

ANIMUS
VOLUME 15 (2011): SHAKESPEARE

Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
George Whalley and a Way of Thinking About Shakespeare by John Baxter.....	4
“The Disposition of Natures”: Aristotle, Comedy, and Shakespeare’s <i>Measure for Measure</i> by Jonathan Goossen.....	20
“What a piece of work is man”: Theatrical Anthropology in <i>Hamlet</i> by Ken Jacobsen.....	47
“Goats and monkeys!”: Shakespeare, Hobbes, and the State of Nature by Andrew Moore.....	86

VOLUME 15 (2011): SHAKESPEARE
Published December 2011. ISSN

Preface

Volume 15 of *Animus* is dedicated to studies of Shakespeare.

William Shakespeare is the central figure of the Western literary canon and a ubiquitous cultural icon in school, theatre, and popular culture. This eminence has produced both ‘bardolatry’ – the uncritical worship of Shakespeare – and its equally irresponsible antithesis: a corrosive resentment, even hatred, anchored in the denial of his intellectual authority. Consider, for example, George Bernard Shaw who famously claimed that “Shakespeare’s weakness lies in his complete deficiency in that highest sphere of thought, in which poetry embraces religion, philosophy, morality, and the bearing of these on communities, which is sociology. That his characters have no religion, no politics, no conscience, no hope, no conviction of any sort.”¹ Postmodern versions of this assertion of Shakespearean vacuity are articulated by Terence Hawkes, who claims that “Shakespeare doesn’t mean: *we* mean *by* Shakespeare,” and Gary Taylor, who says that “We find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him or what others have left behind; he gives us back our own values.”² Such statements sometimes win critics notoriety for their insouciance, but no doubt seem to most readers and audiences an astonishing denial of the obvious: the richness and fecundity of Shakespeare’s thought. Moreover, they have done little to erode Shakespeare’s popularity and reputation, even over the last half-century of ‘high theory’ during which Shakespeare has continued to provoke and answer many of our most searching and urgent questions.

But if there is general agreement that Shakespeare is a significant thinker, there is far less consensus about precisely what kind of thinker he is. What is his relation, for example, to major figures that precede and follow him: Plato, Aristotle, St. Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Erasmus, Machiavelli, Montaigne, Descartes, Hobbes, Hume, etc.? Is he an apologist for tradition, order, and “degree” (like Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*) or an avante-garde skeptic and materialist (like Iago or Edmund)? Is he best understood as a religious thinker or a political one? Do his plays reflect nostalgically on the classical and medieval past, or are they prophetic anticipations of modernity? And to what extent can a contemporary reader look to Shakespeare’s intellectual authority on matters like human nature, the human condition, and the formation of the self? A major difficulty lies in the dramatic form itself which, combined with the plenitude of Shakespeare’s language and characterization, prohibits any simplistic account of “what Shakespeare thought.” As Marjorie Garber notes, “Shakespeare’s voice is many voices” and “one voice will always answer another.”³ Jonathan Bate, in *The Genius of Shakespeare*, argues that this ability to

¹ George Bernard Shaw, *Shaw on Shakespeare*, Ed. Edwin Wilson, (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1961), 27.

² Terence Hawkes, *Meaning By Shakespeare*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 3. Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History, from the Restoration to the Present*, (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 411.

³ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 6.

make different voices persuasive is the key to Shakespeare's renewability and unequalled cultural influence. For Bate, the two "laws of the Shakespearean universe" are "aspectuality" – the recognition that truth is not singular – and "performativity" – the recognition that identity is performed through action; the combination of these two "laws" gives Shakespeare's plays "the capacity to be played successfully in an almost infinite number of different cultural circumstances."⁴

The essays in this volume of *Animus* cohere around two main issues: Shakespeare's representation of human nature and the relevance of other major thinkers, especially Aristotle, to the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays. We believe that these essays both exemplify the openness of Shakespeare's text and evince an openness to the text.

John Baxter, in "George Whalley and a Way of Thinking About Shakespeare," demonstrates the contribution that non-Shakespearean scholars, such as Whalley, can make to the field of Shakespeare studies. He argues that Whalley's critical commentaries on Aristotle, Coleridge, and Jane Austen illuminate the Aristotelian unity of action within Shakespearean drama. In particular, he focuses on Whalley's notion of *pathos-as-praxis*: *pathos* as an inherent part of tragic form: a combination of suffering and action, passivity and agency. He illustrates the far-reaching implications of this insight in a reading of *The Winter's Tale*, in which characters like Hermione and the Shepherd's wife are accorded poetic "presence" through the combination of dynamic, finely-detailed language and "pure action."

Jonathan Goossen, in "'The Disposition of Natures': Aristotle, Comedy, and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*," investigates the nature of comedic catharsis in Shakespeare by drawing on the work of two Aristotelian scholars – Leon Golden and Richard Janko. In his reading of *Measure for Measure*, he makes the case for *nemeson* or "righteous indignation" as the dominant emotion of comedy and the crucial role of comic hoaxes in exposing comic error, curing the characters' extreme divergences from the virtuous mean, and altering "the disposition of natures" of structure and character. In the resulting reading, *Measure for Measure* emerges not as a psychological portrait, but as a comedy about comedy.

Ken Jacobsen, in "'What a piece of work is man': Theatrical Anthropology in *Hamlet*" argues that *Hamlet* contains three distinct strands in its exploration of the theme of human nature: Piconian optimism, coalescing around the figure of *homo rationalis*; a skeptical Montaignean critique of *homo rationalis*; and *homo histrio*⁵ – man the actor -- who

⁴ Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, Rev. Ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 327, 329, 332.

⁵ I am not using the term as a synonym for *homo ludens* – man the player – Johan Huizinga's term which covers a wide range of cultural phenomena and does not pertain to theatricality *per se*. Nor is the term as narrow as Erving Goffman's "dramaturgical self" developed in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1959) or Colin McGinn's "theatrical construction of a self," an adaptation of Goffman's concept used in *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 10-12. *Homo histrio* is meant to stand as a comprehensive metaphor for human nature parallel to *homo rationalis*.

mediates between the two. He argues that *Hamlet* demonstrates the various ways that theatricality, a human invention, has entered into the human world and become a powerful conditioning force within it and that the play's treatment of a theatricalized human condition addresses key issues around which the critique of traditional anthropology coheres: rationality, epistemology, temporality, language, identity, and agency.

Andrew Moore, in "'Goats and monkeys!': Shakespeare, Hobbes, and the State of Nature," argues that Shakespeare's plays, notably *King Lear* and *Othello*, lay the ideological groundwork for social contract theory, particularly as formulated in Hobbes' *Leviathan*. He contends that Shakespeare's view of human nature, like that of Hobbes, is revolutionary in that it insists on the primacy of human autonomy and the need for a political order which accounts for it. In their interrogation early modern political community, Shakespeare's mature plays mark the transition from the notion of politics as a divinely ordered realm to an understanding of human community as constructed. Like Hobbes, Shakespeare portrays the capacity of humans to be something other than what they are by nature.

We hope you find these essays challenging and stimulating. Enjoy.

GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT SHAKESPEARE

John Baxter
Dalhousie University
jbaxter@dal.ca

One of the benefits of studying or teaching Shakespeare, in addition to the endless fascination of the primary material, is the extraordinary quality of at least some of the secondary literature. Commentary grows at an alarming rate, and much of it is uneven to be sure, but a significant number of writers who were, or became, major authors in their own right honed their thinking in their attempts to come to grips with Shakespeare. In the English tradition figures such as Dr. Johnson or Samuel Taylor Coleridge come to mind. On the other side of this critical coin, there are also plenty of examples of writers who said nothing, or next to nothing, about Shakespeare but whose work, nevertheless, can be brought to bear on the plays and poems with some very interesting results. An example of this sort would be a critic such as Mikhail Bakhtin, whose ideas about dialogism or the nature and role of carnivalesque elements in literature have been applied to Shakespeare by others and have generated some illuminatingly new perspectives. You don't need to be a Shakespearean to influence the way others think about him. A further opportunity for a fresh perspective is available in the work of the Canadian scholar George Whalley, not least because of his extraordinary fusion of classical and romantic principles of literary criticism, a combination of approaches that often summon Johnson or Coleridge as their distinctive—and separate—representatives.

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT SHAKESPEARE

Whalley was an eminent man of letters in Canada until his death in 1983. The website now dedicated to his work describes him as “a scholar, poet, naval officer and secret intelligence agent during World War II, CBC broadcaster, musician, biographer, and translator.”¹ He taught at Queen’s University for a matter of some thirty years (1950-80), but for my immediate purposes the most important things to note about his career are his lifelong interest in the poetry and criticism of Coleridge and his sustained engagement with Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The former is manifest in his biography of Coleridge and Sara Hutchinson (1955) and in his editorial work on Coleridge’s *Marginalia* for the Princeton edition of Coleridge’s collected works (1980-2001). The latter issued in the posthumous publication of his edition of the *Poetics*, including translation and commentary (1997). Included in this publication is the remarkable essay called “The Aristotle-Coleridge Axis,”² which brings together in a seminal way the thinking of the two major figures usually understood to represent antithetical poles in the tradition of literary criticism. Though Coleridge is often cited as inaugurating an emphasis on character and psychology in Shakespeare’s plays, what this means, Whalley argues, is not that Coleridge snatches “the primacy of ‘plot’ out of Aristotle’s hands” in order to “reassign it to ‘character’; it is rather to complement and reinforce Aristotle’s position” (176).

Aristotle had seen that tragedy is action of a certain kind and figure; it is induced through a person (‘character’) acting out a certain configuration of events (‘plot’). As long as the action is significant *human* action, plot can no more be separated from character than initiative can be separated from

¹ <http://georgewhalley.algomau.ca/drupal6/>. This website, created by Michael DiSanto, offers a brief introduction to Whalley’s life and works as well as a link to a biographical essay by John Ferns.

² George Whalley, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, eds. John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 161-77.

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

the tissue of knowing and not-knowing. What Coleridge has done is greatly to enrich the possibilities of tragic action by allowing for a greater intricacy of initiative, thereby allowing for a finer and more exquisite definition of moral trajectory; he has done nothing to detract from the integrity of the *drama*, the self-defining of the action as *tragic*. (176)

At the heart of this argument that Aristotle and Coleridge offer complementary approaches to an understanding of drama and tragedy is a claim about the fundamental congruence of what Coleridge calls “imagination” with what Aristotle calls “mimesis.” Imagination, on this view, performs a “realizing function, a dynamic state of wholeness accessible to all men, and overflowing into things-made [poems, plays] so that they have a life of their own, not being the image of the person who made them” (176). It is this sense of imagination as a realizing function helping to clarify the moral trajectory of tragic action that gives Whalley’s way of thinking about drama its extraordinary promise as a way of thinking about Shakespeare—even if Whalley didn’t much write directly about Shakespeare.

