3. Conclusion

In the first three analysed comedies – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice* – festivity is a wished for occasion, a reward to be gained after an effort has been made. It can also be perceived as an objective of the dramatic plot and the destination the characters head for. Duke Theseus' wedding, Duke Senior's forest celebration and Portia's festivity in Belmont all take place after wisdom has been achieved, intricate situations resolved and reconciliations made. In such happy

moments festivity comes as a deserved relaxation and real pleasure just because everybody knows it is a get together of limited duration after which life will resume its everyday course. In *Twelfth Night*, on the other hand, notably in its sub-plot, life is festivity. The revellers eat and drink, crack jokes, sing to the music and make noise. Every single day is the same as they are parasites without obligations and a sense of duty, people who have nowhere to go because they are stuck in the festive setting. Although it does not seem to be the case at first sight, Duke Orsino and Olivia also appear to be stuck in a kind of an everlasting holiday in *their* respective surroundings, a holiday marked by leisure, longing and contemplation, which would have lasted forever if it had not been for the shipwreck and Viola's arrival in Illyria. Both the sub-plot and the main plot seem to suggest that ceaseless festivity eventually results in a dead end.

If Shakespeare's four major comedies can be said to bring to life the secular half of the Elizabethan year, to evoke its particular periods and the activities peculiar to them, the question of why Shakespeare chose to depict its secular and not ritualistic part remains to be answered. In line with Laroque's remark that the secular part of the year lacked important religious festivals, Shakespeare's festive comedies can be understood as his *addenda* to that half of the Elizabethan festive calendar which was not already packed with celebrations. Festivities in themselves, Shakespeare's major comedies have the significance comparable to that of the new holidays inaugurated by the Tudor authorities. And what is more, although they are new events in the Elizabethan culture, they also reintroduce, albeit in a displaced form, and preserve, those older, forgotten, silenced or prohibited traditions which would otherwise have been irrevocably lost.

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Милица Спремић Кончар

„ПЕТНАЕСТ ДАНА СЛАВЉА И НЕМИРА”: ЕЛИЗАБЕТИНСКИ ГОДИШЊИ  
ЦИКЛУС У ШЕКСПИРОВИМ ВЕЛИКИМ КОМЕДИЈАМА

**Сажетак**

У студији *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage* аутор Франсоа Ларок анализира светковине и њихово књижевно и имаголошко представљање у Шекспировој Енглеској. Он сматра да је елизабетинска година била суштински једноставна и логична, будући подељена на две половине. Прва половина је почињала на дан зимске краткодневице, 24 децембра, и завршавала се на дан летње краткодневице, 24 јуна. Укључивла је дванаест дана празновања Божића и важне покретне празнике, попут Ускрса и Духова, те је Ларок назива ритуалистичком половином године. Другу половину, која почиње 25. јуна и завршава се 24. децембра, одликују мањак великих верских празника, неколико фиксних светковина и већи број радних од празничних дана, те је позната као секуларна половина године. Ослањајући се на Ларокове увиде, овај рад поставља тезу да Шекспирове велике комедије – *Сан летње ноћи*, *Како вам драго*, *Млетачки трговац* и *Богојављенска ноћ* – оживљавају секуларни део елизабетинске године тако што се свака односи на одређени период у њој и активности карактеристичне за њега.

**Кључне речи:** Шекспир, светковине, *Сан летње ноћи*, *Како вам драго*, *Млетачки трговац*, *Богојављенска ноћ*

**Milena Kostić\***  
University of Niš  
Faculty of Philosophy  
Niš, Serbia

## **“I AM FOR OTHER THAN FOR DANCING MEASURES”: SHAKESPEARE’S SPIRITUAL QUEST IN *AS YOU LIKE IT***

### **Abstract**

The critical insights of Ted Hughes (his understanding of ‘active ritual drama’ and vision of the ‘Mother Forest’), Northrop Frye (his perception of the Forest of Arden as the green world originating in the bygone Golden Age) and Riane Eisler (her recognition of the partnership model necessary for the playwright’s recreation of the mythic domain based on the matriarchal principles of equality) are combined in the paper in order to explore the spiritual quest Shakespeare embarked on in *As You Like It*. Special attention here is given to Melancholy Jacques, whose decision to devote himself to a solitary life in search of the causes for the existence of the hostility and rivalry between brothers reflects Shakespeare’s professional decision to dedicate himself to the resolution of this issue throughout his writing career.

**Key words:** active/passive ritual drama, Mother Forest, green world, partnership model

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\* E-mail address: mkostic76@gmail.com

## **1. Introduction: Spiritual Quest as a Transition from the Realistic to Mythic Domain**

The paper aims to explore the spiritual quest Shakespeare embarked on while writing the popular pastoral comedy *As You Like It* in 1599. Although the story of the play was not originally devised by him (as is the case with a great number of Shakespeare's plays), but was to a large degree inspired by Thomas Lodge's romantic prose work *Rosalind*, it can be rightfully asserted that Shakespeare's version of the story contains certain elements that contribute to the play's originality and uniqueness (the aforementioned spiritual quest of the author certainly being one of them). In order to clarify the spiritual quest in question here, we have to resort to Ted Hughes' reading of *As You Like It* as a valid illustration of "active ritual drama" (Hughes 1992: 107).

Namely, in his influential study *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992) Ted Hughes differentiates between two types of ritual drama relevant for the interpretation of Shakespeare's opus: passive and active. Both kinds of ritual drama start with the same premise – "a human being is only half alive if their life on the realistic, outer plane does not have the full assent and cooperation of their life on the mythic plane" whereby "the whole business of art... is to reopen the negotiations with the mythic plane" (Hughes 1992: 106). Whereas passive ritual drama's function is to contribute to "communally organized social bonding" and to present a "natural form of deep therapy, where the mythic plane holds the keys to health, vitality, meaningfulness and psychic freedom on the outer plane" (Hughes 1992: 106), active ritual drama goes a step further:

Active ritual drama always begins with a psychic malaise, usually a failure in the link between the personality on the realistic plane and the spiritual self or soul on the mythic plane. This breakdown of communications between ego and soul is always brought about by a 'sin' – usually some more or less extreme form of the ego's neglect or injury to the soul. The result is like the primitive's loss of the soul. In this sense, active ritual drama begins where the traditional shaman's healing drama begins and its purpose is the same: to recover the soul and reconnect it to the ego (Hughes 1992: 107-108).



It is precisely on this level that Hughes perceives *As You Like It*: the dispossessed Orlando becomes the epitome of Shakespeare's "ailing ego" that gradually becomes "illuminated and transfigured by new spiritual understanding and in harmony with the universe – of which the elemental soul is an emanation" (Hughes 1992: 108). As a matter of fact, both variants of ritual drama are offered here at the same time: one for the audience and/or readers who want to enjoy the romantic pastoral comedy and be entertained with the numerous amusing obstacles on the way to the lovers' happy ending, and the other for those who can perceive the significance of the process of the main protagonist's recuperation on the realistic plane, and, more importantly, his commitment to the spiritual quest on the mythic plane, the issue Shakespeare deemed crucial for his artistic vision.

The duality of the play's setting – a duchy in France and the Forest of Arden – actually constitutes the frame for the coexistence of the realistic and mythic realm previously mentioned. Thus, a certain transition, mostly represented through the physical suffering and extreme danger that the main characters undergo, can be traced in the action of the play: from the court, a place that belongs to the realistic domain governed by corruption, political ambition and strife, to the forest, a place belonging to the mythic domain symbolically implying moral healing, personal growth and renewal.<sup>1</sup>

There are certainly many ways of interpreting the transition from the corrupt court to the idyllic Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* (quite symbolically the movement from the domain of experience to that of innocence), but one legitimate reading is to see in it an indirect reply to Baltazare Castiglione's *Courtier* (1528). For Castiglione the court represented the new secular setting for the cultivation of genuinely courteous or virtuous men. Unconscious of any irony, he praised *sprezzatura* – a manner that has the appearance of ease and spontaneity but is in fact carefully calculated and studied – as the chief asset of the ideal courtier (Castiglione 1953).

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<sup>1</sup> This binary opposition in the play evokes Northrop Frye's distinction between two worlds (the contrasted worlds of objective reality and inner desire) in his study *The Educated Imagination* (1963) in the first chapter entitled *The Motive for Metaphor*, whereby the transformation of reality, influenced by the inner desire to recapture the lost harmony with the natural world and transform necessity into freedom, finally results in the creation of the third world, the one created by man, e.g. in this case, the visionary artist: "This third level is a vision or model in your mind of what you want to construct... So we begin to see where the imagination belongs in the scheme of human affairs. It's the power of constructing possible models of human experience." (Frye 1993: 9)

However, Shakespeare was interested in the truth behind the appearances. At the court of the usurping Duke Frederick, dominated by his power games and crafty intrigues, *sprezzatura* conceals a cynical strategy of tragic self-betrayal (here optimistically leading to the sincere repentance of both villains, Duke Frederick and Oliver, unlike in *Hamlet*, for instance, where this strategy ultimately results in madness and death). Shakespeare's goal was to show that far from cultivating independent and free-thinking individuals, courts produced ruthless tyrants and hypocritical Machiavellians.

In accord with this idea, it is important to emphasize that Shakespeare was rather aware of the fact so vividly discussed later by Riane Eisler in her internationally known bestseller *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1989) about the existence of two alternatives in the historical development of our civilization – the first based on the partnership model, the second on the dominator model – the latter implying a high degree of fear and violence, and an authoritarian social structure and hierarchy of domination, all of which perfectly portray the Renaissance courts Shakespeare realistically described and directly criticized in his plays. The partnership model, on the other hand, corresponds to the mythic plane Shakespeare was set on reincarnating in his artistic vision, the spiritual domain of the Forest of Arden, whereby man lived in harmony with natural laws and was committed to the principles of sharing and caring:

The old love for life and nature and the old ways of sharing rather than taking away, of caring rather than oppressing, and the view of power as responsibility rather than domination did not die out... the old roots of civilization were never eradicated. But, like women and qualities associated with femininity, they were relegated to a secondary place. Neither did the human yearning for beauty, truth, justice and peace disappear (Eisler 1989: xvii).

The old roots of civilization are symbolically represented in *As You Like It* through the voices of socially lower classes, underprivileged and inferior at the court of Duke Frederick, but rather potent and compelling in the Forest of Arden; furthermore, the wisdom of ordinary peasants, shepherds and shepherdesses, as well as the court jesters and fools, is appreciated and presented as more humane, lifelike and overwhelming than the Machiavellian court practice. However, in the realistic domain of the court, their life-approving philosophy was not even considered as a valid alternative – there was no place for the humanistic values of sharing, harmony, equality and peace, and, as Riane Eisler comments, this tragic

event occurred at the moment of transition from the matriarchal to the patriarchal system of values:

But there was no such place left in their new world. For this was now a world where, having violently deprived the Goddess and the female half of humanity of all power, gods and men of war ruled. It was a world in which the Blade, and not the Chalice, would henceforth be supreme, a world in which peace and harmony would be found only in the myths and legends of a long lost past (Eisler 1989: xviii).

This idea is quite analogous to Hughes' view of the tragic error our humanity suffers from, described in detail through the myth of Venus and Adonis, in which, by alluding to Shakespeare's version of this myth (1593), the ungrateful young hero rejects the love of the Goddess, puritanically disgusted with it since he perceives it as "sweating lust", "blotted with blame", "full of gorged lies", totally contrasted to his rather deficient vision of true love which "to Heaven is fled" and "comforts like sunshine after rain" (2007: 146-148). This episode that Hughes notices in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* actually reflects the transitional moment whereby matriarchy was succeeded by patriarchy, the moment Eisler refers to as the symbolic downfall of the life-giving Chalice and the rise of the power-centered Blade. According to Ted Hughes, Western history would henceforth be generated, as the rejected Venus in Shakespeare's poem prophesied, by "power-crazy men" (Hughes 1992: 43). Thus, due to the overthrow of the system of values and actual dominance of the male over the female sphere, Shakespeare's visionary heroes are purposefully set on a quest to recreate the long-gone mythic unity and, on their way, experience numerous, extraordinary, significantly revealing ordeals.

## **2. The Rival Brothers: Reconnection with the Lost Soul (Rosalind)**

In his remarkable study *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), Northrop Frye claims that the underlying myth in literature is that of a quest, whereby comedy is perceived as the mythos of spring. Comic vision is based on the triumph of the main character over the blocking forces (natural or human) and generally implies a movement from one kind of society to another (from tyranny to freedom, from the old to the young, from winter

to spring) resulting in the society at the end of the comedy as a projection of our desires (see Frye 1957: 163-186).

A valid illustration of this idea can be easily noticed in *As You Like It*: from the beginning of the play, the audience and/or readers are presented with the conflict between the usurping society, on the one hand, and the vision of the desirable society, on the other. Thus, Duke Frederick symbolically represents, as Frye terms it, a cruel, absurd or irrational law (since he acts on his whim and forces the characters to partake in his obsessions) that will finally be evaded. The movement of the play revolves around a society controlled by habit, arbitrary law and the older characters, and ultimately results in a society governed by youth and freedom, thus quite literally putting into practice Frye's notion of comedy as a movement from winter to spring. Throughout the comedy, the audience and/or readers witness unlikely conversions, miraculous transformations, and acts of providence so that the desirable ending logically follows. The desirable society achieved at the end of the comedy actually represents a return to the Golden Age that existed in the past (before the action of the play commenced), the domain corresponding to Eisler's vision of the partnership model of society symbolically represented through the life-giving Chalice (Eisler 1989), reflecting a stable and harmonious order (represented through the rule of Duke Senior and Sir Rowland), disrupted by folly and obsession (of Duke Frederick and Oliver) and then finally restored (through the characters of Orlando and Rosalind):

...the hero's society rebels against the society of the *senex* and triumphs, but the hero's society is a Saturnalia, a reversal of social standards which recalls a Golden Age in the past before the main action of the play begins. Thus we have a stable and harmonious order disrupted by folly, obsession, forgetfulness, "pride and prejudice", or events not understood by the characters themselves, and then restored (Frye 1957: 171).

Shakespeare's romantic comedy focuses on the final reconciliation or conversion of the blocking characters rather than their punishment (in *As You Like It*: the rival brothers Oliver and Orlando are reconciled, Duke Frederick is miraculously converted), which was a theme present in the medieval tradition of the seasonal ritual play, as Frye notices and claims that "we may call it the drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land... Thus the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal

world, moves into the green world, goes into metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world" (Frye 1957: 182). The Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* represents an emanation of Frye's "green world", which is analogous to the dream world, the world of our desires. In this symbolical victory of summer over winter, we have an illustration of "the archetypal function of literature in visualizing the world of desire, not as an escape from 'reality', but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate" (Frye 1957: 184).

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare portrays Hughes' idea of a psychic malaise that originates in the clash between the realistic and mythic plane whose ultimate result is the injury of the soul, through the theme of the rival brothers (Orlando vs. Oliver, Duke Senior vs. Duke Frederick), whereby the respect for the patriarchal principle of the right of the firstborn represents the cause of the major conflict; namely, it implies a sort of competition between the brothers that should be regarded as equals, ultimately resulting in the insatiable craving for dominance and supremacy over the weak (second-born) brother, whereas the matriarchal egalitarian principles are simply discarded and/or not given enough attention.

Both Hughes and Frye explore the reasons for Shakespeare's description of the overthrow of the good and moral ruling principle by the immoral impulse of the brother who at the beginning of the play unjustly gets the throne for himself. The implication of the possible reason for the weakness of both Duke Senior and Orlando that both critics offer in their respective studies can perhaps be best summarized and paraphrased through the idea that they lack a deeper connection with their 'soul' or as T.S. Eliot would put it, they suffer from 'the dissociation of sensibility'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot employs this term in order to glorify the quality of 'unified sensibility' typical of the English metaphysical poets, who were able to combine totally disparate aspects of human experience in their portrayal of the complexity of life, a quality that was later lost in the poetry of Milton and Dryden, with the emphasis on decorum and versification rather than the emotional content and personal involvement in their verses:

"A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes... sometimes we are told 'to look into our hearts and write'. But that is not looking deep enough. Donne looked into a good deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts" (Eliot 1921: 64).

From this point of view, *As You Like It* can be interpreted as a play in which the hero symbolically reunites with his soul. For instance, Orlando's soul is significantly represented through Rosalind. When he finally reunites with her, he simultaneously reconciles with his vicious brother Oliver:

She is the feminine aspect of Orlando's mythic self... She is what Orlando was lacking at the beginning of the play. The two recognize each other automatically, on first sight. The end of the play and the mending of all other fractures will come when Orlando and Rosalind are betrothed (Hughes 1992: 112).

In addition, it is no coincidence that the marriage between Orlando and Rosalind takes place in the Forest of Arden. This is Shakespeare's vision of the final unity and healing only to be accomplished in the 'Mother' Forest, as Hughes terms it (1992: 110), which ultimately represents a symbol of the totality of nature and men's psychic completeness. In Frye's reading of Shakespeare's green world, an identical idea of the heroine as the lost soul is expressed: "In the rituals and myths the earth that produces the rebirth is generally a female figure, and the death and revival, or disappearance and withdrawal of human figures in romantic comedy generally involves the heroine" (Frye 1957: 183). Thus, Rosalind represents the epitome of the matriarchal earth goddess who revives the hero and at the same time brings about the comic resolution by disguising herself as a boy (for those members of the audience and/or readers who regard the play as an instance of Hughes' passive ritual drama and thus primarily enjoy the process of the young lovers' overcoming various impediments on the way to a desirable end to the play).

### **3. Melancholy Jacques: a Self-Portrait of the Author?**

However, apart from the rival brothers in the realistic domain of the court, Shakespeare also introduces another idea, equally relevant for the spiritual

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Although in this study T.S. Eliot does not mention Shakespeare, this idea can be metaphorically applied to the interpretation of his plays in the sense of the author's constant reminder of the destructive alternative that the majority of his ambitious protagonists opt for – the one based not on cherishing the totality of life's experience, but on the sole aiming towards power and ambition, through the systematic abuse of the intellect, at the expense of the deeper connection with their soul, as previously stated in Hughes' and Frye's reading of *As You Like It*.

quest discussed here, through the confusing insertion of two characters with the same name – Jacques (a name that does not appear again in any of his plays and here, within the same play, refers to two characters). The symbolic bond between Melancholy Jacques (an allusion to Shakespeare himself according to Hughes (1992: 115)) and Jacques de Boys (the middle of the Boys' brothers) alludes to the idea of the idyllic forest brotherhood: namely, they are both scholars, one is a student of the ways of the world and the other is a student of books, thus symbolically representing the playwright's wishful unity of the realistic and mythic domain. Hence, whereas Jacques de Boys represents the mythic intelligence that is the unifying, healing intelligence of the Mother Forest, creative intelligence or spiritual intellect, Melancholy Jacques represents the unifying intelligence of rational consciousness (Hughes 1992: 113).

The chief role of Melancholy Jacques becomes to investigate the role of fraternal crime. Although the play ends with a note of reconciliation, Jacques does not join in. He decides to join Duke Frederick in his exile in order to understand his guilty conscience and repentance, as well as the cause for the existence of the hostility between the two brothers:

If I heard you rightly,  
The Duke has put on a religious life,  
And thrown into neglect the pompous court?  
To him will I: out of these convertites  
There is much matter to be heard and learned...  
I am for other than for dancing measures. (V, iv, 195-200)

"In other words", as Hughes claims, "Shakespeare commits himself to the quest on which his irrational self has already decided. Melancholy Jacques dismisses the pursuit of social happiness... and [he] is Shakespeare himself, thirty-five years old, awake in the depth of the 'Mother' Forest, about to enter his *Divina Commedia*" (Hughes 1992: 115-116). The ideas that Hughes suggests here seem to be rather plausible and trustworthy and can be taken as a well-founded explanation of Shakespeare's spiritual quest initially proposed for discussion in this paper. Namely, if we accept the idea of Melancholy Jacques as the emanation of the playwright himself, that fact would account for Shakespeare's persistent treatment of the theme of rival brothers in his entire dramatic opus. Of course, the author's interest in this theme was rather prevalent in other plays written before *As You Like*

*It* (1599), but it is in this play that the audience and/or readers can finally witness Shakespeare's conscious decision to dedicate his complex artistic vision to the exploration of the patriarchal competition, rivalry and craving for power between brothers, their crucial motifs, motivation, reasons and ultimate result, as well as his creative condemnation and warning against this common practice.

It is no wonder then that parallel with his work on *As You Like It* (1599), Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet* (namely, he probably started writing it in 1599, but according to the history records the final date of its completion is quite uncertain and mostly refers to the period of 1599-1601, quite significantly for the argument presented in this paper). Perhaps the best illustration of the relevance of this theme for the playwright himself can be seen in the famous Closet Scene in *Hamlet* (Act III, scene iv), when the young, almost deranged Danish prince imposes what seems to him an obvious difference between the two rival brothers in the play, his father (the late king Hamlet) and his uncle Claudius (the usurping brother) on his mother, queen Gertrude:

Look here, upon this picture and on this,  
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.  
See, what a grace was seated on this brow –  
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,  
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;  
A station like the herald Mercury  
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;  
A combination and a form indeed  
Where every god did seem to set his seal,  
To give the world assurance of a man.  
This was your husband. Look you know, what follows:  
Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear,  
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes? (III, iv, 54-66)

The young idealist Hamlet is profoundly disgusted and disillusioned with a glimpse into the reality of the Danish court, where the relevant memory of the glories of the past (created by his godlike father) is ultimately erased and replaced with the opportunist's practice of wearing masks that conceal obedient servants of the system (claiming allegiance to his beastly uncle), the masks worn by his friends, servants, acquaintances, relatives (including



even his own mother). Hence, the essence of this tragedy represents the main protagonist's revelation of the meaninglessness, chaos, enigma and mystery behind what seemed to be meaning, order and certainty: quite symbolically, the movement from the domain of innocence (from Hamlet's University of Wittenberg, an ideal, almost mythic, realm of books, learning, knowledge and answers provided) to experience (the court of Elsinore, a realistic realm revealing the political reality of strife, ambition and crime), finally resulting in the tragic self-betrayal, leading to madness and death. This movement is thus thoroughly contrasted to the transition previously described in *As You Like It* – from the corrupt court to the ideal Forest of Arden, from innocence to experience.

Although Shakespeare showed the tragic consequences of self-betrayal (that could be closely associated with the rejection of the mythic or spiritual sphere previously discussed in the paper) as a sort of sincere warning in *Hamlet*, this pessimistic vision was ultimately not an option for the resolution of the spiritual quest undertaken in *As You Like It* that the playwright himself favoured. It is perhaps in the romance *The Tempest* (1610-1611), usually regarded as the last play Shakespeare wrote without collaboration with other authors, that we could search for the ultimate realization of his artistic vision. The theme of the rival brothers is present here as well; however, whereas in *Hamlet* the hostility between the brothers is hopelessly portrayed through the tragic death of the main characters, in *The Tempest* Shakespeare places emphasis on acts of mercy and forgiveness as a more valid option for the resolution of the discussed antagonism. Thus, Prospero, the unjustly banished brother, the rightful Duke of Milan, who, with the help of his magic, induces a storm to entice his usurping brother Antonio and his accomplice King Alonso of Naples to his solitary place of exile, finally gives up on his plans for revenge and states:

Though with their high wrongs I am struck to the quick,  
Yet with my nobler reason against my fury  
Do I take part: the rarer action is  
In virtue than in vengeance: they being penitent,  
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend  
Not a frown further. (V, i, 25-31)

The storm that Shakespeare masterfully depicts here actually represents a symbolic rebellion against any kind of false authority, so that the audience

and/or readers are found in the domain of the mythic once again. The authorities in the realistic realm are exposed here as utterly powerless and helpless revealingly showing Shakespeare's attitude that the forces of nature, instigated by self-conscious individuals, eventually destroy the corrupt human order. Thus, Prospero, the benevolent magician who on his banished island rediscovers the significance of the harmonious (mythic!) bond between man and nature, the brother unjustly discarded from the realistic domain of secular power, (and, according to Ted Hughes, another character that alludes to the self-portrait of the author (Hughes 1992: 99)), acts here as an agent of moral reawakening who decides to terminate the bloody brothers' feud and restore the long-lost mythic unity by setting an example for the future generations to follow – by practicing mercy and forgiveness.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Hence, the spiritual journey that Shakespeare purposefully undertook in *As You Like It*, reflecting Melancholy Jacques' conscious decision to dispense with his old way of life by announcing that he is "for other than for dancing measures" (V, iv, 200), is, according to Ted Hughes, successfully completed in *The Tempest*, where the tragic fraternal crime is finally accounted for:

While in *The Tempest*, as Prospero, this figure judges, repairs and redeems the tragic fraternal crime that has spoiled his life, in *As You Like It*, as Jacques, he resolves to search, i.e. to investigate, 'through and through' man's tragic crime against himself and his brothers (Hughes 1992: 99).

In conclusion, Shakespeare's ultimate decision to revert to the long-forgotten values of mercy and forgiveness in his dramatic opus is completely analogous to Riane Eisler's emphasis of the recognition of the validity of the matriarchal partnership model as opposed to the patriarchal dominator model, whereby the necessary reconnection with the mythic sphere would be finally achieved in Shakespeare's idyllic Forest of Arden, which corresponds to Hughes' vision of the 'Mother Forest' (Hughes 1992: 110) and Frye's vision of the green world (Frye 1957: 182). This is definitely one of the reasons why the passionate admirers and enthusiastic interpreters of Shakespeare's work should regard the pastoral comedy *As You Like It* as a

key element in the attempt to resolve the spiritual riddle that the greatest English Renaissance bard posed for us.

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Милена Костић

„ЗА ДРУГО САМ ЈА, НЕ ЗА ПЛЕСНЕ ИГРЕ ТЕ”: ШЕКСПИРОВА ДУХОВНА  
ПОТРАГА У КОМЕДИЈИ КАКО ВАМ ДРАГО

**Сажетак**

Сврха рада јесте да се истражи тема духовног трагања коју је Шекспир започео у комедији *Како вам драго*, комбиновањем критичких увида Хјуза (његове интерпретације „активне ритуалне драме” и „мајке шуме”), Фраја (његове перцепције Арденске шуме као зеленог света који потиче из давног Златног доба) и Ајслерове (значаја који придаје моделу партнерства неопходном у Шекспировом поновном успостављању митског домена заснованог на матријархалним принципима једнакости). Посебна пажња у раду посвећује се лику меланхоличног Џејквиза, чија одлука да се посвети усамљеничком животу како би истражио узроке ривалитета међу браћом осликава Шекспирову тежњу да се током целокупне своје каријере драмског писца бави решавањем овог проблема.

**Кључне речи:** активна/пасивна ритуална драма, „мајка шума”, зелени свет, модел партнерства

***New Voices:  
Literary and Cultural Studies***

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**Vladimir Bogićević\***  
University of Belgrade\*\*  
Faculty of Philology  
Belgrade, Serbia

## **IN SEARCH OF THE UNPRESENTABLE: 'DETECTIVES OF THE SUBLIME' IN (POST)MODERN AMERICAN NOVEL \*\*\***

### **Abstract**

This paper deals with analysis of five representative American novels of the XX century – Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Barth's *Lost in The Funhouse*, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and Morrison's *Beloved* – using Nabokov's *Lolita* as a reference text and as an intersection of certain narrative strategies which appear in the mentioned novels, too. Through Lyotard's, Baudrillard's, Ricoeur's, Hutcheon's and partially Derrida's philosophical postulates, we shall endeavor to demonstrate that a common denominator of these texts is the search for some modern *unpresentable*, and the role that different forms of *marginal perspectives* play in this search. We shall also outline some provisional (and certainly incomplete) typology of the unpresentable – the paradox of desire, unreliability of reality, and indeterminacy of identity – and determine several different margins – psycho-pathological, racio-cultural, historic-anachronistic and introvertedly philosophical – at which, in various combinations, the characters who engage themselves in this search for the unpresentable are placed.

**Key words:** contemporary American novel, margin, unpresentable

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\* E-mail address: deklinacije@yahoo.com

\*\* PhD candidate

\*\*\* This paper was presented as the exam paper for PhD course "Modern American Novel" held by Prof. Radojka Vukčević at Belgrade Faculty of Philology, in March 2014. Translated from Serbian by Vladimir Bogićević.

## 1. Introduction

A common denominator that, in spite of thematic diversity, we could single out and under whose auspices we would place Faulkner, Pynchon, Morrison, Barth and DeLillo – provided that it will not be reduced to some humanistic platitude, nor to their joint (though in some ways problematic) affiliation to postmodernism – will not be so easy to find, and we are afraid that our following analysis will, despite our efforts, end up on equally undesirable speculative heights. However, certain generalizations are inevitable; all the more so since we are dealing with extremely self-conscious authors – not just in the metafictional sense, which Hutcheon stresses, nor in McHale’s sense of ontological problematization of the text (Hutcheon, 1988; McHale, 1987), but also at the level of social criticism, playing with literary tradition and procedures, incorporation of mass culture, complicating reception (making it *difficult*), etc. In other words, we are facing authors who play with reader a perplexing Nabokovian chess game and whose every move should be monitored with attention and disbelief, for things rarely are as they look, and readers most often will not be even capable to figure them out to the end.