A further implication of the claim that Coleridge allows for a “greater intimacy of initiative” and a “finer and more exquisite definition of moral trajectory” is that it brings to the fore the minute and concrete study of language. Coleridge, after all, is the inventor of practical criticism or what a later century came to call (in a rather belated way) the “new criticism” or the close reading of texts, and he honed his skills in this regard with his celebrated analysis of Shakespeare’s “Venus and Adonis” in the *Biographia Literaria*. But it is possible to get a quick view of the way Whalley aligns this Coleridgean emphasis with the Aristotelian emphasis on the integrity of action by noting the central

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

premises that he brings to bear in his analysis of Jane Austen. Austen, he argues, is a poet in two senses:

(1) in her craftsmanship in language; and (2) in the conduct of the action within each novel. In the first sense, we need to consider fine-grained detail with an ear alert to the dynamics of language; in the second, we are concerned with the disposition of forces within the whole universe of a novel, particularly that mutual definition of plot and character the product of which Aristotle called *drama*, the thing done, or what I may elsewhere—to distinguish it from the ‘action’ that is sheer motion—also call ‘pure action’; the one sense discloses itself on a small scale, the other on a large scale. The evidence for each is of a particular kind, each different from the other. Yet both kinds or functions interact upon each other and can be seen to be poetic because both reside at the heart, or at the roots, of imaginative activity.³

The two functions here summon the energies of both Coleridge (on language and imagination) and Aristotle (on drama and action), but though the passage emphasizes the point that these functions “interact upon each other,” it is Aristotle’s focus on the mutual definition of plot and character that receives greater play in this opening statement. Yet even here the claims are highly compressed and rather puzzling. There is apparently a kind of action which is distinct from the kind that is sheer motion and which Whalley calls, variously, drama, pure action, or the “thing done.” What exactly *is* this thing—

³ “Jane Austen: Poet,” *Jane Austen’s Achievement*, ed. Juliet McMaster (London: The MacMillan Press, 1976), 108-09. Subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically. The essay was reprinted in George Whalley, *Studies in Literature and the Humanities: Innocence of Intent*, eds. Brian Crick and John Ferns (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1985), 145-74.

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

when it's *done*? And especially, what is it when it concerns the disposition of forces within the whole universe of the work?

In the *Poetics* Aristotle considers the matter of wholeness and of the disposition of forces that contribute to it under the heading of “unity of action.”⁴ But the applicability of this central principle to Shakespearean drama has over the years become entangled with some pervasive misperceptions about the Aristotelian provenance of other unities (of time and place) about which Aristotle, in fact, says next to nothing (they are mostly the invention of continental theorists in the 15th and 16th centuries), and one result of the entanglement is a general tendency to dismiss the relevance of Aristotelian thinking to Shakespeare period. The distinguished Shakespearean scholar Stephen Greenblatt is representative in this regard. In his general discussion of “Shakespearean Tragedy” in the newest edition of *The Norton Shakespeare* he argues that “the playwright’s great achievement as a whole does not comfortably fit the philosopher’s influential descriptive account.”⁵ Like many others, Greenblatt follows Samuel Johnson’s great dismantling of the doctrine of the unities, and like many others he supposes that in showing that neither the unity of time nor the unity of place is a regular feature of Shakespearean drama he has also, thereby, somehow disposed of the unity of action. Yet Aristotle’s central principle comes sneaking back into the argument in its later stages without any acknowledgment that it is his. “The death of the protagonists [in the tragedies,]” says Greenblatt, “all bear a significant relation to everything that has come before—that is, to their choices, their

⁴ This principle crops up repeatedly in the treatise, though the most explicit discussion is found in chapters 7 and 8. See especially pages 78-81 in Whalley’s translation, hereafter cited parenthetically as *Poetics*.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, “Shakespearean Tragedy,” *the Norton Shakespeare, Second Edition: Tragedies* ed. Stephen Greenblatt *et al* (New York: Norton, 2008), 104.

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

suffering, their whole way of experiencing the world.”⁶ Fate or destiny has a role, of course,

but the characters themselves cannot and do not live as if they had no agency at all. They suffer intensely from what Hamlet calls the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (3.1.60), but they are never merely victims. They always contribute to the catastrophe that befalls them, if only by setting in motion through some irreversible action an uncontrollable chain of events that brings devastation in its wake.⁷

The centrality of choice and agency, of a suffering the protagonists bring on themselves or to which they contribute materially, an action that is irreversible because governed by necessity or probability, and an uncontrollable chain of events or an overarching *praxis* that brings devastation—what are all of these if not fundamentally Aristotelian principles? The Philosopher’s “influential descriptive account” clearly does fit in ways that Greenblatt seems not realize, even as he gives his own descriptive account. This reliance on the principles without precisely seeing them for what they are displays a certain muddle or confusion that is not untypical of contemporary Shakespeare studies. The Shakespearean expert fails in his account both of Aristotle and of Shakespeare by failing to see the fit.

By contrast, Whalley, though he says nothing about Shakespeare, prepares the way for a more lucid understanding of the fit by emphasizing the insistent, repeated focus on the unity of action in the *Poetics*. Where Dr. Johnson clears the way for common readers by dismantling a rigid neo-classical doctrine of the unities, Whalley clears it

⁶ Greenblatt, 111.

⁷ Greenblatt, 112.

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

further by exposing much of the so-called doctrine as pseudo-classical. The putative ‘unity of place’, he says, is not Aristotelian at all but the “contribution” of Castelvetro, the 15th-century Italian theorist. And the one point in the *Poetics* that offers “the only conceivable reference to the ‘unity of time’,” Whalley argues, has actually much more to do with comparing the relative concentration of tragedy with the looser structure of epic. The relevant Greek word in the *Poetics* is *mekos*, which can mean ‘length’ as well as ‘time’, and in context it refers not to the time it takes to read or perform a play but to “the time encompassed by the action”: “the right *mekos* of tragedy is whatever secures the tense concentration of action peculiar to tragedy” (*Poetics*, 65-6). By this account, then, there is only one unity that really counts and that is the unity of action, and by highlighting that more clearly in Aristotle, Whalley also prepares the way for a clearer view of its relevance to Shakespeare.

At this point, however, one might well imagine that I have shifted the focus from Whalley and Shakespeare to Aristotle and Shakespeare, and to a certain extent this is true. Though I use Whalley’s translation of and commentary on the *Poetics* in my Shakespeare class, I spend a good deal of time asking the students questions that come directly out of Aristotle. What choices are the characters making? What emotional effects do they elicit or respond to? Are their actions governed by probability and necessity? Is the action unified, and is anything purified, clarified, or purged at the end? But I want to bear down more specifically on a section of the *Poetics* which I understand in a conspicuously Whalleyan way. The passage comes at the end of Chapter 11, and, following a shrewd discussion of reversals and recognitions, it offers a short paragraph on *pathos*, the bedrock of tragedy. Here is Whalley’s translation:

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

These then—*peripeteia* and recognition—are two elements of the [complex] plot; a third [element is] *pathos*. [...] A *pathos* is a murderous or cruel transaction, such as killings—[taken as] real—and atrocious pain and woundings and all that sort of thing. (*Poetics*, 91)

I won't take the occasion to compare Whalley's translation here with other contemporary translations, nor comment on many of the critical issues involved, except to say that Whalley's approach to translation is at its most Coleridgean in this particular paragraph.⁸

The part that interests me most at the moment is the definition of *pathos* as a transaction. Whalley comments on his reasons for this definition.

Pathos (from *paschein*, 'suffer') primarily means something 'suffered', something that happens to a person—the complement to something done. Yet Aristotle says that a *pathos* is a *praxis*, an 'act'. [...] The paradoxical term *pathos-as-praxis* seems to imply that the crucial event is to be seen both as suffered and as inflicted. Aristotle's choice of the word *praxis*—which he regularly uses elsewhere of the single overarching tragic action as distinct from the separate *pragmata* (events) of which the *praxis* is composed—suggests further that the *pathos* as an event is both pregnant and determinate, the beginning of a process. *Peripeteia* and 'recognition' heighten and concentrate emotional force: *pathos* is the key event / act that provides substantial foundation and focus for the *peripeteia* and

⁸ The Coleridgean element is conspicuous in the bit inserted in square brackets before the word "real"— "[taken as] real"—which summons what Whalley calls the realizing function of imagination. The Greek words here, *en toi phaneroi* ('in the visible sphere'), lie at the heart of Aristotle's dispute with Plato over whether the poet's representations can disclose important truths about universals or reality. Whalley's parenthetical insertion provides a hint about his much larger argument concerning the correspondence between imagination and mimesis.

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

recognition. I have therefore rendered *praxis* here as a ‘transaction’ to indicate the *pathos*-action paradox and to preserve the processive potential of the word *praxis*. (*Poetics*, 90)

What this commentary brings out with peculiar force is the strangeness and strength of *pathos*, the combination of suffering *and* action, of something inflicted and yet withstood, and not merely withstood in a passive way but withstood with some kind of shaping power, some kind of agency, a supreme testimony to on-going life and vitality even in the midst of destruction and pain. Greenblatt, in the essay I cited earlier, pursuing his view of Aristotle and Shakespeare as being at odds with one another, argues that “For Shakespeare, the form of tragedy, the element central to the *Poetics*, is only a slender, fragile bark bobbing on a chaotic, destructive, and ecstatic sea of suffering.”⁹ By pitting Shakespeare and Aristotle against one another, this claim also pits suffering and tragic form against one another, and in doing so it offers a very impoverished view of tragic form and an incomprehensible view of suffering. By contrast, Whalley’s account shows *pathos* as an integral part of tragic form. The suffering has meaning precisely because, and to the extent that, it helps to shape the form, an inherent part of the process, the transaction. The *pathos* in being a *praxis* is to some extent a part of the form—and not separable from it in the way Greenblatt imagines.

What this means for the study of Shakespeare, of course, is a matter of far-reaching implication, extending not only to the tragedies but to other works too. The idea of a *pathos* that is a part of the form of drama applies to things as various as *The Rape of*

⁹ Greenblatt, 104.

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

*Lucrece*¹⁰ or *Richard II* or even *Twelfth Night* as much as to *Hamlet*, *Othello* or *Lear*. But in order to illustrate the point and to indicate something of the reach of Whalley's way of thinking for the study of Shakespeare, I turn to *The Winter's Tale*. That this play is classified as a romance or more accurately as a tragic-comedy makes it an interesting parallel to the novels of Jane Austen that Whalley discusses in his essay on her. Whether he discusses the more romantic novels or—even more penetratingly—the shape of *Mansfield Park*, which he considers to be a tragedy with a prosperous outcome and fundamentally different in kind from her other fictions, his central perception concerns the nature of dramatic form.¹¹

To those of us who are in the habit of thinking of the 'action' in a novel or play or film as the overt (and preferably sensational) things that people do or have done to them, the internality of Aristotle's view of the nature and sources of tragedy will probably seem a bit esoteric. But Aristotle's view of dramatic action is all of a piece with his ethical view of the sources of human action. And Coleridge, in all his reflections upon moral and dramatic values, also insists upon the internality, the self-originating nature of action; we cannot without damage go behind the statement 'I act'; it is always an 'I' acting, decisively and irreversibly; restraint from action can therefore [also] be an act. He is acutely aware of the bond between action and passion, between doing and being done to, and of the

¹⁰ I explore the implications of Whalley's thought about this idea in my extended analysis of "Action Figures in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*," *Renaissance and Reformation/ Renaissance et Reforme* 33.1 (Winter/Hiver 2010): 81-107.