## 2. Theoretical backgrounds: analysis of the sublime

That is why our initial thesis, in Lyotardian spirit, will invoke a Kantian basis, into which we will try to interweave all scattered narrative threads: as we will use other Lyotard’s terms – differend, breakdown of metanarratives – already overexploited by now, but nonetheless appropriate to point out to some unavoidable aspects (Lyotard, 1991; Lyotard, 1984). We will not forget Baudrillard either, whose theory of simulacra takes its cue from Jameson’s and McLuhan’s critique of media and consumer society, and almost functions as a manual for reading DeLillo, but we will try to subsume it under Lyotard’s basic dichotomies and to draw some not-so-Lyotardian conclusions (Baudrillard, 1994; Baudrillard, 1993). Our goal here is not to devise a coherent philosophical position but only to apply the already existing theoretical concepts for the sake of easier interpretation of specific literary works – not oversimplifying their complexity, but also not straying into overcrowded theoretical arguments. We will, finally, make use of Hutcheon’s insistence on “the voice of the other”, *i.e.* awakening



the margin – which is the direct descendant of Derrida's decentering, feminist, post-colonial and Marxist criticism – and we will “abuse” it, just like Baudrillard's simulacra (Hutcheon, 1988); thereat, we do not expect to encounter significant resistance in making this “philosophical mixture”, since all postmodern thinkers essentially proceed from the same mutually interchangeable assumptions.

It is well known that Kant explains the *sublime* as incompatibility of comprehending faculty of imagination with bordering ideas of the mind (as opposed to the *beautiful*, which is a harmonized play of representations of imagination and concepts of reason; Kant, 2000). Lyotard takes over this Kantian definition, from *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and applies it in a much wider context and in different fields. To him, the distinctive feature of postmodernism, as well as of modernism, is precisely in dealing with *presenting the unpresentable*, i.e. with the impossibility for imagination to picture what mind must know to exist whereat modernism regrets this inability of imagination, and is overwhelmed by nostalgia for the unpresentable – while postmodernism faces the same problem in a much more serene way and finding there a cause for the play of perpetual approaching and distancing (Lyotard, 1992). We agree that the *unpresentable* is one of the most precious golden fleeces of literature not just since modernism, but already in romanticism, and even earlier, in various variants of antique and medieval mysticism. We will add that *the nature of the unpresentable*, in regard to those earlier epochs, has considerably changed; and that this change occurred in the time of positivism, realism and naturalism (which is exactly the time-frame Lyotard is interested in). Old transcendences are demystified; God is dead, phenomenology of spirit is just academic fiction and man just the most recent episteme, like the system of representation, or an even older system of similarity (Foucault, 1970). All the old *Beyonds* have been disqualified (and it would be naïve to return to them) and life yet remained unfathomable.

### **3. The (post)modern unpresentable and its chosen ones**

The unpresentable, which is a subject of modern American novel, is no longer the eschatological or subjective-spiritual unknowns – God, afterlife, genius, inscrutability of nature, infinity of imagination – and even when they are, they come out more as a symbolist intimation than as romanticist

metaphysics (e.g. ‘religious moments’ in Pynchon or death in DeLillo). A whole new world of mysteries was opened up by scientific breakthroughs from the end of XIX-beginning of XX century – ‘understandable in itself’ came into focus of interest: the meaninglessness of routine, irrationality of *social reality*, impersonality of identity and logic of power and submission, to name a few. The classical answer of Emerald Tablet (“as above, so below”), taken over by Christianity, became unsustainable as soon as transcendence that supported it was refuted: it became clear that to search for the first cause would mean *regressus ad infinitum*, and that the dialectics of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ is elusive and interminable. Indeterminacy took place of certainty, and partial analyses that of total explanations. The world, in other words, became decentered and lost its transcendent pledge – the same happening to the subject, history, language, and even science. That trend of demystification of the unrepresentable and exclusion of the original and final is easy to follow in structuralism and poststructuralism, as it is through great works of modernism and postmodernism; its lowest common denominator is a replacement of chain, root or arborescent model of conditioning with a network, or a rhizomatic one – where elements of ‘this world’ can be determined only by other similar elements, not by some instance of higher (or lower) order (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Lyotard characterizes the same phenomenon as breakdown of metanarratives – primarily metanarratives of spiritual development and the emancipation of men – accompanied by fragmentation of knowledge and rise of the utilitarian, capitalist paradigm (Lyotard, 1984). Great stories that give sense to the totality of existence have lost their credibility, and narrative space burst into multitude of smaller narratives, ‘paralogisms’ and ‘differends’, not subsumable under some higher unity. Instead of unfathomable heights of the Divine we are left with unsolvable aporias of the real.

In accordance with that change of the unrepresentable, its champions have changed as well: they are no longer mystics and hermits, philosophers and artists, Faust who wrestles with Erdgeist himself. The new unrepresentable is still being searched for, but now it has its *detectives*: random chosen ones, average, maladjusted, oppressed and rejected – all those who precisely because of their marginal positions have a clearer view on the realm of the real. Whether it is about some pathological ostracism or lack of social affirmation, they are the ones who are capable of stepping out and exposing the incomprehensibility of ‘the normal’: that is equally the case with Faulkner’s Quentin, Morrison’s Sethe, Barth’s Ambrose, Pynchon’s Oedipa

– and even with DeLillo's Gladney. Fragmentation and multiplication of stories – their 'decenteredness', as Derrida would call it (Derrida, 1966) – go hand in hand with these new searches: both when it comes to polyphony and variations of Faulkner and Morrison, and episodicity of Pynchon, Barth and DeLillo; and with them also agrees that 'irreducible residue', to which the new detectives of the sublime are condemned – unlike the old ones, who had their mystical certainty. The true story of Sutpen and his lineage is impossible to recount, as well as that of Beloved or Trystero: while in Barth and DeLillo the subject himself and his reality remain indeterminable – they are what one can speak about, but what cannot be reached. New searchers thus search for their own identity too – or at least for what can be called 'human nature' – as much as the old ones: but, that identity is no longer either the basis of itself or eternal essence or a result of simple 'external' causes. It is, in much more perfidious way, a correlate of one schizophrenically and paranoically derealized reality and is equally elusive as that reality. Baudrillard's simulacra provides us with insight in the extent of this derealization: *White Noise* is so full of them that nothing but death still seems authentic and it too, thanks to dylar, becomes its own simulacrum. But the same could be said about Pynchon's Trystero, Barth's Ambrose, Helen and *Anonymiad*. We believe we would not go too far if we understood both Morrison's Beloved and Faulkner's demon-ogre Sutpen as simulacra of their own kind.

#### **4. Simulacra and authenticity, fiction and history**

The problem of simulacra actually overlaps with the mystery of the unpresentable in (at least) one point: Derridian slippage of the signified. If signs already conceal what they signify, and make it impossible to really speak about it, than simulacra are just the last stage of that cleavage: language is merely a veil of the secret, around which one can circle, evoke it, or falsify it. Just as Faulkner stories circle around an unknown history, Pynchon's around a dubious conspiracy, and Morrison's around a mysterious ghost-imposter who, at the end, disappears with attributes of an African deity (Washington, 2005). Ineffability of reality, *i.e.* its insusceptibility to signs – whose ultimate expression is simulacrum, the sign that signifies itself – serves to conceal, push out or camouflage the unpresentable and that is precisely the mechanism of advertising, fashion and reality TV – themes that occupy

both Baudrillard and DeLillo. This whole problem was already outlined in Heidegger: falling prey, inauthenticity, forgetting and covering over of being all perfectly correspond to both mentioned philosophical concepts and themes of our novels; the important difference being that Heidegger still believes in pristine and original being, which poststructuralism – along with postmodernism – does not acknowledge anymore (Heidegger, 1996). It is almost impossible to ask what is an authentic being of Thomas Sutpen – not just because of the unreliability of various narrators, but also because of one essential ‘inauthenticity’ (Sutpen’s ‘design’) in his character; it is also impossible to ask about Sethe’s authenticity, since her whole life has been shaped by misery, oppression and exploitation; Gladneys for other reasons ‘fall prey to inauthenticity’, surrounded by an artificial reality of television, supermarkets and simulations, where even ‘the true real’ loses its distinctive features (and the question remains whether their obsession with death really represents a step out into the authentic); Barth almost everywhere in the *Funhouse* thematizes inauthenticity: as conventionality of narration, artificiality of the real, fictionality of personality, etc; while Pynchon never gets his Oedipa, neither Trystero, out of the dilemma: myself or the world, lie or truth, madness or conspiracy – where boundaries between authentic and inauthentic are no longer even relevant.

Close to simulacra stands Hutcheon’s ‘historical metafiction’ too – which doubtlessly can be recognized at least in Faulkner and Pynchon (Hutcheon, 1988). The Yoknapatawpha County itself, insignia and *topos* of Faulkner’s whole opus, is just an example of that problematizing of history which she talks about. Thus in *Absalom*, where this ‘unknowable history’ revives as Southern Gothic, fictional places and persons intertwine with real, historical ones: figures ‘larger than life’, at the same time exposed and mystified, stand almost as emblems of moral and political turmoil from the time of Civil War and accompanying crisis of values – and their historical accuracy and fictional expressiveness mutually exchange and equate with each other. Pynchon invents an entire ‘parallel history’ for the sake of his underground society – he places Trystero back in the first days of Thurn & Taxis, making him a crux of all paranoid projections, over-interpretations, and conspiracy theories (whereat *The Crying* could be exemplary of a close relationship between paranoia and historical metafiction)<sup>1</sup>. However, he

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<sup>1</sup> On Pynchon’s attitude to history in general, and paranoia as “a form of cognitive mapping”, see: Elias (2012).

leaves it unresolved whether this is a genuine conspiracy, some obscure deception, or the vivid imagination of his female protagonist.

## 5. *Lolita* and two main types of margin

On the whole, if there were a unique prototype of all our five novels that would be Nabokov's *Lolita*.<sup>2</sup> Standing at the crossroads of modernism and postmodernism, it was crucial for novels that followed, especially in Anglophone world, and its abundance of local trivia, animated with exoticism that only a naturalized alien could provide, made it a kind of lexicon of American culture, both for Americophiles and for Americophobes. The phenomenon of the 'voice from the margin' decentered focus which provides us with a fresh perspective and defamiliarization, is already multiply incarnated in *Lolita*. At a paratextual level, Nabokov himself is that displaced voice, which speaks about foreign culture in a foreign language – but which, at the same time, appropriates this culture and this language, speaking from one internal position, since there is no external perspective with which he could identify.<sup>3</sup> The acuteness of his insights is enabled by that indeterminacy, a stateless *otherness*, which in literature flourished with Kafka's Judaism, or Hemingway's *corrida* – and Humbert Humbert incorporates this Ahasverian feature of his author, replicating it in all fields indiscriminately: as a wandering expatriate, a 'conservative' European in 'liberal' America, idiosyncratic stylist, hypersensitive eccentric, sexual pervert. Otherness in all these meanings – cultural, social, psychological and pathological – will determine the focal positions of our novels too. Perverted sexuality, primarily in incestuous key (in *Lolita* it is 'a simulated incest'), is one of the main flywheels of Faulkner's *Absalom* – especially if the reader remembers Quentin from *The Sound and the Fury* and notices to what extent incestuous matrix shapes his narrative perspective (as well as moral-symbolic milieu of Faulkner's world);<sup>4</sup> *Beloved* is full of images

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<sup>2</sup> We consider *Lolita* 'a prototype' despite it being published almost 19 years after *Absalom*, because the most important tendencies of all five novels converge in it: it is a reference point that 'condenses' their narrative strategies, and therefore from its different elements one can proceed to every one of them in particular. In that and only that sense we allow ourselves to call it 'prototype'.

<sup>3</sup> On Nabokov's ambivalent cultural-linguistic position see: Sweeney (2005).

<sup>4</sup> On the role and significance of incest in Faulkner see: Zender (1998).

of sexual alienation, given sometimes in extremely brutal way: starting from “the stolen milk”, prostituting with the engraver and ‘chokecherry tree’ on Sethe’s back, through various instances of oral, gustative and tactile objectification, to the scenes of savage raping, torture and sexual exploitation.<sup>5</sup> Morrison also points her finger to racial discrimination, position of oppressed other, who is deprived not just of free will, but also of his own culture, and condemned to always be intruder in foreign world. His situation is the inverse of that of Nabokov – he is not in an indefinite borderline area, space between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’, because he tries to appropriate a foreign culture and assimilate with a new society, but because that culture and society are simultaneously being imposed on and denied to him. On the one hand, he is irrevocably cut off from his origins, in order to be forced to accept the orders of his masters, which must become his own, while, on the other, he is being forbidden from any possibility to recognize himself as a member of new community because he is denied his very humanity – *i.e.* of right to any culture. The perspective that opens up from this ‘slave’ margin must concern that elementary and primal, where the human gets in touch with the bestial and *Beloved* reveals that (literally) sub-cultural world of passions and urges, and its civilizational supports, which enclose and maintain it like a reservation. The situation is similar with Faulkner, who puts an equally strong emphasis on the junction of the historical, mythical, pathological and racial, but his narrators give the impression of outsiders also because of something that is more characteristic of a highly intellectual air of romanticism and modernism: their specific mixture of personal extravagance and ideological anachronism. Conspicuous rhetoric and pathetic, as well as extreme passion in solving moral and political problems – which all can be traced back to Schiller – are just a shell behind which hides profound socio-emotional ‘maladjustment’, as of bitter and capricious Rosa Coldfield, so of nostalgic and sensitive Quentin and his father. All three of them live in the wrong time and experience themselves as captives of the past: of a nobler and stronger age when giants walked the earth. This fascination with the past, undead and unreconciled with, which comes back to haunt them is in fact what makes them capable to step out of everydayness and reach a no man’s land, neither-here-nor-there, wherefrom they can look back at ordinary

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<sup>5</sup> On various forms of libidinal objectification, torture and deprivation, as well as on the significance of intersubjective relationships and resocialization, see: Schapiro (1991), and Boudreau (1995).

life.<sup>6</sup> The matter is somewhat different with Pynchon, Barth and DeLillo, in whom history does not appear as a burdensome origin, personal, racial and national past, but as a paranoid construction, mythological pattern, textual (i.e. commercial) convention, or a sign that conceals its own absence. In the vacuum left by the withdrawal of history – which is just a reverse of multiplication of alternative, fragmented histories<sup>7</sup> – their hero-narrators are left on their own; that is why their otherness always develops out of specific heightened self-consciousness, as a final stage of introspection, which becomes self-destructive – awareness of the artificiality of self and the world. DeLillo's Gladney becomes prey of this centrifugal force when he gets to grips with 'the empty center', i.e. becomes aware of his own death. Mistrust of reality, which was already indicated by his cultural analysis, by this shift becomes a burning issue: and his intellectual distance, thanks to which he developed a critical attitude towards the real, will grow into an existential crisis proper. Pynchon's Oedipa will pass through similar ordeals, pushing herself into the world of eccentrics and rejects, of "waste" that gravitates around Trystero, and facing the alternative: solipsism or pan-determinism, madness or conspiracy; her 'mediocrity' will be irrevocably shaken when testimonies of unreliability of the real begin to pile up – so much that one moment she will even attempt suicide.

In Barth, this process is already in its 'Beckettian stage': his characters do not even belong to some reality, which they could afterward call into question, because reality is exposed as a fiction beforehand. The world is clearly falling apart before our eyes, and all that remains is multitude of reverberations – identity compromised by precursors, realism compromised by convention, a funhouse whose dozed off operator just underlines artificial character of entire construction. In other words, in all three authors, margin on which their heroes posit themselves is a product of their critical consciousness: brought to the point of suspecting reality of the world and authenticity of their own egos, they get out beyond the scope of 'normal life' and enter into vicious circle of philosophy. Is the fake reality work of a real subject, or the real subject work of a fake reality? Is the world just a hallucination, or consciousness just the creation of the world? Obsessed by these questions, they displace themselves to the position of one meta-consciousness, whose role is to deconstruct each certainty, all

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<sup>6</sup> On various roles of history and past in Faulkner see: Rollyson (2007).

<sup>7</sup> On various philosophical approaches to history see: Foucault (1972) (*Introduction*) and Ricoeur (1984).

that is understandable in itself – and they insofar cease to be a part of habitual course of events; their newborn fundamental skepticism separates them from its lures. That, however, does not mean that Barth's, Pynchon's and DeLillo's heroes are not displaced in other ways too – as introvert, cumbersome, aloof, unaffirmed, dissatisfied – nor that marginality in general in them (especially in Pynchon) is not thematized; but it means that their philosophical distance plays the same role as racial otherness in Morrison, or historical anachronism in Faulkner. Gladneys are surely remarkable for many reasons (DeLillo's extraordinary skill lies in presenting them as the most unusual where they appear the most common), Ambrose is obviously maladjusted, Oedipa is hasty and unstable, which we do not infer just from her aborted 'psychiatry sessions'... After all, Nietzsche already brought to light the relationship between philosophical and artistic deviations and other sorts of abnormalities, and Mann described it beautifully in his famous novels: so there is nothing surprising in those combinations of eccentricities and insight.

## 6. Search and revelation

If we return to Nabokov, we will realize that the problematics of unreliable reality was already developed in *Lolita* – reaching its full expansion in *Pale Fire* – as well as that a lot of meta-fictional 'traps' and ontological indeterminacies, which will be specific to Barth and Pynchon, were already staged here. Some of the means by which Nabokov achieves that effect of derealization are literary allusions, parodies and pastiches, which Barth and Pynchon use in abundance too (as well as Faulkner; while DeLillo rather parodies sitcoms, disaster stories and pop culture) – while Humbert's paranoia, which mystifies and over-codes the plot of the novel, finds its place both in Oedipa's pursuit of Trystero, and in Gladney's uncovering Babette's infidelity and machinations over dylar (it also could be recognized in Rosa's sections about Sutpen, or in perplexities over phantom nature of Beloved). The dominant plot, however, that one finds both in *Lolita* and in our novels is the plot of search and revelation, which will be in the closest relationship with presenting the unrepresentable. Here literature did not advance much further from Aristotle, who saw *anagnorisis*, in the sense of "a change from ignorance to knowledge" (Aristotle, 1452a), as a constitutive (although



not necessary) part of the tragedy: today it is equally hard to imagine a (decent) story which might do completely without it. His understanding of *anagnorisis* as discovery of one's own or other's identity or true nature also touches the vital point of modern novels: which only means that some habits and interests have not changed for the last two thousand years. But, the whole search for the unknown, the meaning of crucial revelations, went through considerable transformations since Aristotle; former solid cosmological, ethical and political setup became susceptible to the most daring relativizations – while out of inviolable root personality remained just a battlefield of impersonal forces. Hence the concepts of fate, fortune, chance, necessity, opinion and truth, so essential to Greek thought, had to change their role too: recognition could no longer be taken as confirmation of the higher order, disclosure of unexpected rule, or reconciliation with fate, because predetermined social laws, to which individual had to adapt, ceased to be universally valid; just as the guilt of that individual, which determined his place in the story, became too complex to relate just to the clash of general and individual, person and norm, two equally justified and exclusive spiritual claims, etc. Collision of irreconcilable orders – which is another name for Lyotard's differend – such as in *Antigone* or *Oresteia* lost its opportunity to be subsumed under a higher narrative: either that of tragic emancipation through suffering, or that of elevation of spirit through contradictions; and by that fact alone, nature of what has been revealed, and what remains in the gap between these incompatible language games, had to be drastically changed. The question is, therefore: for what *new* revelation search the heroes of (post)modern novels?

## **7. Paradox of desire and unreliability of reality**

In Nabokov, the trajectory in which Humbert's 'investigations' move on follows at least two separate but intertwined tracks: and on each of them he runs up against an insurmountable obstacle, which reveals his aporetic position. The first one concerns paradox of desire, whose gratification inevitably entails upcoming destruction of its object (at least in the oral-sadistic key, which fits perfectly into eroticism of *Lolita*). The lust that drives Humbert into a shared exile, and latter chase after Lolita, will not get him what he wants – complete, mutual consummation – but only certainty about her evasion, corruption, and ultimate degradation: first

with Quilty, and then, in other way, at Schiller's. Even the retribution he carries out, as some kind of "instrument of fate", is extremely farcical, since he bears equal, if not greater blame for Lolita's "downfall", and since Quilty is just his own caricature. Humbert's pedophilic fixation is, from the very beginning, paradoxical and, in a bizarre way, utopian: ideally of his "island of nymphets" is disparate with reality of their age, his pathological need to control with his craving for love, his lyrical outbursts and pangs of conscience with wantonness of sexual exploitation; everything that burdens any passionate relationship is here intensified to the limit, in this impossible arrangement, where the roles of tutor and lover constantly undermine each other, and which is clearly condemned to brevity. The second track concerns, however, that more obvious detective work on discovering Lolita's 'kidnapper' – but is in fact a part of wider constellation of signals and clues, whereby in Nabokov the smallest details get activated. For, as Humbert advances in unraveling set of circumstances responsible for his debacle, signs begin more and more explicitly to indicate a twofold construction of events: that which reveals Humbert himself, and that which *maybe* will be revealed to the reader (and which Humbert is not aware of).<sup>8</sup> In this way, an increasingly fictional structure of *Humbert's story* threatens to call into question the credibility of *story of Humbert* too: and aporia in which we get caught is an undecidability between constructive or real character of the whole inner world of the novel (and, by analogy, of world in general). That already mentioned unreliability of reality postmodernism will exploit abundantly – it will be its generic 'discovery', unrepresentability *ex ante facto*<sup>9</sup> – but the previous differend will be equally significant too: as incompatibility of irrational and rational, unconscious and conscious, performative and indicative. The field where all these opposites permeate each other and spark in a short circuit, is the field of *ideology*, which simulates their reconciliation; that is why it is not strange to regard Faulkner and Morrison, whose novels are the most inwrought with the ideological (political, racial, cultural), in spite of their stylistic differences as still closer to Nabokov than Pynchon, Barth and

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<sup>8</sup> This *double coding* is a subject of many works on *Lolita*; here we will point out just three: Pifer (2007); Ferger (2004); and Stone (2010).

<sup>9</sup> And this unreliability will reveal itself through both what McHale calls epistemological and what he calls ontological dominant; thus, although McHale places *Lolita* in Nabokov's modernist phase, indications that issues of ontological ambiguities are in it already raised are numerous and hard to ignore. On that see: Fraysse (1995).

DeLillo; with them it is easier to recognize both impassable paths whereby in *Lolita* one searches for revelation.

### **8. *Lolita* and *Absalom*: desire and reality**

In Faulkner we find almost identical problematics, as well as identical obsessiveness of the main characters. Racial and class prejudices, as irrational and therefore indestructible foundation, play the same part in Sutpen's design, as sexual preferences for Humbert (who even dreams of conceiving the whole dynasty of *Lolitas*) – while the scene at planter's mansion, from Sutpen's childhood, assumes equal significance to him as "Annabel Lee" in *Lolita*. Both obsessions develop in formative years (without going into psychological implausibility of Humbert's ironic self-analysis), when 'naïveté' of heroes allows them to leave such indelible stamp on their psyche; both heroes are slaves to their passion, which makes them blind to others' feelings; and, for both of them, fulfillment of their tyrannical desire entails its frustration too. The reason for their failure, however, cannot be attributed to fate – Aubrey McFate panders to Humbert's machinations, just as for Sutpen it sometimes seems that he is being favored by incredible luck; instead of hybris, their plans are thwarted by the past which returns to claim its debts: either in the person of Quilty, about whose acquaintance with *Lolita* Humbert finds out too late, or in the person of Charles Bon, whose relationship with his own half-sister Sutpen fails to prevent, not being willing to acknowledge him for his son. In both cases, psychological and social conditionality of desire that governs their actions is conspicuous, as is its inner contradiction that leads inevitably to an absurd and tragic outcome. If Sutpen had been able to renounce his beliefs, his tragedy could have been avoided, and the goal to which he strived because of those beliefs would maybe have been attainable to him – same as *Lolita* would have been attainable to Humbert if he had been able to renounce his passion, which led him to her in the first place. With both, it seems like the goal and the means for its fulfillment by nature exclude each other; Humbert's lust makes him too demanding to be able to keep the object of that lust – apart from forcing him to play two different roles that exclude each other – just as exclusive commitment to founding a dynasty and securing its material well-being makes Sutpen cruel enough to turn one son against another, becoming the real culprit of its downfall. It is characteristic that

both have earlier, unsuccessful attempts behind them – Humbert to achieve a relationship with a “girl-child” in Europe, Sutpen to found a family in Tahiti – and that both are trying again, after their best chance for success went down the drain – Humbert with Rita, Sutpen with Rosa and Milly. Compulsivity of their characters and Sisyphean discipline with which they devote themselves to their mania point out to desire as a center around which gravitate all other plots: its paradox is that unrepresentable which is searched for in *Absalom* and *Lolita*.

But, that is not the only unrepresentable. The already mentioned unreliability of reality, which is the second layer of “the Passion of Humbert”, in *Absalom* does not perhaps appear with all ontological and metafictional implications that Nabokov will develop from *Lolita* to *Pale Fire*, but it certainly comes out with powerful epistemological charge and indeterminacy, which already threaten to blow up the limits of modernism. In *The Sound and the Fury* we were dealing with different versions of events, recounted by highly specific narrators (Benjy was retarded, Quentin and Jason obsessed with honor and profit, and all in their way preoccupied with Caddy), with extraordinary points of view – but the definitive story might be (at least fragmentarily) reconstructed, which is also confirmed by final interfering of omniscient narrator, and by subsequently added author’s appendix (Faulkner, 2003). In *Absalom*, things are different: apart from us being left to conflicting narrators, with biased or otherwise deformed points of view, the story that reveals itself is also mediated, sometimes through multiple generations or instances of ‘oral tradition’, not one narrator except Rosa is really a witness of described events (and even she witnessed them only for a short period she lived in “Sutpen’s Hundred” – otherwise she spreads others’ hearsay in her own interpretation, as Quentin’s father spreads stories of his own father, general Compson), and, on top of all that, in Quentin’s and Shreve’s ‘improvisation’ the whole narrative becomes completely hypothetical (with made up characters, like Bon’s mother’s lawyer, of whose existence there is not any ‘evidence’ in the world of the novel).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This, of course, applies only to the ‘central story’, which describes the rise of Thomas Sutpen and quadrilateral Sutpen-Judith-Henry-Charles Bon: not to the additional or secondary events, which heroes-narrators could attend as witnesses (or inform themselves about them ‘from the first hand’).

## 9. *Absalom*: fiction and past

The problem that comes out to light here is the unrepresentability of the past, exactly in terms in which Linda Hutcheon discusses historical metafiction, as a difference between *fact* and *event* (Hutcheon, 1988). Something did happen (event) – of that one can (mainly) be sure: but, what is *the meaning* of that (fact)? The whole context, causes, interests and motives cannot be known to their contemporaries because they are not omniscient, and their perspective is both spatially and temporally, intellectually and hermeneutically – quantitatively and qualitatively – restricted; while, on the other hand, as one moves away from the *eyewitness position*, the dangers of retrospective projection, misrecognition, over-interpretation and ideologization become more and more noticeable. To that extent, historical distance is at the same time necessary and detrimental; some comprehensive “truth” would be available only to an ideal being, in the rank of Berkeley’s God, who would be aware of *all* “external” and “internal” events (even those “without witness”), their meaning and correlations, and would be able to connect them into one coherent whole. For human beings, though, reconstruction implies construction – not just for someone who “unravels” history afterward, but also for those who are experiencing it immediately – and construction fiction (*et vice versa*; Ricoeur, 1984; Hutcheon, 1988); Faulkner’s *Absalom* demonstrates that in the most striking way. Let us ask ourselves, whose ‘story of Sutpens’ is more convincing: Rosa’s, general Compson’s, his son Jason’s, or Quentin’s and Shrive’s? Fragmentary views that complement and undermine each other in different narratives, leaving us with undisguised extrapolation and speculation, reveal nothing except that “the right past” is unknowable; if a story about any “historical event”, from biography to national history, is possible, it is far from complete and reliable report – and we do not even want to clarify what “the event” by itself means, and how to limit all lateral series entering in its orbit (*i.e.* to what extent to “expand” the story, for it to have any meaning).

## 10. *Beloved*: the paradox of desire and indeterminacy of identity

The paradox of desire – let us call it its differend – is no less noticeable in *Beloved*. There we encounter a different, but equally possessive love – parental and filial – whose two complementary sides are protection

and recognition. Aporeticity of this relationship was already presented in *Lolita* and *Absalom*: however contaminated Humbert's "fatherhood" may have been, his attempts to 'save' Lolita from the world (although not from himself) are real – as real as aversion that he in this way arouses, and because of which she eventually leaves him (the interesting question is what is the real reason of Lolita's escape: Humbert's sexual exploitation, or his "fatherly" control? We ask this – knowing how offensive it might sound – primarily because she runs away from him only to embrace even more perverse "protector", Quilty)<sup>11</sup>; while, in *Absalom*, Charles' attempts to attract Sutpen's attention and be acknowledged as his son ends up in an inevitable catastrophe – the single thing he achieved is to force him to orchestrate his murder: and this with the help of other son, who also, in order to be (in another way) recognized, had to renounce the family, for whose recognition he was striving. In *Beloved*, hopelessness of parental love is even more drastic: in order to protect her daughter and save her from the school teacher and his nephews, Sethe is forced to kill her; just as Beloved, in her desire for recognition verifying her identity, physically ruins the person whose love she needs. Sethe's need to redeem herself, to 'explain' the unexplainable – how murder can be an act of love – exposes herself to an even more gruesome aporia, potentiated by the supernatural atmosphere of the novel: her devotion to 'the again found' Beloved and their reciprocal decline and exuberance show only that, in her subsequent giving of once denied, Sethe condemns herself to vanish – i.e. moves precisely toward the moment when 'giving' will become impossible. In that succubus-family circle, even the 'male intervention' of Paul D could not stop rushing into disaster – not until the whole community, in a sort of collective exorcism, casts out the intruder and 'breaks the spell': where it is impossible to determine whether this intruder really is, and to what extent, Sethe's deceased daughter (Channinghombree, n.d.). Isolation, as a neurotic choice par excellence – full separation of public and private – only increases entanglements of desire: as in *Lolita*, where Humbert from the beginning tries to put his nymphet under the glass bell, so in *Absalom*, where Sutpen openly withdraws from community, and limits all his aspirations to conception of a future 'dynasty'. In *Beloved* that isolation reaches even more pathological and 'psychic' heights, becoming absolute

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<sup>11</sup> Which is certainly not to suggest that she is *not* a victim of Humbert's molestation and manipulation; on the contrary, her behaviour can be interpreted also as developing behavioural "resilience" in response to experienced trauma. See: Hamrit (2009).

and almost inescapable. And, in all three cases, breakthrough of the outside world, if not abolishes ominous circling of desire, at least gives it a decisive thrust, speeding it up to the point of breakdown. Gordian knot is not untied – desire cannot be tamed by mere involvement of ‘reality principle’ – but is cut off by a ‘coup de grace’ – when artificial paradises of the private give in before onslaughts of the public.