¹¹ An interesting follow-up to Whalley's suggestive comments about the element of tragedy in Jane Austen is found in Sarah Emsley, "The Tragic Action of *Mansfield Park*," *Persuasions On-Line* 28, no.1 (Winter 2007). A revised version of this essay is scheduled to appear in *Approaches to Teaching Austen's Mansfield Park*, eds. Marcia McClintock Folsom and John Wiltshire (New York: The Modern Language Association, forthcoming).

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

correlation of action and passion in any one person. (“Jane Austen: Poet,”
114)

The “He” referred to in the last sentence is probably Aristotle (though the gist of the argument may assimilate Coleridge to it as well), and the correlation of action and passion here sounds very much of a piece with the discussion of *pathos* in the *Poetics*.

In *The Winter’s Tale* the central *pathos* involves the suffering inflicted on the female protagonist, Hermione, by her jealous husband Leontes. His jealous rage is as violent as it is sudden, and it results in his sending her to prison to await trial for treason and to face what he regards as an inevitable death sentence. Her imprisonment is the more stressful in that she is nearing the term of her pregnancy, but in facing prison she herself defines her *pathos* in ways that only Whalley’s principles can fully illuminate. She addresses her waiting gentlewomen:

Do not weep, good fools,
There is no cause. When you shall know your mistress
Has deserved prison, then abound in tears
As I come out. This action I now go on
Is for my better grace.¹²

(2.1.120-4)

The weeping ladies see her plight as a matter of suffering, pure and simple, but Hermione is unwilling to cast herself as simply a victim. For her the suffering is more than a matter of simple endurance; it has a purpose, her “better grace,” and while what exactly that

¹² William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, *The Norton Shakespeare, Second Edition: Romances and Other Poems*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt *et al* (New York: Norton, 2008). References are cited in the text by act, scene, and line number.

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

could mean remains mysterious, she clearly sees herself, even or perhaps especially in the throes of her *pathos*, as “an ‘I’ acting, decisively and irreversibly.”

In external terms, her action is most visible and impressively heroic in her magnificent speeches of self-defense during her trial in Act 3, but that action comes to an abrupt conclusion when she faints—and supposedly dies—at the conclusion of the trial. And since she then effectively disappears for the rest of the play, until the very last scene, the way that her *pathos* participates in the overarching action of the play, its *praxis*, also remains deeply obscure. I won’t go on to offer a detailed discussion of the workings of the play,¹³ but in order to suggest the extraordinary illumination that Whalley’s formulation about *pathos-as-praxis* can cast on it, I return to the first of the critical principles he brings to bear on Jane Austen: “to consider fine-grained detail, with an ear alert to the dynamics of language.” In reading Shakespeare, as in reading Austen, it is important to see how the dynamics of language interact with the drama of the whole. “In this,” Whalley argues, “we are not considering simply a verbal locution or ‘figure of speech’ but a commanding process radical to poetry itself—the metaphorical process that secures and enriches the interaction not only of single words, but of elements within sentences, of sentences within paragraphs, and the collusive interaction of elements of much larger scale if they can be constructed with strong-enough identity” (“Jane Austen: Poet,” 117).

A good example of a dynamic language with fine-grained detail is to be found in *The Winter’s Tale* when the Old Shepherd celebrates the abilities of his long-deceased wife. Hermione’s trial now seems a thing of the distant past, and her lost daughter,

¹³ My seminar paper on “Reported Speech in *The Winter’s Tale*” for the Conference of the Shakespeare Association of America, Bellevue, Washington, April 8, 2011, offers a preliminary discussion of how the principles work in detail.

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

Perdita, in ignorance of her origins, is being admonished to play her part as mistress of the sheep-shearing festival in Bohemia:

Fie, daughter, when my old wife lived, upon
This day she was both pantler, butler, cook,
Both dame and servant, welcomed all, served all,
Would sing her song and dance her turn, now here
At upper end o'th' table, now i'th' middle,
On his shoulder, and his, her face afire
With labour, and the thing she took to quench it
She would to each one sip. You are retired
As if you were a feasted one and not
The hostess of the meeting. [...]
Come, quench your blushes, and present yourself
That which you are, mistress o'th' feast.

(4.4.55-68)

The vitality of this passage is evident even when quoted out of context, the energy of the hostess reflected in the restless movement of rhythm and syntax. In it Shakespeare exhibits the same sort of “overarching poetic instinct” with which Whalley credits Jane Austen, “to be seen in her handling of detail, economically and vividly, so that actual things at times glow under her eye—a process I have called ‘naming’, which, in the perceiving as in the writing, turns upon the vitality of concreteness—what Henry James admirably called ‘solidity of specification’” (“Jane Austen: Poet,” 123).

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

The drama of the Old Shepherd's wife consists in good measure in the way she is solidly "there" in all the specificity of poetic enactment Shakespeare gives her, her concreteness all the more remarkable in that she is not actually there. She is, in terms borrowed from Whalley's translation of Aristotle's paragraph on *pathos*, "[taken as] real." And this tension between imaginative and literal reality brings us to the heart of Shakespeare's purposes, the way his dynamic language interacts upon the drama of the whole. At one level the wife is being held up as a model hostess, praised for fulfilling to perfection the function that proved so fraught with difficulty in the conflict between Leontes and his wife, and so the passage clearly comments on the beginning of the *praxis*, offering something of a vindication of Hermione's actions. Even more important, however, is its connection with the end of the play. In Shakespeare's source (*Pandosto* by Robert Greene) the Old Shepherd's wife is, in fact, alive.¹⁴ The representation of her in the play as dead but brought back to vivid life in this moment appears to be a part of a pattern of what Whalley calls the "collisive" interaction of sentences and paragraphs with elements of much larger scale. The celebration of the old wife as hostess seems intended as a part of the *praxis* of the play, anticipating the conclusion, with its resurrection of Hermione, parallel now to the resurrection of the wife. A detailed analysis would show more thoroughly how that connection is worked out, but this single illustration is enough to show how needful is Whalley's kind of attention to the combinations of dynamic language and the drama of what he calls "pure action" to come to a fuller understanding of Shakespeare.

¹⁴ The character in Greene is called "Mopsa." A generous selection of relevant passages from *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* is included in the Oxford edition of *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 234-74.

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

I said at the beginning that Whalley did not much write directly about Shakespeare, but that statement requires a slight modification. In the course of celebrating Jane Austen, he does invoke Shakespeare directly, and in a way that bears on some of the issues I have been considering. “If her ‘Shakespearean’ quality is to be taken as a specific indication,” he says,

we can give it more point by noticing what Coleridge found impressive about Shakespeare. He rejoiced as much as anybody else in the variety and life-likeness of Shakespeare’s characters, and marveled at the copiousness of his invention. But two things that struck him just as forcibly were these: that none of Shakespeare’s characters seemed in any way a projection of Shakespeare himself, and were not drawn naturalistically from the life; and that Shakespeare was never guilty of ‘ventriloquism’, of speaking deceptively through his characters in his own person. (“Jane Austen: Poet,” 112)

Some of this may seem wildly wrong-headed, since it is a common assumption among Shakespeare experts and common readers alike that many, if not all, Shakespeare’s characters *are* drawn naturalistically *from life*, and it is also a near-universal assumption among Shakespeare’s biographers that he *does* project himself through his characters, ventriloquizing his own person.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Whalley and Coleridge seem to me fundamentally right. The greatest of writers, such as Austen and Shakespeare, rise to a level of impersonality that is not to be explained (or explained away) as authorial self-projection. And if their characters are defined crucially by their autonomy or

¹⁵ The dubious assumptions underlying the desire to equate the author and his characters are impressively challenged by James Shapiro in *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

BAXTER: GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE

independence and integrity, that is not simply because they are endowed with voices of their own (their own highly individuated speech patterns) but also because they live within what Whalley calls the “whole universe” of the literary work. As a crucial passage in the *Poetics* has it, the force of great artists is not merely in representing men and women, but in a mimesis of *action*—or as Whalley says, ‘pure action’. In this realm, neither authors nor actors are primarily interested in presenting, or ventriloquizing, their own characters; rather, “they embrace their characters for the sake of the actions they are to do” (*Poetics*, 73). If we are to grasp the nature of that special disposition of forces in the plays, it would be enormously helpful—in some of the ways I have suggested—to bring Whalley’s way of thinking to the study of Shakespeare.

“THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES”: ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND SHAKESPEARE’S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

Jonathan Goossen
University of King’s College
jonathan.oossen@ukings.ca

“Poetry,” claims Aristotle, “is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history.”¹ Exactly how tragedy can be such occupies much of Aristotle’s subsequent thought in the *Poetics*, but he is referring here to all dramatic poetry. This is significant; it implies that comedy (the other dramatic genre he discusses) shares tragedy’s capacity for serious speculative thought. Just how comedy might do this, though, receives only a brief treatment in the *Poetics*, despite Aristotle’s apparent intention to give it attention equal to that he allots tragedy. Indeed, it has long been thought that this promised account was written, but (*pace* Umberto Eco) was lost before the sixth century.² There are at least three sources, however, which classicists have for some time identified as offering substantial clues to what Aristotle might have had to say about comedy. These are, in order of significance, the extant *Poetics* itself; relevant passages from other works recognized as part of Aristotle’s corpus; and the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, a tenth-century Byzantine manuscript which may be a summary of Aristotle’s lost treatise on comedy. The extant *Poetics*, often assumed to be a work solely on tragedy, actually devotes equal time in its opening chapters to comedy. Two crucial questions left us by the *Poetics* are what Aristotle

I am grateful to John Baxter for commenting on drafts of this article and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Killam Trusts for financial support during its writing.

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Aristotle: “Poetics” I with the “Tractatus Coislinianus,” a Hypothetical Reconstruction of “Poetics” II, and the Fragments of the “On Poets,”* ed. and trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 1451b. Except where otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations of the *Poetics* will be taken from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by Bekker numbers.

² See Janko, ed., “*Poetics*,” 159.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

saw as the emotions in comedy that, parallel to the "pity and fear" of tragedy, undergo catharsis, and what analogue tragic *hamartia* or "error," so crucial to tragedy's action, might have in comedy (1449b, 1453a). Recently, classicists Leon Golden and Richard Janko have independently provided intriguing answers to these questions by bringing relevant parts of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Nichomachean Ethics* (Golden) and the *Tractatus* (Janko) to bear on the lacunae of the *Poetics*. In particular, Golden builds a surprising but plausible case for *nemesan* or "righteous indignation" as the dominant emotion of comedy, and argues that comic error, unlike tragic, arises from an excess or deficiency of virtue.³ Janko highlights the role that the comic joker and his or her deceptions play in exposing this comic error. His study also implicitly bolsters Golden's significant reinterpretation of catharsis as an "intellectual clarification."⁴

Pressing their findings into the interpretive service of Shakespeare's comedy may well elicit cries of "anachronism!" Indeed, the more obvious way to discuss the relationship of Shakespeare to Aristotle is to survey the commentaries of Robortello, Maggi, Castelvetro, *et al.* (the Cinquecento Italians who, after its thousand year absence, reintroduced the *Poetics* into Western literary discourse), and then attempt to locate in Shakespeare's drama an engagement with their redactions of Aristotle. Shakespeare certainly had at least this sort of second-hand knowledge of the *Poetics*, but the conclusion most easily drawn from such a comparison is that he regularly and boldly contradicted (or just plain ignored) what he knew of Aristotle.⁵

³ Leon Golden, *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1992), 92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ This is seen in the frequent critical manoeuvre of acknowledging the *Poetics*' analysis of drama only to dismiss it as inadequate to a discussion of Shakespeare. Stephen Greenblatt does this in his essay "Shakespearean Tragedy" even as much of his subsequent discussion unwittingly depends upon the *Poetics*' terms and categories. See *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., *Tragedies*, eds. Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 2008), 104ff. Ralph Berry provides another example in *Tragic Instance: The Sequence of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 12-14.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

Ironically, though, the very thing that Shakespeare most appears to reject about the Renaissance version of the *Poetics* – its strongly prescriptive dramatic formulas – is precisely what recent classical scholarship has dismissed as most un-Aristotelian. Even more importantly, the strong emphasis the latter has placed on things often marginalized during the Renaissance – the *Poetics*' deeply exploratory and speculative nature,⁶ the centrality of its argument about plot,⁷ and the complexity of its concept of *mimesis*⁸ – all accord remarkably well with Shakespeare's drama.⁹ In other words, modern readings of the *Poetics* make Shakespeare look much more Aristotelian than do Renaissance ones, and this is what interests me here.