However, behind the impassable paths of desire, there is, in *Beloved*, an even more fundamental problematic hiding determining the fate of those “sixty million” (and more) from the dedication and reaching into the darkest corners of psycho-political abysses – the question of identity. Brought to the foreground by mentioned contradictory position of slaves, as people forcibly integrated into a foreign culture but deprived of any chance to become its members, it is already indicated in *Absalom* by indeterminable racial and family status of Charles Bon and his son (which largely resembles Smerdyakov’s similar anonymity): and in Morrison it gets the most striking expression in long, variously intriguing “monologue” of Sethe, Denver and *Beloved*. Sethe’s ‘resurrected’ daughter is not, of course, the only character whose self-awareness is warped and endangered – physical and mental torture equally gnaws at Sethe and Paul D, as Denver is stricken by isolation and neglect (and as, in Faulkner, both Quentin and his father are torn between old traditions and new state of affairs) – but she takes a special place in this charade of identities: because of intensity of her inner dispersion and symbolic charge that Morrison stores into her chaotic ‘memories’. Fragments that flood her consciousness can in no way be attributed to a single person: some of them corroborate her being Sethe’s real daughter, while others are phantasmagoric, outside any context or related to things the real *Beloved* could not experience (e.g. sections evoking maltreatment on a slave ship); and the climax of derangement is reached when fragmentary but still recognizable voices of Sethe and Denver in 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter merge with dispersed voice of *Beloved* – leaving the impression of progressive confusion and erosion of all three identities (Rimmon-Kenan, 1996). The pendulum that describes the way in which heroines experience their ‘self’ in the novel goes from paranoid implosion to schizophrenic dispersion<sup>12</sup> – from various forms of persecution, isolation and enclosure to the breakdown of personality and its effusion in unpredictable directions – and if anything is suggested through that array

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<sup>12</sup> The polarity of paranoia-schizophrenia should be understood in the context of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s ‘paranoid’ and ‘schizophrenic’ poles, from: Deleuze&Guattari (2000).

of 'false salvations' it is that identity cannot be built, nor regained, without strong social foundation: i.e. interaction with some kind of group (at least with Paul D, who is a 'disturbing factor'), and its reciprocal support and recognition (i.e. 'outside intervention' surpassing efforts and power of the individual). Denver is the one who has the chance to make the most of that lesson and get out from the vicious circle; Sethe's future is more uncertain, although her last meeting with Paul D indicates that she is not unable to become her 'best thing' – to construct her own identity without burdens of the past, which kept her trapped in a triangle of trauma, guilt and redemption. One should, however, have in mind that community here plays the role of the 'healer' just as particular, local group, able to physically communicate with and 'embrace' endangered individual: community as an abstract, global or backstage entity can have exactly opposite effects – deconstruction of identity (either in paranoid, or in schizophrenic key) – which will be thoroughly explored by Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*. But *Beloved* too already indirectly shows us the dark side of social instinct; if we bypass symbolic reading, and refuse to recognize just the paradigm of female Negro slaves, or slaves in general, in *Beloved* (i.e. if we do not accept her only as a symbol epitomizing the fate of those 'sixty million' – which does not mean that the text forbids such reading), and do not write off surreal visions from her monologue as scenes 'from the other side', some transitional transcendence (which the text also does not exclude – especially in the light of African religious beliefs), but accept them as *real*, though hallucinatory / illusory memories, that monologue could help us discern the mechanism of her obscure socialization. In a word, either *Beloved* is a runaway captive from Deer Creek who really witnessed events on the slave ship, or she is embodiment of the ghost of Sethe's daughter who haunts the house no. 124, or she is somehow both – because the text fragmentarily corroborates both possibilities, in spite of their mutual exclusion – in all three cases the fact remains that it is precisely her hunger for integration, simultaneous appropriation and belonging – between dead and alive, daughter and mother, orphan and family, individual and race – that creates her schizoid omnipresence (hicstansand nuncstans) as a conglomerate of incompatible identities. The undecidability between natural and supernatural interpretation is not of essential importance for that conclusion: in Africa, the living dead and their communi(cati)on with the relatives are not a matter of fiction but of religious belief, so the appearance of ghost in flesh and blood is not a contradiction at all – but



that does not solve the problem of mixed, fragmented identity. The search for the face, smile and recognition which runs through the entire Beloved's monologue, and possessiveness of that longing, in which boundaries between self and the other, between what one is, one has and to what one belongs are lost, testify about more general crisis: the impossibility for alienated "I" from the margin to build up its identity through any universal or ideal identification – including identification with the margin itself. And Beloved is in this respect exemplary: if she is Sethe's deceased daughter then assimilation of entire "racial past" is a factor of schism in her identity; if she is a runaway slave from Deer Creek then this factor is her craving a "family shelter"; at any rate, search for unique meaning, for centering of decentered alternatives, leads to dissolution of personality, which ceases to be "its own", and becomes equally no one's and everyone's (hence such symbolic potential of Beloved). Identity, in the case of racial discrimination – and other marginalizing practices – is not opposed just to the universal imposed by colonialism as its global heritage: it opposes every universalization – because every universalization is the heir of colonialism, whatever it sets as its locus. Anguishes that Sethe, Denver and Paul D suffer, in their own search for belonging, are thereby focused and potentiated in Beloved, because the irreconcilable opposites they face are in her brought to the extreme – to a transcendent plane; but also conversely, dispersion of Beloved's identity in return dissolves all personalities within her range, all too willing to get caught in a net of pathological dependence and its inherent self-destructive individuation.

### **11. Identity and reality: paranoia and schizophrenia (Barth, Pynchon, DeLillo)**

The unpresentability of identity in Morrison is emphasized as a result of centuries-long racial exploitation; but, already in Nabokov, the characters reflecting in each other (Humbert-Quilty, Annabel-Lolita), the system of doubles, overlaps and substitutions – and literary analogies – problematize identity as (im)possible construction. Pynchon, DeLillo and Barth will approach this problem from a different, less "moving", but no less anxious side. While in Faulkner and Morrison we deal with an ambiguous exclusion from culture or cultural and racial ostracism, in them the culture itself becomes a burden, storehouse of repetitive patterns, and torsion these

patterns require: but, since there is no more “nature” that would precede that “distortion”, building up identity is like erecting castles in the air, phantasms supported by phantasms – which is graphically represented by a symbol of Moebius strip at the beginning of Barth’s book: strip whose underside is just an extension of the upper side, twisted around itself in order to serve as its own basis (in Pynchon, a similar role is assigned to “weaving the world” from Varo’s painting– where weavers, since they weave entire reality, must weave themselves too). Oscillating between the paranoid and schizophrenic, and its characteristic ‘entropy of identity’, are so conspicuous with these writers that there is almost no need to dwell on examples (Trystero, dylar, Mucho Maas, Willie Mink, Barth’s echolalias, etc.): but it is important to note that, unlike Faulkner and Morrison, for whom repression, torture, and cultural and axiological deracination were factors of loss of identity, for them this role is assumed by existential insecurity, breakdown of meta-narratives and artificiality of reality – i.e. by already mentioned ‘derealization of reality’. In (post)modern age which exports brutality and discrimination to the dumpsites of the “Third World”, or to its own abject enclaves (ghetto, white trash, various sub-cultural groups), individuation of the average man is no longer endangered by what is traumatic and terrifying – on the contrary, they sometimes can have even therapeutic effect – but by that all too familiar, which is a factor of paralysis: maintaining at the same time illusion of continuous change, and of non-existent meaning that this commotion ostensibly evokes. Paranoia is one of the ways out that ‘lends’ meaning to the world without meaning, and allows recuperation of identity, even at the cost of conflict with the forces projected into its center; schizophrenia, as rendering senseless so advanced that it turns into its opposite, into omnipresence of meaning – and thereby of personality too – is the other. Boundaries between Ego and the world, *i.e.* Ego and the others, in both cases are violated: and we are not so much interested here in psychological explanation of mechanisms of this violation, as in the fact that the reality itself, especially from about the mid-twentieth century – being increasingly more ‘mediated’ and fictional – has become a perfect ground for these mechanisms. In other words, what Freud in his time recognized as a triumph of reality principle, on account of limitation and deformation of human drives and pleasure principle,<sup>13</sup> has today come to its own inversion: to releasing the drives (at least in enclosed, but globally recognized “reservations” – which are still in expansion), on

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<sup>13</sup> *e.g.* in: Frojd (1969).

account of limitation and deformation of the reality principle. Here we will stop, because deeper delving into this would require more serious psychosocial analysis (and resorting to some terms – such as ‘death drive’ – which are still raising controversy even in their own fields); we will just repeat once more a distinction between Barth, Pynchon and DeLillo that applies to the unpresentability of reality, thus to unpresentability of identity (as obverse and reverse of the same process): Barth primarily ‘dissolves’ his characters by pointing out to their fictional, conventional and imaginary nature; Pynchon by confronting them with alternative and paradoxical interpretation of the world; DeLillo by having them taste instability and ‘falseness’ of reality. All three, thus – as we already said – dispatch their heroes into the labyrinths of philosophical aporias, which force them to get themselves involved in the most fundamental and essentially insolvable questions about the world and about themselves.

## **12. Conclusion: three types of the unpresentable; margin as a condition of their knowledge**

Finally, we have distinguished desire, reality and identity as three ‘modern’ unpresentables: they are mutually interconnected in their unreliability and indeterminacy, and are usually signaled by simultaneous presence of several irreconcilable orders and interpretations. The prevailing plot, which gravitates around these unpresentables, is a plot of search and revelation – which is just why it is not by accident that Pynchon, by the name of his heroine, in fact alludes to *Oedipus Rex*, a play considered exemplary for its economy of reversals and recognitions (*peripeteias* and *anagnorises*) by no other than the father of both terms, Aristotle; and just because of the irreconcilability of contradictions of these unpresentables, the heroes who dare to face them must be of the people from the margin – of those who will not conform to one totalizing explanation, but live out the opposites to the full extent and to their ultimate limit. We will not claim that this is the only, not even the main thread binding the five discussed contemporary novels together: but it is no doubt there; whether we should follow it further, and how far, will depend on more general conclusions it is to provide us – and on the possibility or impossibility of applying them to a wider group of literary works.

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Владимир Богићевић

У ПОТРАЗИ ЗА НЕПРЕДСТАВЉИВИМ: 'ДЕТЕКТИВИ УЗВИШЕНОГ'  
У (ПОСТ)МОДЕРНОМ АМЕРИЧКОМ РОМАНУ

**Сажетак**

Овај рад бави се анализом пет репрезентативних америчких романа XX века – Фокнеровим *Absalom, Absalom!*, Пинчоновићем *The Crying of Lot 49*, Бартовим *Lost in The Funhouse*, Де Лиловићем *White Noise*, и Морисоновкином *Beloved* – служећи се Набоковљевом *Лолитом* као референтним текстом, и као пресеком одређених наративних стратегија, које фигурирају и у поменути романима. Кроз Лиотарове, Бодријарове, Рикерове, Хачионкине и делимично Деридине филозофске поставке настојаћемо да покажемо како је заједнички именовани ових текстова потрага за једним модерним *непредстављивим*, и улога коју у тој потрази играју различите форме *маргиналних перспектива*. При том ћемо скицирати једну провизорну (и свакако непотпуну) типологију *непредстављивог* – парадокс жеље, непоузданост стварности, и неодредивост идентитета – и утврдити неколико различитих маргина – психопатолошку, расно-културолошку, историјско-анахронну и интровертно-филозофску – на које се, у различитим комбинацијама, смештају ликови који се упуштају у ову потрагу за *непредстављивим*.

**Кључне речи:** савремени амерички роман, маргина, *непредстављиво*





**Irina Kovačević\***

University of Belgrade

Faculty of Philology\*\*

Belgrade, Serbia

## **POPULAR CULTURE IN ITS POSTMODERN CONTEXT: VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *LOLITA***

### **Abstract**

The principle concern of this paper is to explore elements of popular culture in relation to postmodern literature; namely, the most important forms of intertwining 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and popular culture as its referent field. In this regard, one specific feature which this paper hopes to further address and elaborate on is the concept of postmodern identity in its consumerist and consumptionist ends, and how it relates to the novel of *Lolita* as a whole. In doing so, the paper explores characteristics of postmodernism and establishes its place and significance of essential manifestations of postmodernism in popular culture.

**Key words:** postmodernism, popular culture, consumerism, *Lolita*, Nabokov

### **1. In a Quest for *Lolita***

The novel *Lolita*, though usually interpreted as an allegory of romance in bridging the literary modern to the postmodern, is also a representation of

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\* E-mail address: i\_nina\_k@yahoo.com

\*\* PhD student

the respective postmodern cultural values, norms, and society in which it is set, and when it was written. It itself is an artifact of the popular culture of the America of its time, specifically the post and Cold War 1950s, and may be seen as such throughout the novel. In this regard, as a product of its time, *Lolita* should be relegated to the period of cultural, historical, and intellectual ideas of postmodernism, emerging from the literary background of its own underlying philosophy.

While Fredric Jameson, the Marxist political theorist and leading thinker in the field of postmodern critique, does not find the novel to be a primary instance of postmodern ideals in its truest form, it does offer something even more important, an ever so unique bridging of the apparent prior modern into the postmodern, as the novel's background quality, which sheds light upon the two differing, yet emerging, schools of thought (the modern into the postmodern): "Jencks's late moderns are those who persist into Postmodernism, and the idea makes sense architecturally; a literary frame of reference, however, throws up names like Borges and Nabokov [...] who had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms" (Jameson, 1991: 304).

It would seem then that if one desired to see a clear illustration of what the postmodern would be (especially in regard to the modern), one would then be apt to take Jameson's advice and read the novel *Lolita* to gain such an understanding.

## 2. The Postmodern and Popular Culture

Though originally coined by Tonybee<sup>1</sup> in the 1940s to describe a post-world-war-two era and picked up on by art theorist Charles Jencks to describe the deconstructionist based art movements of the 1970s, the term "postmodern" has become all encompassing, though elusive in meaning, and, in all actuality, self-contradictory: "The word 'postmodern' itself seems odd, paradoxically evoking what is after ('post') the contemporary ('modern'). How can something be *after* the contemporary?" (Bennett and Nicholas, 2004: 248).

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<sup>1</sup> See: Tonybee, A. J. (1974). *A Study of History*. Vol. 1: Abridgement of Volumes I-VI. Oxford University Press.

Fredric Jameson, renowned expert on the “postmodern”, also provides no clear definition *per se*, even in his culminating work *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Being so hard to delineate, the essential definition is only alluded to in a general idea and laid out through example throughout the work. Perhaps though, this is the way “postmodernism” should be defined, as supposition could herein be made that postmodernism is merely an analysis of how things are and in their moment and shape the movement thereof, as opposed to how things are from a background, top-down, all pervasive meaning (i.e., modernism); part of the essence of the postmodern is the inability of its decision to be defined and to define what it gives rise to.<sup>2</sup>

To shorten the argument of the definition of the postmodern, let it suffice to say that Jameson is of two main minds in his work, characterizing the idea of postmodernism as a whole: 1) there is no prior meaning, rather the cultural realm in itself makes meaning as it transpires<sup>3</sup> and 2) mass consumerism/consumption is a readily visible facet and outlet of the postmodern ideal, whatever it may be and in whatever form it may take, as what is made or done gives the meaning as in a stream of development. In Jameson’s own words, what is most important is that: “A postmodernist culture is also implicitly to affirm some radical structural difference between what is sometimes called consumer society and earlier moments of the capitalism from which it emerged” (1991: 54).

The postmodern is perfectly reflected and to be understood in what it produces, especially in the consumer culture which it not only reflects, but also creates, feeding off itself. Therein, according to Jameson, the essence of postmodernism is that the massive influx of commercially available goods have influenced the mere definition of postmodernism itself: “What wears the mask and makes the gestures of ‘populism’ in the various postmodernist

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<sup>2</sup> “The postmodern, that is to say, does not simply reject the possibility of making decisions. Rather, it gives new attention to the value of the undecidable. What the new critics of the middle of the twentieth century called ambiguity or paradox is now considered in terms of undecidability” (Bennett and Nicholas, 2004: 249).

<sup>3</sup> Having no set terms does not limit the power of postmodern theory, rather “this paradox of the time of the postmodern also points to the fact that, strictly speaking, the postmodern should not be thought of as a term of periodization: the postmodern challenges our thinking about time, challenges us to see the present in the past, the future in the present in a kind of no-time” (Bennett and Nicholas, 2004: 248). Therein, the associated aspects and results of postmodernism are those to be examined to gain clarity into its actual function.

apologias and manifestos is in reality a mere reflex and symptom of a [...] cultural mutation, in which what used to be stigmatized as mass or commercial culture is now received into the precincts of a new and enlarged cultural realm” (Jameson, 1991: 63). Jameson goes so far to say that postmodernism has initiated a self-perpetuating creation phenomenon, where consumption has rapidly enveloped the cultural realm as a whole, becoming the driving force behind the aesthetic ideals of postmodernism: “What has happened is that aesthetic production has become integrated into commodity production generally” (1991: 3).

The idea of production and consumption as being a moving or mutating force in the creation of an epochal idea or cultural movement is not novel to Jameson. Walter Benjamin previously suggested that the mere establishment of a means of mass consumption and reproduction gave the individual more power over the object of art and its creation, influencing the nature of art itself: “For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (Benjamin, 2010: IV). Hence, divorcing art from the thereto traditional aesthetic principle, to the end purpose of reproduction for consumability, is the same envisioned by Jameson.

This new relationship between the object and the individual in postmodernism may be subsequently seen as revitalizing the idea of an object’s individual aesthetic as applied in practice and theory to the individual: “The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition [...] in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced” (2010: II). The relationship of the object with the individual in its consumption can therefore be seen as the ultimate token essence of postmodernism, being one of its fundamental pillars.

Much like postmodernism, “popular culture” also derives its own definition from its own instances. Popular culture, in its postmodern sense, would seem to be but a mere extension of consumption, i.e., the object to be consumed which Jameson or Benjamin touches upon. Fiske, a renowned theorist of popular culture is of a similar mindset in his exploration of the field in terms of the postmodern, claiming, “in general popular culture finds its most fertile soil in the fields of leisure and consumption” (Fiske, 1997: 213). If the object and its obtainment is part and parcel of the postmodern

and enjoyment in the produced object is the manifestation of the popular, then postmodernism and popular culture would seem to easily bear the same foundation to their identity: the production and consumption of the object. Therefore, the relationship between the object consumed and the consumer may also be considered essential to “popular culture”; namely the result of consumerism on the consumer in establishing postmodern culture.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, attached to the postmodern idea of consumption is popular culture's idea of consumerism, as being defined by what one owns, or that identity is found along within the pleasure of the consumption of the object: “People can turn cultural commodities to their own interests and find pleasure in using them to make their own meaning of their social identities and social relations” (2010: 56). Within postmodernism, consumerism has also become a micro culture of its own, the best definition of which is offered by Charlotte Sussman, where she sees consumerism as a set of beliefs and values, sometimes even a way of life that distances the obtaining of material assets, and the actual process of obtaining them, at the top of the list of priorities for those who believe in the concept.<sup>5</sup>

The affect of consumer identity, however, is not alone found in the object and its consumption; rather, the actual relationship in the process of the consumption of the object by the individual is of primary concern, as “between the person (who uses them) and these products (index of the ‘order’ which is imposed on him), there is a gap of varying proportions opened by the use that he makes of them” (deCerteau, 1984: 32). The object then, from its start to its end and the manner in which it is done (the relationship of consuming the object), is therefore but one end-result of the postmodern, ultimately giving rise to consumerist popular culture.

In postmodern popular culture, the consumer uses the object as fulfillment, where consumerism becomes a progressive trend and the purchasing of goods becomes the only defining quality of assigning purpose or meaning. In late capitalistic postmodernism, “everyone is a consumer. Consumption is the only way of obtaining the resources for life, whether

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Williamson, a British journalist and filmmaker concurs in this regard, postulating that “the original context of any product is that of its production. [...] Because of the product's context is, first of all, its production, what is the context of the consumer, without whom, after all, there can be no consumption?” (Williamson, 1995:229-230).

<sup>5</sup> See: Sussman, C. (2000). *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender and British Slavery, 1713–1833*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

these resources be material – functional (food, clothing, transport) or semiotic – cultural (the media, education, language)” (Fiske, 2010: 28). A postmodern member of society is then to be defined by their purchase, rather than thought or reflection. The postmodern individual in popular culture can therefore be comprehended by the relationship as to how they desire to consume, providing insight into the individual’s personality as relates to consumerism. Williamson even goes so far as to state that it defines one’s conscious: “[The] chosen meaning in most people’s lives comes much more from what they consume than what they produce. [...] All the things we buy involve decisions and the exercise of our own judgment, choice, ‘taste’” (Williamson, 1995: 230).

Accompanying this dominant aspect of consumerist self-definement is that pervasive consumerism “offer[s] a sense of control. If you pay for something you do tend to feel you control it” (1995: 230). This sense of entitlement to an object in its entirety stems from the actions of acquisition in order to acquire it and is a powerful underlying motive in consumerism. As a dominant force in postmodern popular culture, it may be also hypothesized that “ownership is at present the *only* form of control legitimized in our culture” (1995: 231). Postmodernism may therefore be essentially characterized in popular culture as the essence of owning or possession as to define individual identity. Yet, the mere possession of a thing, need not supply a final identity. With this need to control, there occurs a deficit of identity security. The nature of acquisition as to identity is purely transitory and does not endure. As Williamson suggests, ownership only offers itself alone, not a secure identity<sup>6</sup> since the compulsion to consume in order to gain an identity collapses into an endless cycle where one cannot be certain in it. Once an object is consumed, another is needed to maintain the relationship it once provided the consumer. Therein, Williamson criticizes the ideals of consumerism, stating that the acquisition, attainment, and procurement of objects only supplies consumers with an illusory sense of control, whether it be attainable or not: “The great irony is that it is precisely the *illusion* of autonomy which makes consumerism such an effective diversion from the lack of power in people’s lives” (1995: 233).

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<sup>6</sup> See: Williamson, J. (1995). *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers. p. 232.

### 3. Obtaining the Object of “Lolita”

If the consumerism inherent to the postmodern concept of popular culture compels one to form their own identity in the relationship reciprocal of the object of one's consumption, the novel *Lolita* can be consequently read as one man's desire to control a person as an object, to fulfill himself, his identity, his sense of being, his character, to the detriment of that same person.

The synopsis of *Lolita* is the following: The character of Humbert Humbert, a well-educated and read, attractive European émigré comes to a small town to focus on his “writing”. Seeking lodging, he eventually comes across an empty room offered by one Charlotte Haze, who falls in love with him. However, he is fascinated only by her daughter, Dolores, who is merely twelve, and whom he assigns the sobriquet *Lolita*. To stay close to Dolores and take advantage of her young attributes, which he so deeply desires, he hatches a plan to marry Charlotte, who, luckily for Humbert, shortly after dies when being hit by a car. From this moment, Humbert starts acting partially as a father, as well as a lover, towards Lolita. After a road trip in which he establishes a more predatory relationship with his “Lolita”, they move to another town, to a small college where he teaches French literature. Seeing that she is growing distant, and afraid to lose her, he tries another road trip a year later, where she escapes him. In the end, after being contacted by Lolita, he finds out that she had run away with another, older man, whom he eventually murders.

In 1940, Nabokov and his family immigrated to the United States where he earned his living teaching literature. He wrote *Lolita* while travelling on butterfly-collection trips that he undertook every summer.<sup>7</sup> Nabokov came to the idea for writing such a kind of a novel in 1939 and 1940 while he was still living in Paris; originally writing it as a short story in Russian, at the end of the 1940s, he decided to write it as a novel in English. According to Nabokov, *Lolita* was his successful “affair with the English language” (Nabokov, 2000: 316). It is not presumptuous to suppose that Nabokov may have written the novel as a growing reflection on the American society that he saw at the time. Given the position and relationship between Nabokov and the narrator of the novel Humbert Humbert, as both men of literature

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<sup>7</sup> A statement further seen by the fact that the “butterfly” even appears as one of the novels important motifs, subtly indicating the resemblance to the most famous fictional character Lolita.

and European outsiders in origin,<sup>8</sup> it could be even argued that Nabokov fashioned the narrator of *Lolita* to be a removed commentator for what he observed of the America of the time.

To wit, this 1<sup>st</sup> person narration provides an unreliable narrator which compels the reader think, to even examine the truth of every statement. What is more, while the structure of the novel itself is straightforward (a presentation of Humbert Humbert's manuscript – his chronological unfortunate “love story” with a girl coined as “Lolita” to fit his fancies and obsessions) it is within this narration which reveals more than merely a confession, but an exploration of identity in consumerism, as shall be now shown.

#### 4. A Monster in Humbertland

Nabokov presents Humbert as, at times a sympathetic, but obsequiously clinical case, one who is completed by no further character development beyond the simple obtainment of an idea or fulfillment of a desire he possesses. Yet, the author does try to create an illusion of his growth. By placing him in the position of the narrator, Nabokov makes him and his story fallible in the mere presentation of the events, by being the only source of information about himself and others in the process. Duplicating his name in creating a surname, addressing himself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person warns that “Humber Humbert” wears a mask and it is only his false self in contact to the others and the reader. In fact, Humbert worsens the “reality” presented, providing final, artificial scenery of occurrences and its causes: “He must re-name everyone and every place in the book in order to disguise their ‘real’ identities” (Brand, 1987: 18).

Humbert, as narrator, represents different situations which lead him into a “difficult” position, which is no more than the realization of a tragic flaw. Yet, this prism of Humbert as such not only allows for the

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<sup>8</sup> Nabokov makes the novel *Lolita* in this fashion, but any consideration that he is representing himself in any manner beyond the superficial should not be taken seriously, as he is leading the reader into a labyrinthine game: “When earnest readers, nurtured on the ‘standardized symbols of the psychoanalytic racket’, leap to make the association between the two episodes [...] and immediately conclude that *Lolita* is autobiographical in the most literal sense, then the trap has been sprung: their wantonly reductive gesture justifies the need for just such a parody as Nabokov’s.” (Nabokov and Appel, 1991: 76-77).



so-called “truth” of the events to be distanced by a narrator’s unreliability, but for focus to be given to more singular ideas that drive the story as well. Compelled by description and explanation as a motive or confession, the plot of the novel is allowed to be explicated through Humbert’s own retelling as the mere “obtainment” of a sought “Lolita” – what the term or person of “Lolita” represents to him. Here then, is where the story of the novel lies and which focus is belied from character to progression, while maintaining the same end idea – Humbert’s need to have his “Lolita”.

As the story originates through Humbert, the assigned character he gives to Dolores of “Lolita” stems from his early childhood. As a young man, he was in love with a girl named “Annabel Leigh”, an obvious reference to Edgar Allan Poe in that her tragic and premature death severely influenced the rest of his life, engraving upon his psyche to seek out a “nymphet”<sup>9</sup> to replace her: “Was it then, [...] that the rift in my life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first evidence of an inherent singularity?” (Nabokov, 2000: 13).

Stemming from his childhood experience, Humbert goes so far as to literally call himself an artist in his gift of recognizing the “complex nature of nymphets” (2000: 16). He comes across Lolita, by actual name “Dolores Haze”, and sees in her “Annabel”: “It was *the same child – the same* frail, honey-hued shoulders, *the same* silky supple bear back, *the same* chestnut head of hair” [italics mine] (2000: 39). He concludes with “she, this nouvelle, this Lolita, my Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype” (2000: 40) to which he suddenly sees a direct purpose to his desire: “Everything between the two events was but a series of gropings and blunders, and false rudiments of joy. Everything they shared made one of them” (2000: 40). Still, in spite of his simplistic desire to possess or own such a girl, throughout the novel Humbert is not merely interested in only having sexual relations with Lolita, but rather to enjoy her presence and ability to keep the memory on his first love intact: “I am not concerned with so-called “sex” at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (Nabokov, 2000: 134). Ironically, this is where his immaturity

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<sup>9</sup> Humbert defines a “nymphet” as a specific type of girl “between the age of nine and fourteen [...] who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is demonic); and these chosen creatures I propose to call ‘nymphets’” (Nabokov, 2000: 16).

comes to the fore as this sexual trait reaches and reviles his pathological character which ultimately destroys everyone around him.<sup>10</sup>

What Humbert strives in his machinations to have is something unobtainable: the particular youth of a young girl to enliven him in his secret desires. It is almost a punishment as all young girls such as Lolita outgrow what Humbert desires, and therefore castigation at the same time: “In two years or so she would cease being a nymphet and would turn out into a ‘young girl’, and then, into a ‘college girl’ – that horror of horrors” (Nabokov, 2000: 90).