The argument for this similarity need not depend on Shakespeare having carefully studied the *Poetics*, much less twentieth-century extrapolations from it, but only on what I aim to show as the real responsiveness of his comedy to principles that Golden and Janko find latent in the *Poetics*. As with any new theoretical reading of Shakespeare, my approach is not primarily historical (claiming that Shakespeare derived his ideas from some early form of the theory) but comparative, suggesting a set of categories by which we might better understand how his comedy functions. *Measure for Measure* provides a fine example of this. The play evokes in its characters and audience an extraordinary array of emotion in response to the various hoaxes of

⁶ See George Whalley, "On Translating Aristotle's *Poetics*," in *Aristotle's "Poetics*," eds. John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (Montreal and Kingston, Ont: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 21-29.

⁷ See Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's "Poetics"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 138-67.

⁸ See Golden, *Mimesis*, 63-75.

⁹ Renaissance scholars were certainly aware of these central tenets of the *Poetics*, but their oft-noted habit of conflating Aristotle with Horace's *Ars Poetica* and, in the case of comedy, the essays of Donatus and Euanthius, frequently led them to subordinate the *Poetics*' fundamental ideas to ones more peripheral, ultimately resulting in the strictures of neo-classicism so dissonant with Shakespeare's drama. Halliwell (*Aristotle's "Poetics*," 288-308) provides a concise account of the Renaissance's strongly rhetorical approach to the *Poetics*. For the standard exhaustive survey, see Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), chs 9-13.

GOOSSEN: “THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES”: ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE’S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

Vienna’s Duke. Golden’s and Janko’s hypotheses compellingly illuminate the trick at the centre of the play, the faked death of Claudio. It seems directed at his sister Isabella, but what does the Duke expect it to accomplish? And again, what is the nature of the change wrought in her by the time of Act Five’s judgment scene? In each case, the *Tractatus*’ explanation of the purpose of comic hoaxes, the emotion of indignation and its relationship to pity, and a new understanding of catharsis reveal a play fundamentally concerned to portray, test, and alter “the disposition of natures” of structure and character.¹⁰

I

Aristotle begins the *Poetics* by stating that dramatists represent “people in action,” and “these people are necessarily either good or inferior. For characters almost always follow from these [qualities] alone; everyone differs in character because of vice and virtue” (1448a).¹¹ He then categorizes dramatic genres according to the sorts of characters they represent: “comedy prefers to represent people who are worse than those who exist, tragedy people who are better.” “Good” and “inferior” in the first quotation are Janko’s translations of *spoudaios* and *phaulos*, adjectives which describe respectively a blend of moral and social stature, and its lack. Leon Golden translates the pair as “noble” and “ignoble” in order to stress their antonymic nature, and in turn, “the emphatic distinction Aristotle makes between the noble or good (*spoudaios*) character and action of tragedy and the ignoble or bad (*phaulos*) character and action of comedy.”¹² Aristotle later specifies just what sort of inferiority comic characters possess, stating that comedy is “a representation of people who are inferior – not, however, with respect to every

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. N. W. Bawcutt, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.1.166-67. Subsequent quotations of the play are cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number.

¹¹ In this and all subsequent quotations of Aristotle, words within square brackets have been inserted by the translator to clarify meaning.

¹² Golden, *Mimesis*, 67.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

[kind of] vice, but the laughable" (1449a).¹³ "The laughable," he explains, is "a sort of error or ugliness that is not painful and destructive, just as, evidently, a laughable mask is something ugly and distorted without pain" (1449a). That the laughable in a person or action can be an error links comic character and action to those of tragedy, in which the *hamartia* or grave mistake of the protagonist is crucial to the plot. Translators Janko and George Whalley both suggest that like tragic, comic error arises from ignorance: "Plato (*Philebus* 48A-50B) makes it clear that what we find ridiculous in others is their deficiency in self-knowledge."¹⁴ But where tragic *hamartia* has for some time been recognized by classicists to be a *mistake* in action or decision and not, as it has often been misunderstood, a moral "tragic flaw,"¹⁵ comic *hamartēma*¹⁶ must be a mild flaw, because the central feature of comic characters is inferiority or ignobility. Since Aristotle insists that "everyone differs in character because of vice or virtue," a tragic protagonist is thus *spoudaios* because of his or her virtue and a comic character *phaulos* because of vice.

Golden then directs us to Aristotle's familiar concept of virtue as a mean between vices in the *Nicomachean Ethics* for further suggestions of what, in addition to general self-ignorance, might constitute the error of comedy's *phauloi* characters. In the *Ethics*, he says, we find a "virtual rogue's gallery of comic archetypes": the sycophant and the misanthrope, who evince excess and deficiency respectively in the virtue of friendship; the braggart and the self-

¹³ While comedy is concerned with the laughable, it is evident that Aristotle does not mean to contrast it with tragedy as a genre without seriousness or significance. On the contrary, it shares in precisely that characteristic which makes all poetry "philosophical and serious": an interest in the "universals" of human existence (*Poetics*, 1451b). Thus, "comedy in its mature development is, for Aristotle, as equally serious an intellectual and aesthetic experience as tragedy, only directed at ignoble rather than noble human action and character." See Golden, *Mimesis*, 67.

¹⁴ George Whalley, commentary on *Poetics*, in *Aristotle's "Poetics,"* trans. George Whalley, eds John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (Montreal and Kingston, Ont.: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997), 62 n. 22.

¹⁵ Whalley's notes on 1453a offers a succinct summary of the interpretive history of *hamartia*. See Whalley, commentary, 94 n. 123.

¹⁶ Aristotle uses this close cognate of *hamartia* to identify comic error.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

deprecating dissembler, who demonstrate excess and deficiency of right self-opinion, and so on.¹⁷ What is particularly important here is the general principle that comic error, being a mild form of vice, will be an excess or deficiency of some virtue. The *phaulos* character of comedy will be imbalanced, and, being an example of the laughable, that imbalance will arouse laughter.

The concept of catharsis receives no direct explanation in the *Poetics*, but has nonetheless precipitated centuries of debate. Following Jacob Bernays, twentieth-century commentators tended to understand the experience it describes as the arousal and purgation of pathological emotion,¹⁸ but this interpretation has been increasingly questioned. Instead, both Kevin Crotty and Richard Janko observe that in the last thirty years, a "consensus seems to be forming that tragic catharsis has to do with the increased understanding, or 'clarification,' of the emotions."¹⁹ Leon Golden's argument for catharsis as "intellectual clarification" was one of the original versions of this general view and is particularly relevant to Shakespeare's comedy. The only occurrence of the term in the *Poetics* is at the famous definition of tragedy, where Aristotle states that tragedy accomplishes "through pity and fear the *katharsis* of such experiences"²⁰ (*i.e.* those pitiful and fearful). While Aristotle does not speak directly about comic catharsis, his use of the

¹⁷ Golden, *Mimesis*, 92.

¹⁸ See Bernays's seminal 1857 paper, *Zwei Abhandlungen über die aristotelische Theorie des Drama* (1857), translated by Jonathan Barnes and Jennifer Barnes as "Aristotle on the Effect of Tragedy," in *Articles on Aristotle, Vol. 4: Psychology and Aesthetics*, eds Jonathan Barnes et al. (London: Duckworth, 1979), 154-65

¹⁹ Crotty, *The Poetics of Supplication: Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 15 n. 32. Janko makes a similar assertion in "*Poetics*," vii. In addition to Golden, Carnes Lord, Martha Nussbaum, Stephen Halliwell, and Janko are among those mentioned as holding broadly similar views of catharsis.

²⁰ I here quote Golden's translation of *Poetics* 1449b (*Mimesis*, 66). The term he renders "experiences" is *pathēmata*, which can also be translated as "emotions" (Janko) or "painful acts" (Whalley). There is an openness in Golden's "experiences" which allows for both possibilities. For a brief discussion of the options, see Whalley, commentary, 68 n. 14.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

term makes it appear not to be limited only to tragedy; comedy would accomplish a similar catharsis, but of those emotions which are central to it.

Golden builds a detailed case for his reading of the concept on two points. The first is Aristotle's identification of "'learning and inference' as the essential goal and pleasure of all *mimesis*," or representation.²¹ "Learning and inference" are essentially philosophical acts: the realization of the particular's relationship to the universal. Secondly, we have seen that Aristotle puts forward the catharsis of pity and fear as the end of tragedy. So, if learning and inference are the end of *mimesis* in general, and catharsis the end of tragedy (a particular sort of *mimesis*), it follows that tragic catharsis must be a learning about the "universal nature of pity and fear in human existence."²² Instead of hindering reason, as Plato charged, emotion is a legitimate object of the intellect, and thus able to contribute to self-understanding. Rather than being dryly cerebral or strictly cognitive,²³ Golden's theory of catharsis highlights how "painful emotions such as pity and fear serve as especially potent incentives for grappling intellectually with their cause and effect."²⁴ Tragic catharsis can thus be helpfully (if not exclusively) seen as the "intellectual clarification" of pity and fear, and of pitiful and fearful occurrences. Moreover, the result of this clarification of the nature of emotion and circumstance is frequently "a powerful moral transformation" as the character begins to act on his or her new understanding.²⁵ We can infer from this that if the vice of comedy's *phaulos* character is in some way an imbalance, then

²¹ Golden, *Mimesis*, 21. Golden here quotes *Poetics* 1448b.

²² *Ibid.*, 26.

²³ Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Lear (who also criticizes Nussbaum) have both levelled this charge against earlier published versions of Golden's theory. He has refined the one which appears in *Mimesis*, bringing it fairly close to Nussbaum's understanding. See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 390-91; and Lear, "Katharsis," in *Essays on Aristotle's "Poetics,"* ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 318-26.

²⁴ Golden, *Mimesis*, 33.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

catharsis might be the process whereby the character recognizes this imbalance and moves to a proper mean of virtue.

As is evident in my summary, Golden is not consistent about whether catharsis occurs in a play's audience, its characters, or its plot:²⁶ he refers directly to the comprehension of the plot that the audience gradually attains as it unfolds (thereby locating catharsis in both audience and plot), but both his examples identify literary characters²⁷ as those who experience catharsis. For my purposes, the possibility that a play's characters can undergo catharsis is most illuminating; indeed, Martha Nussbaum's example of Sophocles' Cleon suggests that what catharsis an audience experiences is first modeled for it within the drama that it watches.²⁸ Shakespeare, it seems, is especially interested in dramatizing in his plays the reactions that Aristotle's commentators have typically suggested occur within an audience. Of these, the cathartic realization and amendment of a previous error of imbalance are central.

Aristotle's use of the term catharsis in his definition of tragedy implies that it would be equally applicable to comedy, except that the emotions on which it works would be those uniquely aroused by comedy. The *Poetics* does not identify what these might be, but here Aristotle's larger body of work is relevant. Golden points to the catalogue of emotions in the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle defines pity in terms very close to those of the *Poetics* (1453a): it is "a certain pain at an apparently destructive or painful event happening to one who does not deserve

²⁶ Commentators have typically located catharsis in the audience; Gerald Else, H. D. Kitto, and Whalley, in the action. For an account of this, see Whalley, "Translating Aristotle's *Poetics*," 27-28.

²⁷ Achilles during his visit with Priam in *Iliad* 24 and Strepsiades in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, upon realizing that he has been duped by Socrates. See Golden, *Mimesis*, 34-37, 95-97.

²⁸ "Just as, inside the *Antigone*, Creon's learning came by way of the grief he felt for his son's death, so, as we watch a tragic character, it is frequently not thought but the emotional response itself that leads us to understand what our values are" (*Fragility of Goodness*, 390).

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

it and which a person might expect himself or one of his own to suffer."²⁹ Aristotle then goes on to describe pity's opposite as the feeling of *nemesan*, or "being indignant," which is "in some way opposed to feeling pain at undeserved *misfortune*" (*i.e.* pity) and means "being pained at undeserved *good fortune*."³⁰ Citing E. M. Cope, Golden explains that *nemesan* "represents the "righteous indignation" arising from a sense of the claims of justice and desert, which is aroused in us by the contemplation of success without merit, and a consequent pleasure in the punishment of one who is thus undeservedly prosperous."³¹ It is thus indignation, which Aristotle describes as opposite to pity, that Golden argues is the comic emotion analogous to pity and fear in tragedy.

Two further possibilities are opened up by Golden's suggestion of indignation as the comic emotion. First, in the attempt to clarify his argument, he downplays the clear similarities Aristotle notes between pity and indignation – similarities which are as fruitful in examining Shakespeare as are the differences between the terms. Aristotle explains that "being pained at undeserved *good fortune* arises from the same moral character [as does pity], and both emotions are characteristic of a good character."³² It follows, then, that the closer a comedy comes to portraying painful acts, as do many of Shakespeare's, the more likely it is that the action will evoke pity as well as indignation. Second, Aristotle follows up his definition of *nemesan* by providing examples of those undeservedly prosperous sorts of people that rightly arouse indignation in us. Their shared characteristic is that their prosperity violates the laws of

²⁹ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, 2nd ed., trans. and ed. George A. Kennedy (Oxford University Press, 2007), 1385b.

³⁰ Ibid., 1386b. *Nemesan* (literally, "being indignant") is a verbal noun derived from *nemesis*; Kennedy suggests that Aristotle may have preferred the former term because "nemesis had often taken on the meaning of 'divine retribution'" (141).

³¹ Golden, *Mimesis*, 92.

³² Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1386b.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

"proportion and appropriateness": what they have received is disproportionate to their character or deeds.³³ If we consider that it is likely a comedy's *phaulos* character who arouses indignation in both other characters and the audience, we can then make a link between the imbalance which makes him or her ignoble and the violation of proportion which arouses indignation: his or her disproportion may be not simply one of circumstances but of emotions which lead to, or indicative of, vice.

In his attempt to reconstruct an Aristotelian comic theory,³⁴ Janko carefully points out the significant consistency of the *Tractatus* with the extant *Poetics* and the plausibility of its expansions on it, particularly with regard to how comedy achieves its effect. In an earlier study of the *Tractatus*, Lane Cooper wonders whether the *pathos* or "suffering" so central to tragedy might have its comic counterpart in "the comic incident" or "device" at the centre of many comedic plots.³⁵ Janko bears this suggestion out: the *Tractatus* observes that laughter arises "as a result of (a) diction and (b) incidents."³⁶ In categorizing the different sorts of each, "deception" is listed as the first sort of incident.³⁷ Deceptions, of course, require a joker or trickster figure to enact them. The *Tractatus* not only acknowledges this in its subsequent discussion of the objects of comic laughter but suggests a motive: "The joker wishes to expose errors of soul"³⁸ – precisely those things that Aristotle in the *Poetics* identifies as characteristic of the *phaulos* character, "the laughable," or mild vice. The aim, then, of at least some of the deceptions practiced in comedy is the exposure of the *phaulos* character's vice. The motivation for this

³³ Leon Golden, "Aristotle on the Pleasure of Comedy," in *Essays on Aristotle's "Poetics,"* ed. Rorty, 382.

³⁴ For a brief reception history of the treatise, see Richard Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of "Poetics" II* (1984; repr. London: Duckworth, 2002), 1-4.

³⁵ Lane Cooper, *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922), 197.

³⁶ Janko, trans. and ed., *Tractatus Coislinianus*, in Janko, "Poetics," 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Aristophanes' *Strepsiades* is once again the example of this.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

exposure would logically arise from indignation at the imbalanced or disproportionate nature of the *phaulos* character. But unlike the direct abuse of lampoon, the genre out of which comedy evolved and which "details without concealment the bad [qualities and actions] attaching to people," comic deceptions or jokes must be indirect, as Janko points out, because "jokes shade into abuse if they go too far."³⁹ Thus, the *Tractatus* states, "comedy requires the so-called innuendo."⁴⁰

This emphasis on the revelation of error further links the *Tractatus* to the *Poetics* because it recalls the process of catharsis Golden has outlined: by acknowledging his error when the joker exposes it, the *phaulos* character becomes a locus of catharsis. And given that he is only mildly vicious, it is likely that he would then be concerned to correct himself by finding the virtuous mean from which his vice deviates. Moreover, that the comic hoax would directly contribute to the ultimate effect of drama – catharsis of the emotions and circumstances evoked – fits precisely Aristotle's insistence that action and plot are of primary importance. Drama is "a representation not of human beings but of action and life.... Consequently the incidents, *i.e.* the plot, are the end of tragedy, and the end is what is most important" (1450a). As a central comic plot device, the hoax is thus doubly important.

II

The biggest problem with approaching *Measure for Measure* as a comedy on Aristotle's terms is its current critical status as a tragicomedy – a genre unknown (at least by that name) to Aristotle. The *Poetics* states that comic error is "laughable," "not painful or destructive," but *Measure* crucially employs tragicomedy's typical brush with death: Angelo's vice very nearly costs Claudio his life, and Isabella for a time fully believes that it has. Yet Aristotle is not quite

³⁹ Janko, "*Poetics*," 167 n. 7., referring to *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.1128a.

⁴⁰ Janko, *Tractatus*, 45.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

as emphatic in his division of tragedy from comedy as is often thought. When describing what sort of *peripeteia* or reversal of fortune makes for the best tragedy, he insists that it should not show "wicked men [passing] from misfortune to good fortune. This is the most untragic of all...for it is neither morally satisfying nor pitiable nor terrifying" (*Poetics* 1452b). This most "untragic" action is, of course, that of comedy, which in its initial stages is deliberately not "morally satisfying" but productive of righteous indignation. What is interesting, though, is the possibility that the comic action described here can involve not only the mildly vicious but a "wicked" character, and will still produce an effect proper to comedy. As Malcolm Heath suggests, "since [Aristotle] did not regard all painful and destructive events as evocative of fear and pity, he need not have thought that pain and destruction are always inimical to laughter."⁴¹

Indeed, Aristotle goes on to allow in tragedy the "double structure" characteristic of comic action "which ends in opposite ways for the better and worse [persons]," though he sees it as inferior in tragedy because its "pleasure...is more particular to comedy. There the bitterest enemies in the story exit as friends at the conclusion and nobody kills anyone else" (1453a). Two ideas are present here: first, if the best tragedy eschews the comic pleasure of reconciliation, it follows that the best comedy would reject the tragic pleasure found in the emotions of pity and fear produced by destructive error. Second, though, Aristotle also observes that such mingling does occur and even allows for it in tragedy; again, it makes sense that the opposite – some tragic pleasure in comedy – would then also be permissible. So what appears to be Aristotle's earlier proscription of pain and destruction in comedy may actually be a statement of the comic ideal rather than a rule, "a generalization...designed primarily to distinguish comedy from tragedy,"

⁴¹ Malcolm Heath, "Aristotelian Comedy," *Classical Quarterly* 39 (1989): 353.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

and from which a dramatist may deviate.⁴² *Measure for Measure* is thus broadly consonant with Aristotelian comic principles.

To begin with, then, the overarching action of *Measure for Measure* is itself a comic hoax. The Duke of Vienna takes it into his head to leave his city in the hands of the young courtier Angelo. He is from the beginning suspicious of Angelo's apparent virtue, however, and after leaving for a time, comes back to Vienna disguised as a Friar so that he can "behold his sway" (1.3.43). The Duke clearly states his reason for playing this trick on Angelo: he wants to "see / If power change purpose, what our seemers be" (1.3.53-4). This intention to test "the disposition of natures" (as he later calls it⁴³) is in keeping with the *Tractatus*' claim that the comic "joker wishes to expose errors of soul," and it is out of this hoax that the rest of the play's action arises. That the Duke has specific designs for his apparent absence is emphasized by the obvious parallel Shakespeare draws between him and the "testing master" in Christ's parable of the talents, who departs on a journey and leaves his estate in the hands of servants in order to prove their relative worth.⁴⁴

Viewing the Duke as just such a tester is crucial to understanding the reason for another of his hoaxes: convincing Isabella that Claudio, whom he had tried to save, has nevertheless been executed by Angelo's warrant. Throughout most of Act Five, it is clear that he is testing her response to it. Yet, unlike the Duke's dealings with Angelo, the error that he seeks to expose in her is not immediately clear. Critics have most typically suggested that the Duke aims at her

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The Duke actually and ironically attributes this intention to Angelo's propositioning of Isabella when he is trying to extinguish Claudio's hope for release: "Angelo had never the purpose to corrupt [Isabella]; only he hath made an assay of her virtue, to practice his judgement with the disposition of natures" (3.1.164-67).