Humbert’s attitude towards a nymphet, his past history, his classification and harking desires, can also be taken as that of the act of simply acquiring one, much as one would shop around for a product or object to fulfill what one believes to be the essence of one’s character, or, at least, the end or purpose thereof. For this reason, Humbert’s sense of control over having Lolita drives his character throughout the novel, and may be read as a commentary on consumerism and its postmodern nature in popular culture itself, on the act of *buying her*: “Humbert can only have the illusion of possessing Lolita by spending a great deal of money to buy things for her. When Lolita becomes [...] a commodity, Humbert becomes a consumer” (Brand, 1987: 19).

However, nothing is clearly bought and possessed, unless it is duly paid for. As an object, Humbert tries to mollify Lolita with other objects of her own affection. He buys clothes, magazines and food for his “little nymphet”. Humbert is willing to do anything just to have her “play around [him] forever” (Nabokov, 2000: 21). He becomes a victim of his own mad desire in a completely unbalanced volition, objectifying a living person.

One prime example of this objectified relationship is in the first road trip Humbert takes with Lolita in hope that no one will ever find out “his secret”. They purposefully never stay long enough at one place in order to not only avoid discovery, but for his precious Lolita not to be taken away from him as well.<sup>11</sup> Beyond this as a literary device propelling events forward, the conjunction of Humbert in his obsession with Lolita in the

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<sup>10</sup> Jameson equates this very fetishism of Lolita’s character through Humbert to a growing exploration of taboos in postmodernism, as a greater exploration of the consumed object and its effects on artistic works: “The latest and the last in the long line of those taboo forms of content which, beginning with Nabokov’s nymphets in the 1950s, rise one after the other to the surface of public art” (Jameson, 1991: 293).

<sup>11</sup> See Nabokov, V. (2000). *Lolita*. London: Penguin Classics. p. 138, 139.

backdrop of said road-trip may also be used by Nabokov to provide criticism into the small-town, suburban America of the time, and its consumerist postmodern nature in popular culture: "This is why Lolita is, for the most part among other things, a brilliant, lucid and ironically subjective account of a journey, a huge panorama of America seen through a distorted mirror, through the eyes of a cynical European. [...] He does not want to reach any concrete place in particular, but in his constant changing of places, he tries to become invisible" [translation mine] (Paunović, 2006: 197).

Humbert's pathological jealousy, firmly believing that everyone wants to steal away his sacred guarded "object", in which he cloaks himself in the hypocritical presentation of a concerned "father figure" where Lolita is the actual victim of a pedophilic relationship illustrates that Humbert is indifferent to her other needs or anything that might represent her inner life: "I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind [...] there was in her a garden a twilight [...] absolutely forbidden to me" (Nabokov, 2000: 284). While he may profess to love "Lolita" until the end, it is only the love of the unobtainable object that forces his hand as a character. Lolita is not a person to him, she is something he wants to play with; she is "a word" where "Humbert is flesh: loins, tongue, palate, teeth" (Kauffman, 1989: 136). In Humbert's own words: "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Nabokov, 2000: 9). His profession of love is empty. It is a tragic flaw of Humbert's obsession where "the Double parody in Lolita locks Humbert within that prison of mirrors where the 'real self' and its masks blend into one another, the refracted outlines of good and evil becoming terrifyingly confused" (Nabokov and Appel, 1991: 82).

Seen then there is Humbert not caring one bit for Lolita outside of her as an item to get his hands on. Surely, though Nabokov's "hero" does not enjoy hurting Lolita, he is her abuser for treating her as such. Humbert Humbert is ultimately presented as a deranged individual who uses and abuses Lolita as a material object and from the standpoint of the popular culture of the postmodern consumerist society of the novel, it is a criticism offered for its time of publication.

## 5. In Love with an Image or “How Much is that Little Girl in the Window?”

As has been noted, Humbert is an unreliable narrator. Exceptionally eloquent, he has an unusual gift for rhetoric. Utilizing a needless abundance of academic words and sentences than would a layman to hide his true intentions, Humbert's outward confession can succeed in persuading the reader of how he is not actually guilty of anything. Yet, such lofty ideals that Humbert likes to shield himself in do not completely hide his true motives.

Williamson notes in her book *Consuming Passions* that “as a contemporary advert puts it: ‘*One instinctively knows when something is right.*’ [But] unlike advertising, Art has a reputation for being above things vulgar and mercenary, a form eternal rather than social, whose appreciation springs from the discerning heart, not the cultural background” (Williamson, 1995: 67). If Williamson is to be considered, while Humbert may loom largely upon his *Lolita*, the reader may not be so easily fooled into his “innocent” objectives. Instead, what is left is that *Lolita* may be seen in Humbert's eyes as a sexual product being advertised and obsessed over – opposite to that of the artist who would not incite the vulgar. Humbert is therefore not the artist as he portends to be, but an advertising executive trying to sell the reader on his version of *Lolita*, an object of his own making and fancy, a fact undeniably found in his own words: “What I had madly possessed was not she, but *my own creation*, another fanciful *Lolita* – perhaps more real than *Lolita*; overlapping encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will no consciousness – indeed, *no life of her own*” [italics mine] (Nabokov, 2000: 62). The method of persuasion that Humbert embarks upon is therefore similar to that of promoting an object, where “advertisement is a false double of art in that it deceives a viewer into thinking that an object can be possessed in actuality and not merely in the imagination, consumerism is a false double of aestheticism in that it involves a dependence upon the actual rather than the merely imaginative possession of objects” (Brand, 1987: 20). In this regard, Humbert tries not only to sway the reader to accept his ideas as the norm, but also himself in the process, selling himself on the ideal nature of his romantic intentions.

The reader is easily drawn into Humbert's little game, perceiving him as if he were only some kind of a well-mannered madman. This arises as

the reader views all events and characters exclusively through Humbert's own objectifying eyes. Such is the case with little Dolores: seen through the eyes of her sexual predator, Lolita is viewed as nothing but a worshipped and classified object with which he fulfils his abnormal needs. As Humbert is the narrator of the story, Lolita is a "flat" character, projecting only Humbert's whims and desires, with no internal character thereof to that of Lolita herself. As Kauffman notes in her essay *Is There a Woman in the Text*: "Lolita is little more than a replication of a photographic still. [...] He longs to have a frozen moment permanently on celluloid, since he could not hold her still in life. She is thus the object of his appropriation, and he not only appropriates her, but projects onto her his desires and his neuroses (Kauffman, 1989: 137). Therein, no "true" character of Lolita in the text exists, just Humbert's objectification of a little girl.

Unmasking Lolita's real but (essentially) non-existent character that is amended and usurped by the voice of the narrator does not lend itself to be easily undertaken since the narrator is so sexually aroused by the *nymphet* that he fetishizes her body (paying attention only to parts of it, e.g. the way she holds her toes, the way she speaks, etc.) to such an extent that the reader is left more with a superficial description than a character made to resemble an individual young girl. Lolita's character is seen but in parts, never as an entire person.<sup>12</sup> Humbert's fetishism objectifies Lolita so greatly that its progression is best symbolized by the replacement of her name Dolores Haze, with the nickname "Lolita" – emptying her identity and filling it with his wants instead.

The story of Lolita's character does offer more insight into her as a separate individual outside of Humbert's encompassing gaze, but, sadly, not enough to establish a separate character outside of his grasp. To wit, the circumstances in which Lolita grew up were that she was without a father figure and under a mother who did not care for her, treating her daughter as a competitor, one aspect which influences Lolita's formation and maturation. Due to her subsequent naiveté, Lolita willingly falls in love with an older man, *Quilty*, which she finds normal, and even defends, only complaining about how he broke her heart and how she was an active participant in the affair, not the victim Humbert had assumed.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lolita's lack of a character actualized through her presentation by Humbert is not unique; the rest of the female characters are described mostly as superficial and unworthy of any of his attention, and they only receive outright criticism.

<sup>13</sup> See: *Lolita* p. 279.

It could also be argued that Lolita had come to see herself only as an object of others' desires. At the end of the novel, Lolita is unable to come to complete terms with what had happened to her (both with Quilty and Humbert), and sees her present choice (her husband) as something which is the best compromise, given her past. This is a trait which can be seen when Humbert gives her money that she and her husband desperately need for improving their life together. Humbert also gives her a choice to "go with him" as well. Strikingly, at first she understands it as if she needs to "repay" him for it and "go with him to a hotel" – clearly not understanding his gesture. Despite being pregnant and married, somehow she has never emerged from seeing herself as merely an object to him, or perhaps even to Quilty. Torn between the two predators who have defined her, one in narrative (Humbert) and another as a counterpoint to the main character (Quilty), she cannot escape the definition they assign her: an object of their desire.

Still, the object is not the same for both characters, illustrated by the first exchange that Quilty and Humbert share, directly prior to Lolita's first sexual experience with Humbert, in which the two have a mundane conversation, and Quilty mentions: "Where the devil did you *get* her?" [*italics mine*] to which Humbert replies "I beg your pardon?" (Nabokov, 2000: 127), not fully understanding the direct overtones. Surely, Humbert in this light is presented more gallantly than Quilty who has never so elaborately hidden or justified his intent, and Quilty's character could be seen as the carnally perverse mirror to that of the perversely romantic of Humbert's. From these snippets of dialogue,<sup>14</sup> Lolita as an object to these two men and her definition thereof could be taken to be that merely of an object, one based on a fetishism and another purely on exploitation, but in both still just something to be used, no matter the excuse.

This fetishism of Lolita implies that she cannot be anything but a "material object of desire" for anyone, which is why a progression of Lolita's character cannot be seen until she is removed from all – even if, in the end, she may not know who she is and what she really wants. It bears repeating that growing up in an environment where she has never been the

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<sup>14</sup> Another instance is when Humbert is rampaging through Quilty's house, on the verge of shooting him, he deadly seriously posits: "'Quilty', I said, 'do you recall a little girl called Dolores Haze, Dolly Haze? Dolly called Dolores, Colo.?'"  
Quilty, thinks nothing of Lolita to such an extent that he does not even understand the verb to call, mistaking it for "by telephone": "Sure, she may have made those calls, sure. Any place. Paradise, Wash., Hell Canyon. Who cares?" (2000: 296).

subject to another, Lolita is not the subject in Nabokov's novel either, but a motive of someone else's manipulative and confabulatory reflection above all; Humbert is the narrator who takes himself as a reference point, and distorts reality by subordinating the truth to an *a priori* notion of himself, even so much as to make him into the hero, claiming to have killed Quilty in the firm belief that he is defending himself and his "Lolita".

To this extent, Lolita is unable to escape Humbert in his domination of the text. The most freedom she has is when Humbert recognizes she falls out of the sphere of what he had once imagined her to be. When Humbert realizes that his "artistic creation" does not exist anymore, though willing to accept her even if she is pregnant and blemished, he has one of his "epiphanies", which are "all the more obvious and frequent indicators of Humbert's growing inability to control himself and his own thoughts" [translation mine] (Paunović, 2007: 135): "I know that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (Nabokov, 2000: 203). Yet, there is nothing of regret, only his Lolita has surpassed him in life, and has now been disposed of after having been consumed.

Lolita is never to reach being a self-individual or subject to others, confirmed by her denial of abuse: "She asked me not to be dense. The past was the past. I had been a good father, she guessed – granting me *that*" (2000: 272). She never overcomes the trauma but is induced by others' behavior and modeled as a victim apart from the fact as to whether in her environment the abuser exists or not. Humbert does not simply determine Lolita's fate; he also interjects that he loves her even if she has lost her nymphet qualities, as if his love is a reward for her which in a great part diminishes Lolita as an autonomous person.

## **6. "One loves ultimately one's desires, not the thing desired."<sup>15</sup>**

A superficial reading of *Lolita* will provide the reader with nothing more than an account of one man's sad and pedophilic journey in the pursuit to realize his own perverse goals, which end and begin in the death of an elusive literary figure. The novel is clearly not meant to be taken as such. Instead, an inspection of the narrative and its characters reveals a

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<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche's aphorism

criticism of finding one's identity in the consumption of an object, *vis-à-vis* the postmodern culture of consumerism.

As a literary character, Humbert was drawn to and compelled by his own nature to possess a "nymphet". While this may have been his primary motivation, it is also his tragic flaw. Without his "Lolita" in the young Dolores Haze, there would be nothing of him to note. In fact, even though a small majority of the novel consists of taking road trips, the reader does not experience much of them beyond his poetical lusting of Lolita, showing how closed he is to anything but his obsession of her. Albeit, there is some development in his character, as "at the end of the novel, Humbert recognizes that his observations of the American landscape have been distorted by the prism of his obsession: 'We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing'" (Parker, 1987: 83). Nevertheless, this admission only comes after the fact and not during.

Just as consumerism instills a desire to have, hold and control an object, Humbert wishes the same in his relationship to Lolita. Yet, he can never be satisfied, even admitting in several places how transitory his possession and her state are. It would not appear that Humbert ever lets go of his obsession, even after having been sentenced to life imprisonment. "The diary he discloses to the court is the best proof how the disappearing of the worshipped object did not decrease at all greatness of his affair. [...] It would seem that Humbert, once again with exactly the same intensity, is experiencing the sweetness and the agony of enormous (still) unfulfilled passion" [translation mine] (Paunović, 1997: 113). Humbert's identity is far too much based on his pursuit of his ideal Lolita for him to abandon, it is all that he has to characterize himself. Clearly, this is a criticism of identity being based on self-reference to an object and, therefore, anti-consumerist.

Truthfully, Humbert's prone position as he seeks to be the owner (for lack of a better word) of Lolita is the only needed plot device of the story of which all other subplots are based on. In the same instance, it is a criticism of the same self-destructive pursuit of identity through consumption. What Humbert wants is not to be had by any means, even if he fools himself into believing it can be so. The fixation on his "little nymphet" forces him along nonetheless, producing a character who would develop without "developing". As Williamson notes: "Desire itself is channeled into this endless, obsessive theorizing about desire – harnessed in its own pursuit; [...] *the more elusive its object, the more interesting this pursuit is*" [italics



mine] (1995: 12). Nonetheless, Humbert is only one actor in this story. There could be no Humbert without Lolita to prod him onward. Just as Humbert is defined by the object, his object is defined by him or perhaps, has no definition beyond him.

If the novel can be taken as a censure of the consumerism for when it was written, then Lolita is more than an object of a lecherous man's desires. In fact, she may even be given as an epitome of consumerism itself to lend even more criticism of her objectification. It has been observed that the character of "Lolita is indeed an 'ideal consumer'" (Nabokov and Appel, 1991: 62). In Humbert's own description, he even mentions: "She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster" (Nabokov, 2000: 148). Indeed, the reader does not know much about Lolita beyond the special natures of her nymphic qualities Humbert so values in his object. In her youthful childishness and as a tragic figure at the end of the novel, there is not even much to be said of her as having individual characteristics separate than that Humbert assigns her. In between though, in her more intimate time with Humbert, she comes most typified by her wants and desires. Although this may not be atypical for a teenager in postmodern popular culture, she is directly placed in the story to reflect consumerist sentiment. However, while Lolita may be taken as the "ideal consumer", she is still a victim of being consumed, "she herself is consumed, pitifully, and there is, as Nabokov said, 'a queer, tender charm about that mythical nymphet'" (Nabokov and Appel: 1991: 62).

One thing is certain for the novel. "Lolita is but one part of that universe of fiction arrayed around the consciousness of Nabokov, who would join Humbert in his lament that words do indeed have their limitations, and that 'the past is the past'; to live in it, as Humbert tried, is to die" (1991: 85). Indeed, Humbert has made this world of his own choosing, but is jailed by it. He seeks his freedom as he creates his Lolita, striving for his fulfillment and identity through her, but unable to do so, makes a tragedy in the consumption of her and himself in the process.

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Ирина Ковачевић

ПОПУЛАРНА КУЛТУРА У ПОСТМОДЕРНИСТИЧКОМ ОКВИРУ:  
*ЛОЛИТА* ВЛАДИМИРА НАБОКОВА

**Сажетак**

Рад се бави теоријским одређењем популарне културе као и практичним увидом у најважније видове међусобног прожимања популарне културе и књижевности постмодернизма. У складу с тим, испитује се и објашњава концепт постмодерног идентитета у потрошачкој култури и конзумеризму, и како се тај концепт може довести у везу са Набоковљевим романом *Лолита*. Као производ свог времена, *Лолита* пружа верну слику одговарајућих постмодерних културних вредности, норми и друштва у којем је радња романа смештена и периода када је написан. Такође се приказују и најважније карактеристике постмодернизма, нарочито када се популарна култура постави за референтно поље, чиме се успоставља битно место и значај рефлексивна популарне културе у књижевности постмодернизма.

**Кључне речи:** постмодернизам, популарна култура, конзумеризам, *Лолита*, Набоков



**Stefan Pajović\***

University of Novi Sad  
Faculty of Philosophy  
Novi Sad, Serbia

## INSTRUCTING THE INDIVIDUAL IN DEMOCRACY IN WALT WHITMAN'S *LEAVES OF GRASS*\*\*

### **Abstract**

The paper examines the democracy motif in Walt Whitman's lauded collection of poetry *Leaves of Grass*. After an introduction which asserts Whitman as a writer of democracy, the paper shifts towards the relationship between the individual and democracy. The poet's stance is that the individual is the building block of American democracy. Whitman's own democratic views expressed in his poetry serve as guidance to his fellow countrymen on how to develop their democratic potential to the fullest. The conclusion dwells on the topicality of such a democratic concept since America is in need of it now just as ever.

**Key words:** Walt Whitman, democracy, *Leaves of Grass*, individual, America, poetry

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\* E-mail address: stefan@capsred.com

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*"I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy, / by God!"*  
Walt Whitman, from "The Song of Myself"

## 1. Introduction

Walt Whitman's (1819 – 1892) greatest work was by far his collection of poems entitled *Leaves of Grass*. First published anonymously in 1855, it contained 12 unnamed poems preceded by a preface. Over the following half a century it would be printed and edited several times, amounting to the ultimate, "Death-bed Edition" of 1892, containing nearly 400 poems (Oliver 2004: 105).

The reinstatement of democratic ideals was one of the main reasons behind Whitman's poetry:

Anticipation lay in his hope that the nation, by seeing both its best and its worst features reflected in the improving mirror of his poetry, would reverse its current downward course and discover new possibilities for inspiration and togetherness (Reynolds 1995: 111).

The work was by no means exclusively turned to the past, but possessed a vein of futurity since the gap between the individual and the state was ever widening and the events that would occur were becoming more and more unpredictable, which perturbed Whitman. The very title of the collection indicated the contradiction the poet had not only set down on paper but lived by his entire life. In the compound, the leaves are juxtaposed to the grass in its entirety, effectively forming an order or hierarchy in which leaves are subordinated to the grass. However, the opposite is true as well, as the grass could not exist sans its comprising members, i.e. the leaves, which indicates that it too is in a subordinate position. The metaphor at work, which the poet ingeniously creates, refers quite obviously to the humankind and the issue of government, especially the American one.

"The grass represents the people, the mass, but since it is characteristic of grass not only to grow in turfs (nations) but also in individual leaves (one person), Whitman points out that uniqueness, as a whole has its place in this great world and the Universe" (Lončar-Vujnović 2007: 226). It is interesting to notice that Whitman did not opt for the proper word "blades," but chose to comprise his grass of leaves (Karbiener 2004: 10),

manifesting outwardly in the very title that he had faith in humankind and his Americans. Blades are sharp, whereas leaves are not as rigid and can adjust more easily, i.e. progress and transform themselves, creating the perfect breeding ground for democracy.

It cannot be argued that the centerpiece of Whitman's artistic endeavors was the individual, but the title of his *magnum opus* reveals a troublesome relationship between the state and its subjects. By and large, "the vision of democracy Whitman advances in *Leaves of Grass* is an explicitly constructed vision" (Mack 2002: 22). In Whitman's own words from the 1872 "Preface" the collection "is, in its intentions, the song of a great composite *democratic individual*, male or female" (1982: 1004). Summarized in one word, it is a "yawp" intended for Americans whose characteristic democracy was becoming ever dormant, and susceptible to erroneous paths it could take. But it is not a concept without a future, of which Whitman wishes to remind his countrymen in *Democratic Vistas*, an essay written after the Civil War:

We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawaken'd, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue (1982: 960).

He goes on to conclude that "it is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted" (Ibid.). Whitman had become a crucial factor of this historic enactment, not only through his poetry, but through his entire personage of a celebrated national poet for "celebrity had evolved into more than a quality granted by the public; it was also a distinct category of democratic identity" (Blake 2006: 29). For Karbiener Whitman is America, as "he represents the best that America can be—the promise of the new democracy" (2004: 7).

## 2. Democratic literacy

Nationality, literature and democracy all share the same building block: the individual. Whitman's famous opening lines of "The Song of Myself," "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," claim that very same individual as the object, as well as the subject, of the poet's literary proclamation. By

celebrating himself, he celebrates every “Self” in existence by ordering them to introspect: “You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me” (Whitman 1982: 14). Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967), the author of the famous poem “I, Too Sing America,” wrote of Whitman’s potent first person exclamation:

One of the greatest “I” poets of all time, Whitman’s “I” is not the “I” of the introspective versifiers who wrote always and only about themselves. Rather it is the cosmic “I” of all peoples who seek freedom, decency, and dignity, friendship and equality between individuals and races all over the world.<sup>1</sup>

One of the best confirmations of Hughes description is Whitman’s address “To a Common Prostitute.” By conversing through the medium of poetry to this woman, “who was considered the lowest of the low in society” (Karbiener 2004: 30), he clearly stipulates with whom he wants to chat, effectively immersing them in his concept of democracy:

Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,  
Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to  
rustle for you, do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.  
(Whitman 1982: 512).

The belonging to Nature is the only ticket to the poet’s world of democracy as he was the bard of and for every person:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,  
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,  
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,  
Stuff’d with the stuff that is coarse and stuff’d with the stuff  
That is fine,  
One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same  
and the largest the same ... (Whitman 1982: 203).

These opening lines of part 16 of the “Song of Myself” confirm the poet’s universal and utterly contradictory vision of America, in which total oppositions reside alongside one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, “The ceaseless Rings of Walt Whitman,” (qtd. in *Walt Whitman: The Measure of his Song* 97).



This intended cultivation of the individual is the cultivation of his or her soul. It was a well-known fact since Antiquity that one's soul is enriched by literature, but Whitman argues that "even this democracy of which we make so much, unerringly feeds the highest mind, the soul" (Whitman 1982: 986). Democracy is an instrument for schooling of the individual, and the poets are the teachers which convey their message in a radically new pedagogy of oneness:

The message of great poets to each man woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose, What you enjoy we may enjoy (Whitman 1982: 14).

The "great poet" instructs Man not of God's ways, but of his own. For Man is the "commonplace" Whitman sings of in the eponymous poem:

The commonplace I sing; ...  
The open air I sing, freedom, toleration,  
(Take here the mainest lesson – less from books – less from  
the schools,)  
The common day and night – the common earth and waters,  
Your farm – your work, trade, occupation,  
The democratic wisdom underneath, like solid ground for all  
(Whitman 1982: 651).

The closing couplet is important because it sheds light on the very foundation of democracy. People who are the salt of the earth are glorified as pillars of any democratic system and their mundane chores provide the prolongation of any such system. Whitman's "democracy has to work from the bottom up, not hierarchically from the top down" (Fletcher 2004: 122), which was the direction power circulated in bloodstream of humanity during the previous centuries. In Whitman's view, America was a "nation of common people, all of whom are more important individually and collectively than all the politicians who run the country" (Oliver 2004: 156).

The entire poem is, like the bulk of Whitman's poetry, an observation which is inherently in the present tense. The "present" period did not feature prominently in the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an observation

which apparently held ground even in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. D.H. Lawrence wrote on the topic in 1920:<sup>2</sup>

“One realm we have never conquered: the pure present. One great mystery of time is *terra incognita* to us: the instant. The most superb mystery we have hardly recognized: the immediate, instant self. The quick of all time is the instant. The quick of all the universe, of all creation, is the incarnate, carnal self. Poetry gave us the clue: free verse: Whitman. Now we know” (qtd. in Bloom 2008: 128).

Democracy too “necessarily privileges the here and now, just as time, as we experience it, moves us progressively forward” (Mack 2002: 58). Its reach, the politically suitable *carpe diem* trait set aside, extends by default into the future acting as a stark contrast to hereditary forms of government which seek legitimacy in the past. In that sense, Whitman’s poetry can be regarded, along with his description of contemporary American society, as being projected into the future, futuristic even, as a renowned Serbian literary critic from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Todor Manojlović, noticed:

He introduced into poetry motifs, terms, and objects from modern life which was up until that period regarded in poetry, simply as “unpoetic” and “impossible” – he started celebrating by means of poetry (precursor to Futurism!) technical progress, factories, machines, steamboats, trains – he had in a similar manner the means of expressing these new terms – his tongue – cast, poured himself from the elements which no other contemporary poet would have even mentioned: from life, rough and powerful dialects of the street, suburbs, newspapers and farms (1998: 150).

Whitman truly was “the bard of the future,” as Henry Miller described him, unlike his contemporaries, namely Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807 – 1882), who drew his poetic material from the past. That past is not a very far away one, as in the poem “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,” which takes place at the onset of the American Revolution in 1775, but still requires the reader to recollect or be in a reminiscent mood while reading the lines.

However, democracy is such an institution of the soul that calls for an equilibrium, rather than promoting extremities. Ivo Andrić wrote that:

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence, D. H. (1920). Poetry of the Present. Intro. to *American edition of New Poems*.

Whitman perceived the task of his democracy – the democracy of America and the world – in generating a grand and a free personality out of every individual, but at the same time generating a powerful sense of solidarity in that individual (1977: 162).

Thomas Jefferson once wrote on the issue of the rigidity of constitutions that dead had no rights, referring to the lawmakers (Mack 2002: 59).

In his famous preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote a nearly imbecilic assertion of reality: “What is past is past” (Whitman 1982: 9). Behind this short sentence, whose plainness renders it perfect for an advertizing slogan, lurks a radical stance Whitman takes towards the legacy of the past. He does not denounce it entirely, but rather calls for its re-evaluation, just as his country was a massive test for the entire humankind up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He couldn’t do away with his predecessors because he was aware that he too would over time become one of them. He decided to instruct the reader of the past, depriving it of its own voice, but expecting in return that the free man or woman who reads his lines draw the final conclusion, thus grandiosely asserting the democratic self and fulfilling the promise of America, all through the means of poetry:

You shall no longer take thing at second or third hand, nor  
    look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the  
    spectres in books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things  
    from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self  
(Whitman 1982: 189-190).

Walt Whitman was the Hermes of American democracy, readily falling in the battle for the preservation of the universal ideals his country was founded on. He was in his opinion (“nor take things from me”) only a minor casualty in the epic struggle in which every American carried upon himself the enormous weight of freedom of thought (“filter them from your self”). Whitman’s repetitive “I” retransfers the burden of freedom to the “you” of America, evoking in its citizens the initial concept of democracy that had spawned the United States of America. In the first edition of *Leaves*

of *Grass*, the famous “Song of Myself”<sup>3</sup> opened with an “I” and ended with a “you,” which was not followed by a period, indicating that America’s democracy was still to a large extent a *tabula rasa*.

Before the Revolution, the Continent was in need of a republic of equal citizens without hereditary titles, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that very need took a different shape, embodied in the New Yorker’s famous cry: “... the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets ...” (Whitman 1982: 8). Whitman was to become one of these poets, but his life work would fall short to his initial expectations.

### 3. Conclusion

American democracy today applies to a much greater number of people than it did in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Whitman lived. Thus, its task of uniting all Americans seems more arduous than ever. Whitman’s poetry and its teaching are great instructors on how to overcome the multitude by promoting the individual. His own democracy in personal, intimate even, and present in every task he undertakes, whether intellectual or physical. Individual’s democracy acts as a cell which merges with other such cells to build the organism of American democracy. The poet’s claim is that if we ensure that each such cell remains healthy the entire organism would too. The only way a democracy can be successful on the national scale is by succeeding inside the respective members of that nation. In *Leaves of Grass* there exists a shift of democracy, a gift one could say, that the poet presents his fellow Americans with. He possesses democratic sentiment in abundance and wishes to pass it over to the readers of the collection. Perceived as such, democracy ceases to be a choice, but rather an innateness that every individual is endowed with. For Whitman, it is inseparable from being human and every man has a right to it, just as he is entitled by birth to life and freedom. It is the “pursuit of happiness” that *The Declaration of Independence* lists as an “unalienable right.”

*Leaves of Grass* thus serve as a handbook of sorts on how an individual can awake the democratic feeling in himself. Such a concept of democracy promulgated by Whitman did in fact prevail in the American society and in terms led to the economic and political growth of the country in

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<sup>3</sup> In 1855 the poem did not bear that title, but was later named by Whitman.

the centuries that ensued. It is a democracy that rests on the pillars of individuality and freedom, just as the Good Grey Poet had envisioned it.

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Стефан Пајовић

ПОУЧАВАЊЕ ПОЈЕДИНЦА О ДЕМОКРАТИЈИ  
У ВЛАТИМА ТРАВЕ ВОЛТА ВИТМАНА

**Сажетак**

Рад испитује мотив демократије у чувеној збирци поезије Волта Витмана *Влати траве*. Након увода у коме се још једном потврђује да је Витман писац демократије, подробније се анализира однос појединца и демократије. Песниково становиште је да појединац представља темељ америчке демократије. Демократски назори који се могу срести у поезији самог Витмана су заправо смернице његовим земљацима како да у целости развију своју кадрост за демократију. У закључку се потврђује актуелност таквог концепта демократије јер је он више него неопходан и у данашњој Америци.

**Кључне речи:** Волт Витман, демократија, *Влати траве*, појединац, Америка, поезија

## Notes to Contributors

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