⁴⁴ Matt. 25:14-30. Louise Schleiner discusses this and several other relevant parables in "Providential Improvisation in *Measure for Measure*," *Publications of the Modern Languages Association* 97 (1982): 227-29.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

"anger and desire for revenge"⁴⁵ or "her chastity-based spiritual pride,"⁴⁶ and that he succeeds in leading her to "humility,"⁴⁷ "charity and forgiveness,"⁴⁸ but have rarely given the question more than passing mention.⁴⁹ I generally agree with these assessments, but Aristotle's interest in the precise nature of comic error encourages a more prolonged look at what the Duke intends to correct in Isabella. Curiously, he is initially transparent with her (apart from his disguise as a friar, of which no one in Vienna is aware), suggesting to her at their first meeting the bed-trick as a way to save Claudio. He only begins specifically to trick Isabella when he discovers that, even after sleeping with the disguised Marianna, Angelo will not release Claudio according to his bargain but has instead hastened his execution. At that moment, Isabella meets him, forcing the Duke to provide an immediate response to her enquiries about Claudio. While he has narrowly managed to save Claudio by sending a substitute head to Angelo to satisfy his request for proof of death, about Isabella he quickly decides, "I will keep her ignorant of her good / To make her heavenly comforts of despair / When it is least expected" (4.3.106-8). Calling this apparently hasty decision "the weakest moment in the play" in terms of narrative structure, N. W. Bawcutt holds that the Duke "is forced by the exigencies of the plot to lie to Isabella and make a feeble excuse for doing so."⁵⁰ Yet even if these words mark a weak beginning for his hoax, Act 5 proves them to be an accurate description of what it finally effects: her despair over Claudio's

⁴⁵ Gregory W. Lanier, "Physic That's Bitter to Sweet End: The Tragicomic Structure of *Measure for Measure*," *Essays in Literature* 14.1 (1987): 31.

⁴⁶ Peter Lake, "Ministers, Magistrates, and the Production of 'Order' in *Measure for Measure*," *Shakespeare Survey* 54 (2001): 179.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁸ Schleiner, "Providential Improvisation," 234; see also Northrop Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections on Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 29.

⁴⁹ Lanier's article ("Physic That's Bitter") is a rare exception: he describes the Duke as a figure of comic temperance who moderates Isabella's tragic volatility over the course of Acts 3-5.

⁵⁰ Bawcutt, introduction to *Measure for Measure*, 24.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

apparent execution leads her to pity rather than condemn him, and her anger towards Angelo is similarly converted to sympathy for his human frailty. Like Friar Francis in *Much Ado About Nothing*, who tricks Claudio with the fake death of the slandered Hero, the Duke hopes that the sorrow of loss will cause the object of his hoax to see more clearly and compassionately, disregarding the faults of another. However apparently spontaneous his decision, then, the Duke's statement and intention demand to be taken seriously.

We are still uncertain, though, about what inadequacy in Isabella has motivated the Duke's trick. Earlier, his introduction to her had been by way of her harsh denunciation of Claudio. Now, after he breaks the news of Angelo's further duplicity, Isabella is again enraged: "O, I will to him and pluck out his eyes!... / Unhappy Claudio, wretched Isabel, / Injurious world, most damnèd Angelo!" (4.3.117-20). After calming her, the Duke seeks to re-enlist her aid in exposing Angelo and urges her, "pace your wisdom / In that good path that I would wish it go" (4.3. 131-2). As a reward for this, he promises, "you shall have your bosom on this wretch, / Grace of the Duke, revenges to your heart, / And general honour" (4.3.133-4). Her quick agreement, "I am directed by you," would indicate that his pledge has hit on something that she really wants – vindication of her integrity and vengeance for Claudio's death (4.3.134). In other words, Isabella feels deeply the *nemesan* at undeserved good fortune that Golden identifies as the central emotion moved by comedy. What makes Angelo's success undeserved is its violation of "the laws of proportion and appropriateness" with regard to "wealth and power": his authority is out of all proportion to his moral character.⁵¹ While Claudio doesn't enjoy Angelo's good fortune, as Isabella's brother and in the absence of their father he does have authority over her. This is inevitably vitiated in her eyes, though, by his sin with Juliet – one which she does

⁵¹ Golden, "Pleasure," 382.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

"most...abhor" (2.2.29). So when he asks her to commit a sin similar to his and for his sake, powerful indignation results.

The Duke perceives this in her yet postpones the satisfaction of it until the end of the play. As Friar, he gives her no hint of the feigned disbelief with which as Duke he will greet her accusations against Angelo, a disbelief which for a time actually sharpens her humiliation and augments Angelo's honour. In doing so, the Duke aims precisely at the comic emotion of indignation present in Isabella and the *self*-righteousness in its motivation. When she had earlier visited Angelo to plead for Claudio's life, she had little to lose. Obviously, she goes hoping to save her brother, but his life is already forfeit; the worst that can happen to her is that her suit will be unsuccessful. In this knowledge, she is able to debate the law with a clarity and precision that stand out against Angelo's increasingly lust-heated logic. He rants,

'Tis all as easy

Falsely to take away a life true-made,

As to put metal in restrained means

To make a false one.

(2.4.46-49)

His coining analogy absurdly equates the begetting of an illegitimate child with murdering a legitimate one. Isabella calmly and reasonably responds that this principle may well be "set down so in heaven, but not in earth," allowing Angelo's analogy in the spiritual, heavenly realm (all sins being equal before God), but denying its applicability to one temporal and earthly (2.4.50). After Angelo finally makes her understand the sexual trade he is proposing and dismisses her initial threat to expose him, the indignation she expresses is intense, yet retains the dignity of diction previously indicative of her rational poise:

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

O perilous mouths,
That bear in them one and the selfsame tongue
Either of condemnation or approof, Bidding the law make curtsy to their will,
Hooking both right and wrong to the appetite,
To follow as it draws!

(2.4.173-8)

Her later response to Claudio in the prison when he begs that she give in to Angelo's request is anything but poised, however. She explodes,

O you beast!
O faithless coward, O dishonest wretch!
Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?
Is't not a kind of incest to take life
From thine own sister's shame? What should I
think?
Heaven shield my mother played my father fair,
For such a warped slip of wilderness
Ne'er issued from his blood. Take my defiance
Die, perish! Might but my bending down
Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed. I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy
death,
No word to save thee.

(3.1.139-50)

Her previously lucid judgment deteriorates when she is under duress in exactly the way Angelo's did: she equates Claudio's quite natural desire for life with grossly unnatural incest, comparing

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

an understandable sin with one thoroughly repellent. The reason for the great difference between her responses to the two petitions for her body, it seems to me, is the petitioner. Her indignation towards Angelo is essentially just, arising from her sense of the gross disproportion between his power and his character. Yet one can also perceive in her a subtle satisfaction at having proven her virtue to him. Her conclusion to that earlier speech – “Then, Isabella, live chaste, and brother, die; / More than our brother is our chastity” – evinces a quiet self-satisfaction that prevents outward-looking pity (2.4.185). Pondering exactly this moment and its relation to her subsequent castigation of Claudio, Harold Goddard asks, “Who in the midst of making a speech, performing a part, or carrying a point, realizing with delight that it is ‘coming off,’ has not paused for a fraction of a second to pat himself on the back, and then – it was indeed all ‘off’ in another sense.”⁵² Claudio’s failure to appreciate her virtue and his desire instead that she compromise it precipitate just such a dissolution in Isabella.⁵³ One whose sin she has already described as abhorrent and from whom she expects congratulation for her virtue is instead asking her to lower herself to his level – that of a sinner – and this her sense of self-righteousness will not brook. Her indignation towards him is thus not simply a result of the injustice of her predicament, but of hurt pride. The Friar-Duke’s hoax on Isabella demonstrates that he perceives not only the mingled source of her indignation, but also her ignorance of its quality and its excessive degree. This is what he aims to reveal to her by way of the humiliation he initially puts her through when he returns to Vienna as Duke and by seeing whether she will plead for

⁵² Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 2.57.

⁵³ This subtle pride, I would suggest, is a deeper motivation for Isabella than the abhorrence of sex usually put forward as an explanation by both traditional and feminist critics. See, for examples, Vivian Thomas, *The Moral Universe of Shakespeare’s Plays* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1987), 177; and Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays, “Hamlet” to “The Tempest”* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

Angelo's life with Marianna. His aim in doing so, I would suggest, is not simply to satisfy "a scientific curiosity as to how [she] will behave under stress,"⁵⁴ but to effect catharsis in her, clarifying to her the nature and source of her indignation – and providing her the opportunity to amend these.

This clarification begins in her when she learns of Claudio's purported death: the very thing she vowed in her rage to pray for moves her instead to sorrow and anger at Angelo. Indeed, her later willingness to shame herself by publicly accusing Angelo of sleeping with her must surely be motivated by pity for and forgiveness of her brother. As Friar Francis in *Much Ado* might put it, the shock of loss clarifies within Isabella her feelings for Claudio, revealing her initial indignation toward him as excessive and tempering it with pity, its opposite. While this is a remarkable change from her condemnation of him in the prison, it is not overly surprising; her clarification is aided by the love she naturally bears Claudio. The Duke has a further purpose for his hoax, though. He wants to see if she will experience this sort of catharsis of her feelings toward Angelo, whom she has no reason to pity. The Duke lays out this final part of his fake death plot in his sentencing of Angelo, offering to Isabella the satisfaction of the indignation he has worked to inflate. His judgement is phrased to proffer precisely the vengeance she had earlier been eager to take:

...as he adjudged your brother,
Being criminal in double violation
Of sacred chastity and of promise-breach
Thereon dependant for your brother's life,
The very mercy of the law cries out

⁵⁴ Anne Barton, introduction to *Measure for Measure*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 581.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

Most audible, even from his proper tongue,

"An Angelo for Claudio, death for death."

(5.1.404-10)

In response to this, Marianna brings the Duke's hoax to a climax by begging Isabella to plead with her for Angelo's life, and I wonder if she hasn't planned this ahead of time with the Duke. He responds that Marianna's request is "against all sense" because of what Isabella has suffered at the hands of Angelo. By reiterating that "he dies for Claudio's death," the Duke leans heavily on what to Isabella is the fact of Claudio's death to ensure that her response is fully grounded in her knowledge of Angelo's supposed act (5.1. 434, 444). The resulting tension is exquisite: Marianna asks Isabella a third time to kneel, indicating that her first two requests have gone unheeded.⁵⁵ Finally, she agrees, and asks the Duke:

Most bounteous sir,

Look, if it please you, on this man condemned

As if my brother lived. I partly think

A due sincerity governed his deeds

Till he did look on me; since it is so,

Let him not die.

(5.1.445-49)

Remarkably, she makes no mention of Marianna here at all, but bases her request on her own pity for Angelo. In the true sense of "sympathy" as "shared" or "common feeling," she can sympathize with his initial zealotry for the law and believe that "due sincerity governed his

⁵⁵ Peter Brook's 1950 Stratford-on-Avon production famously had Isabella (played by Barbara Jefford) "stand silent for a long as she thought the audience could bear before dropping on her knees to plead for Angelo." See Bawcutt, introduction, 37.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

deed" of punishing Claudio. His subsequent falling off from his high ideals when "he did look on me" she can understand as a common human weakness.

This sympathy derives from the earlier catharsis of her feelings toward Claudio. She had earlier acknowledged Angelo's assertion that not only men but "women are frail, too" (2.4.125). Her hasty agreement – "Nay, call us ten times frail, / For we are soft as our complexions are, / And credulous to false prints" – was ostensibly self-deprecating, but subtly distanced her from the sex she judged and from the charge of weakness (2.4.129-31). Claudio then asked her much more pointedly to identify with human frailty by committing his sin to save his life, and she violently refused. But her remarkable willingness in the first part of Act Five at least verbally to associate with sin by shaming herself comes about, I would suggest, because of the catharsis of her self-righteous indignation towards Claudio, brought about by the Duke declaring him dead. And here she goes even further, sympathizing with the most morally repugnant person in the play. That Isabella only "partly" thinks this reveals the immensity of the task of feeling such sympathy, rather than simply indicating half-heartedness or mere acquiescence under duress. Katherine Maus aptly calls this "a more subtle and exacting asceticism" than that Isabella originally desired to practice in the convent, an "asceticism of the spirit" rather than only of the body.⁵⁶ No small part of her still resists identifying with a man like Angelo, yet her experience with Claudio has convinced her that she must. Northrop Frye points out that "the woman who earlier had stated her intention of praying for Claudio's death pleads for Angelo's life on the ground that he is less villainous than self-deluded."⁵⁷ In words suggestive of the process of catharsis Isabella has undergone, he concludes that it was just this sort of "charity...that Isabella

⁵⁶ Katharine Eisaman Maus, introduction to *Measure for Measure*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., *Comedies*, eds Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 2008), 847.

⁵⁷ Frye, *Myth of Deliverance*, 29.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

had dimly in mind when she first wanted to be a nun."⁵⁸ Christy Desmet thinks that "the act of kneeling therefore deprives Isabella...of autonomy and control";⁵⁹ rather, it is a supreme act of will that counters judgement with pity in a manner exemplary of the theme that runs throughout the play. This change in her might itself be the "heavenly comforts" which the Duke wanted to make for her out of "despair": for her earthly sorrow at the loss of Claudio she gains a spiritual compassion and clarity she did not previously possess. Genuine *nemeses* is not wholly set aside – she offers no protest when Angelo is forced to marry Marianna – but it is tempered and purged of its earlier alloy with self-righteous pride.

But Isabella goes on to demonstrate that the catharsis of indignation has also reinvigorated her reason. The Duke's charge against Angelo is as curious as it is precise. Angelo is not, as we might expect, to be executed for propositioning Isabella, sleeping with Marianna, or breaking his promise to release Claudio, but for presuming to sentence Claudio while himself guilty of Claudio's crime: "as he adjudged your brother." This distinction is crucial. Because the knowledge of his own guilt inspired no mercy in Angelo for Claudio, says the Duke, Claudio's sentence will be turned upon him. But after kneeling, Isabella goes on to make a remarkably precise legal argument on Angelo's behalf:

My brother had but justice,
In that he did the thing for which he died.
For Angelo,
His act did not o'ertake his bad intent,
And must be buried but as an intent

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Christy Desmet, *Reading Shakespeare's Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 154.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

That perished by the way.

Thoughts are no subjects,

Intents, but merely thoughts.

(5.1.449-55)

Angelo's planned blackmail does not, in a technical sense, succeed, she points out. As a result, he is not guilty of judging Claudio while himself "in double violation / Of sacred chastity and of promise-breach"; his intention never becomes action, and thus cannot be judged. Hunt complains that Isabella "reasons syllogistically" and thus misses the Duke's lesson that "mortal frailty gives forgiveness its edge in a competition with the application of talionic law," but his claim overlooks the difference that Isabella perceives between personal Christian ethic and state law.⁶⁰ Marianna had previously asked the Duke to pardon Angelo and been rebuffed, and Isabella sees that, similarly, her own personal forgiveness of him is hardly grounds for a state pardon. She thus picks up the charge, "he dies for Claudio's death," and throws it out of court, so to speak. Just as her subtle spiritual pride when challenged earlier had clouded her reasoning, here her humble and generous pity sharpens and enlivens it. Rather than obfuscating justice, as many critics have charged,⁶¹ the technical loophole that she shrewdly finds enables an exoneration which the strictures of the law could not allow. She goes beyond what the Duke expects by

⁶⁰ Maurice Hunt, "Being Precise in *Measure for Measure*," *Renascence* 58.4 (2006): 259.

⁶¹ Like Hunt, Marcia Riefer also criticizes Isabella's logic as "twisted" and her argument as mere "specious legalism." Barton (Introduction, 582) concurs: "That Angelo has not slept with Isabella, as he intended, is true. He has, however, slept with Mariana outside the bonds of holy matrimony, even as Claudio did with Juliet. How, then, can Isabella claim that her brother 'had but justice' when he has died (as she thinks) for exactly the same sin, fornication on a pre-contract, committed by Angelo with Marianna?" While true, both critics miss the subtlety of Isabella's argument – a subtlety necessary to legal dispute: she speaks here of Angelo's intended crime against *her*, not his wider guilt. She requests pardon of his crimes as they relate to her and her brother (though still on legal grounds), not to others like Marianna. See Riefer, "Instruments of Some More Mightier Member": The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 35.2 (1984): 166.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

arguing against the very charge that might be expected to arouse her indignation, not pity. When he grimly answers the Duke's charge against him, Angelo finally does what he had earlier promised Escalus he would if guilty of Claudio's crime – submit to death. Here, Isabella does what she promises Angelo she would do if she were judge, but forgets in her irrational malice toward Claudio.⁶²

As I have already suggested, this change in Isabella strongly corresponds to Golden's account of Aristotelian catharsis. In its light, the Duke's much-maligned marriage proposal might be most properly seen as Shakespeare's concluding comic trope for his surrogate dramatist, rather than something psychologically motivated (whether from love or a desire to subjugate). The Duke's offer comes at the very end of the play:

Dear Isabel,

I have a motion much imports your good,

Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,

What's mine is yours and what is yours is mine.

(5.1.537-40)

He explicitly makes his offer conditional upon her "willing ear," and it embodies by means of antimetabole the same ideal of mutuality and reciprocity that mark Shakespeare's other comic matches: "What's mine is yours and what is yours is mine." This offer appears "abrupt, naïve, even tasteless"⁶³ only if one has read the Duke and Isabella primarily as psychological portraits, and it certainly disallows the possibility that his proposal "recapitulates Angelo's harassment."⁶⁴ Rather, his proposal is a fitting recognition of his and Isabella's comic complementarity: she is

⁶² Kamaralli ("Writing about Motive," 59) also makes this point, but thinks that Isabella remains true to her promise throughout the play.

⁶³ Hunt, "Being Precise," 252.

⁶⁴ Maus, introduction, 847.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

initially an object of his hoax, his pupil, but takes up the challenge that it poses so successfully that she is able to outdo him in the end by arguing down his charge against Angelo.⁶⁵ The Duke recognizes this in both the content of his proposal and in its couplet form, which links it to the play's other similarly-patterned affirmations of balance.

III

N. W. Bawcutt muses that, while *Measure for Measure* "is full of striking themes and concepts" like justice and mercy, sexual morality and its regulation, and the line between public and private, these "are not part of a logical structure intended to eliminate inconsistencies and to work rigorously towards a definable conclusion ('Shakespeare is showing us that...')." ⁶⁶ Verna Foster puts her finger on the trouble this dichotomy can create when she observes that "modern scholars have wished for a resolution of the characters' moral difficulties commensurate with the intellectual effort that has gone into their articulation. Instead the problems set up are countered by comedic intrigue."⁶⁷ The Duke's dominant role in these and his obvious resemblance to a comic dramatist make plausible Frye's assertion that *Measure for Measure* is at heart "a play about the relation of all such [issues] to the structure of comedy"; it is a "comedy about comedy."⁶⁸ Consequently, moral categories and the moral character of those in the play primarily serve larger dramatic categories; as Lever argues, "*Measure for Measure*...is concerned with error, not evil; with correction, not retribution.... It is in the nature of the play that Isabella's personality, like the personalities of Claudio and of Angelo, should seem neither 'good' nor

⁶⁵ Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew* seems an early prototype of this sort of pupil-turned-wife when she not only submits to Petruccio's demand that she recognise old Vincentio as a 'gentlewoman,' but lavishly calls him a 'Young budding virgin, fair, and fresh, and sweet' (4.5.29, 37). Like Isabella, she not only enters into the joke but becomes an equal participant in its playing (I here cite H. J. Oliver's 1982 Oxford edition of the play).

⁶⁶ Bawcutt, introduction, 45.

⁶⁷ Verna A. Foster, *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 58.

⁶⁸ Frye, *Myth of Deliverance*, 24, 25.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

'bad', but basically self-ignorant."⁶⁹ From this standpoint, then, to foreground the dramatic categories of the hoax, indignation, pity, and catharsis when interpreting the play is a direct way to get to its heart. Shakespeare's interest in Isabella is thus only secondarily in her rigidity, legalism, and pride, and their subsequent conversion to mercy, forgiveness, and humility; his primary concern seems the indignation that drives comedy towards resolution and its relationship to the emotion of pity that tragedy pairs instead with fear.

Part of Shakespeare's unique genius lies not simply in the way his comedies can produce these emotions, but his dramatization of them in his characters. He puts them into situations that we might expect to arouse either one emotion or the other, and then sees if it might be possible, or even more deeply fitting, for that same circumstance to arouse both emotions at once. To do this, the dramatic situation must necessarily be extreme, especially for a comedy. Brian Gibbons describes how the particular conventions of tragicomedy serve this end: the hybrid genre "stresses the peaks and troughs of the emotional trajectory proper to romance" and "accelerat[es] the development of experience proper to tragedy" in order to exert "a maximum of stress" on the characters in the play.⁷⁰ Yet these very extremes of emotion are at the same time a constituent part of Aristotelian comic error as Golden theorizes it: characters diverge from a virtuous mean in both action and feeling. Shakespeare seems especially interested to investigate the possibility left open by Aristotle of painful error and feeling within comedy, but without leaving behind comedy's particular character types and plot devices. Even in its moments of pain, *Measure for Measure* does not cease to function as a comedy. Indeed, it is the comic hoax that is used to fake tragic action and induce pain in its objects. In a strange way, emotions heightened in response to

⁶⁹ J. W. Lever, introduction to *Measure for Measure*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1965), lxxxii.

⁷⁰ Brian Gibbons, introduction to *Measure for Measure*, updated ed., The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 46.

GOOSSEN: "THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES": ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

a mock tragedy are better comprehended by those who feel them than those arising from the real but less intense events of their lives. Extremity of experience cures extremity of character, bringing about the realization of the need to respond to a given situation with finely balanced, rather than exclusive and extreme emotions. In all of this a remarkable symmetry emerges between the disparate emotions evoked by these plays, the clarification of these effected by the comic hoax, and the larger genres of comedy and tragedy employed by Shakespeare. The real benefits of Aristotle and recent work on his comic theory are to suggest the categories that reveal this symmetry to our eyes.

“WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN”: THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN *HAMLET*

Ken Jacobsen
Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland
kjacobsen@grenfell.mun.ca

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is, among other things, an agonized meditation on conflicting early modern conceptions of human nature, a preoccupation signalled by persistent anthropological generalizations.¹ Yet, despite this insistent emphasis on “man,” Shakespeare's view of human nature in the play seems ambivalent; it is perhaps the safest path to argue that the implied anthropology of *Hamlet* is paradoxical, both affirming optimistic classical-humanist commonplaces and subverting them by voicing radical pessimism, doubt, and uncertainty. This sense of irresolution can be illustrated by the play's most memorable statement about human nature. Having characterized the earth as simultaneously a “goodly frame” and “sterile promontory,” and the atmosphere as both an “excellent canopy” and a “foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” (2.2.299, 302-3), Hamlet turns his attention to the enigma of humanity: “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god; the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals – and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of

¹ Here are some examples: “He was a man, take him for all in all” (1.2.187); “apparel oft proclaims the man” (1.3.72); “As infinite as man may undergo” (1.4.34); “Every man has business and desire” (1.5.136); “to be honest as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand” (2.2.177-8); “Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping” (2.2.524-5); “What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all” (3.1.128-9); “To give the world assurance of a man” (3.4.62); “What is a man” (4.4.33); “a man's life's no more than to say ‘one’” (5.2.74); “to know a man well, were to know himself” (5.2.137-8). All quotations from *Hamlet* are from The Arden Edition, i.e. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Ed. Harold Jenkins, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982) and refer to Act, scene, and line numbers.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

dust? Man delights not me..." (2.2.303-9). The passage's judgment on human nature is suspended between a Piconian exaltation of human potential and a Montaignean anti-humanism which denies human exceptionalism. The gap between the two accounts is not attributable to any new datum – e.g. the new science, Copernican cosmology, etc. – but by an apparent rupture between the objective and subjective. Hamlet knows (or at least used to believe) that human beings are magnificent creatures living in a majestic cosmos; this judgment seems sufficiently universal and objective. Yet, having mysteriously lost his mirth, Hamlet now perceives otherwise: "seems to me," "it appeareth nothing to me," "yet, to me" (2.2.298-9, 301-2, 308). Like Montaigne, whom Shakespeare read closely, Hamlet pits the authority of the perceiving human subject against received opinion, even to the point of solipsism: "The world always looks straight ahead; as for me, I turn my gaze inward, I fix it there and keep it busy. Everyone looks in front of him; as for me, I look inside of me; I have no business but with myself; I continually observe myself, I take stock of myself, I taste myself."²

Given the volume and degree of disagreement among the play's critical commentators, as well as the play's thematization of irresolution,³ it is tempting to play it safe and call *Hamlet's* anthropology irresolvably paradoxical. But I don't believe this does justice to the text, which contains three distinct strands in its exploration of the theme of human nature: 1) an articulation of Piconian optimism, coalescing in the figure of *homo rationalis* – man as the rational or thinking animal; 2) a skeptical Montaignean critique of *homo rationalis*; 3) the proposal of an

² Michel de Montaigne, "Of Presumption," trans. Donald M. Frame, in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), . 499.

³ The play is notoriously resistant to definitive interpretation. Moreover it dramatizes suspension of judgment and action. One thinks for example of the emblematic poised over the prone body of Priam, Pyrrhus, who, "like a neutral to his will and matter,/ Did nothing" (2.2.477-8), or of the guilt-ridden Claudius's self-description: "like a man to double business bound,/ I stand in pause where I shall first begin,/ And both neglect" (3.4.41-3).

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

unlikely alternative model, *homo histrio*⁴ – man the actor – which, while conceding the Montaignean critique in many respects, nevertheless recuperates Piconian ideals in an unexpected form. *Hamlet* shifts the focus from human nature *per se* to the human condition; the play explores the multiple ways that theatricality, a human invention, has entered into the human world and become a powerful conditioning force within it. *Homo histrio* might be termed the theatricalization of the human condition, or, as Lionel Abel puts it, “life seen as already theatricalised.”⁵ And while *homo histrio* is not necessarily Shakespeare’s final word on humanity (though he certainly employs the notion again in *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *The Tempest*), it effectively addresses key issues around which the play’s critique of traditional anthropology coheres: rationality, epistemology, temporality, language, identity, and agency. It is an elegant, modest, and flexible definition of the human, one that acknowledges the ineluctable presence of irrationality, contingency, illusion, and conditioning in human life.

As all readers and auditors of *Hamlet* know, the arrival of the players in Act Two, scene two, changes everything, not least the protagonist’s mood. The cloud of melancholy hanging over the prince temporarily lifts, and he springs to life, suddenly enthusiastic, gregarious, and purposeful: “there did seem in him a kind of joy/ To hear of it” (3.1.18-9). I wish to suggest that the arrival of the players and the extended meditation on theatre which follows are directly relevant to Hamlet’s conflicted meditations on human nature. When Hamlet tells his former

⁴ I am not using the term as a synonym for *homo ludens* – man the player – Johan Huizinga’s term which covers a wide range of cultural phenomena and does not pertain to theatricality *per se*. Nor is the term as narrow as Erving Goffman’s “dramaturgical self” developed in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1959) or Colin McGinn’s “theatrical construction of a self,” an adaption of Goffman’s concept used in *Shakespeare’s Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 10-12. *Homo histrio* is meant to stand as a comprehensive metaphor for human nature parallel to *homo rationalis*.

⁵ Lionel Abel, *Metadrama: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 60.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

schoolfellows, "Man delights not me" (2.2.309), Rosencrantz smiles in amusement:

Ham. Why did ye laugh then, when I said man delights not me?

Ros. To think my lord, if you delight not in man, what Lenten entertainment the players shall receive from you. We coted them by the way, and hither are they coming to offer you service.

Ham. He that plays the king shall be welcome....

(2.2.312-8)

Rosencrantz has a valid point. If Hamlet's claim is true – that he no longer takes delight in humanity *per se* -- then this must necessarily include the players. It is evident, however, that the players, "Even those you [i.e. Hamlet] were wont to take such delight in" (2.2.326), are a striking exception to the rule, a continuing source of delight to the Prince despite his disillusionment with human beings in general. One might even go out on a limb and argue that, while Hamlet no longer finds *homo rationalis* viable, the actors represent a way of being human which he can embrace, an anthropological paradigm which is precisely answerable to the objections he has conceived against the classical-humanist model.

In our own time, when theorists from a variety of fields – e.g. Erving Goffman, Kenneth Burke, Gregory Adams, Elizabeth Burns, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner⁶ – have appropriated and generalized dramatic and theatrical concepts in order to construct theories of the self, social

⁶ Burke, Kenneth, *A Grammar of Motives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945); Gregory Adams, *All the World's a Stage*, (New York: Basic Books, 1963); Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality: A study of convention in the theatre and in social life* (New York: Longman, 1972); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publishing, 1987).

⁷ Quotations are all from Arden Editions of the plays: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Ed. Harold F. Brooks, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979); *Henry V*, Ed. T.W. Craik, (London: Methuen Drama, 1999); *The Tempest*, Eds. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, (London: Methuen Drama, 1999); *Macbeth*, Ed. Kenneth Muir, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1951).

JACOBSEN: “WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN”: THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

behaviour, and cultural practice, it is easy to underestimate the bold originality of *Hamlet*. To offer up the actor as anthropological model was audacious in a strongly antitheatrical milieu in which actors and acting were persistently associated with inauthenticity, affectation, deception, hypocrisy, unreality, and unnaturalness. Indeed, Shakespeare’s own references to actors often have an antitheatrical cast; they are “shadows” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 5.1.208, 409), “ciphers” (*Henry V* Prolog. 17,) “meaner ministers” (*The Tempest* 3.3.87) and “poor player[s]/ That strut and fret [their] hour upon the stage,/ And then [are] heard no more” (*Macbeth* 5.5.24-6).⁷ Even in *Hamlet*, where the acting “quality” is treated with relative dignity, the protagonist expresses dehumanizing contempt for popular but inept players, “that neither having th’accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of Nature’s journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably” (3.2.31-5). This passage simultaneously establishes the figure of the actor as a potential “measure of man,” while quieting potential objections to this standard by acknowledging the inferiority of particular actors and performances.

But Shakespeare’s purpose goes well beyond outflanking the enemies of the stage by pandering to anti-theatrical biases. Rather, he appropriates and transforms the ancient analogical trope of *theatrum mundi* – all the world’s a stage. As Anne Barton contends in *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, Shakespeare found in the commonplace of *theatrum mundi* “a virtually inexhaustible means of expression, reflecting the multiple possibilities inherent in the dramatic situation itself” and turned this into something “individual and characteristically brilliant.”⁸ But,

⁸ Anne Richter (Barton), *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 89. Barton argues that Shakespeare’s contemporaries used *theatrum mundi* persistently to represent the theatricality of English political, social, and religious life, whether the ideological use of public spectacle by princes, the sermons of divines dramatizing the splendour and transience of human life, or the use of costume and stagecraft in the gulling of dupes (83-4, 113).

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

as Thomas Postlethwait and Tracy Davis argue, *Hamlet* is not merely a compendium of the *theatrum mundi* heritage, but in fact the inaugural point of a new kind of dramatic self-consciousness.⁹ In a period when many European playwrights were exploring the possibilities of metadrama, or drama about drama, *Hamlet* is the metadramatic work par excellence, utilizing all of the varieties of overt metadrama: plays-within-plays, ceremonies within plays, role-playing within roles, literary/real life references, self-reference, and the theme of drama and perception.¹⁰ As Alvin B. Kernan notes, Shakespeare depicts all life at Elsinore as acting and playing; virtually every scene (e.g. Hamlet's first meeting with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia's pretense of prayer in the "nunnery scene") is a latent or submerged play-within-the-play.¹¹ In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's self-reflexive meditation on the art of theatre suspends the dramatic illusion and in so doing sets up a conceptual mirror which illuminates the conventional, illusory, and theatrical nature of everyday life. Further, I would argue, the play is designed to produce in its auditors metadramatic consciousness, a multi-level awareness in which one simultaneously 'believes' in the dramatic illusion, perceives the play as theatrical artifice, and experiences self-conscious awareness of one's own awareness (i.e. becoming one's own audience, as it were). This metadramatic experience, writes Richard Hornby, is characterized by "unease, a dislocation of perception,"¹² and it is uncannily analogous with the shift of consciousness we observe in the protagonist, who comes to perceive his own reality metadramatically. As James Calderwood argues, Shakespeare "wants our disillusionment to mirror Hamlet's....For Hamlet the Ghost's

⁹ Thomas Postlethwait and Tracy C. Davis, "Theatricality: An Introduction," in *Theatricality*, Ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlethwait, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11, 15.

¹⁰ Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986), 31-2.

¹¹ Alvin Kernan, *The Playwright as Magician: Shakespeare's Image of the Poet in the English Public Theater*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 101-3.

¹² Hornby, *Metadrama*, 32.

JACOBSEN: “WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN”: THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

story dissolves, annuls, or in the fashionable term deconstructs his schoolboy conceptions of a world governed by honor, love, and truth.So Hamlet discovers behind the arras of his youthful assumptions the fraudulence of the world, and suffers for his knowledge.”¹³ Yet, Calderwood goes on to argue, though we participate in Hamlet’s disillusionment, we also move with him toward “a more embracing conception of the human condition, one that neither endorses nor denies either innocence or disillusion but acknowledges both.”¹⁴ In this paper, I would like to demonstrate how this double consciousness coheres in the metadramatic figure of *homo histrio*, drawing particular attention to its recuperative and constructive function in *Hamlet*.

Homo Rationalis and its Discontents

To appreciate *Hamlet*’s reconception of human nature, we begin with the classical-humanist model I have called *homo rationalis* – the human being as a rational or thinking animal – as memorably delineated by Pico della Mirandola in the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Pico begins with the striking assertion that human beings were created in indeterminate form at the midpoint of creation and endowed by the Creator with the capacity for rational self-fashioning: “In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself...Thou, like a judge appointed for being honourable, art the molder and maker of thyself.”¹⁵ According to Pico, the fact that “we may be what we will to be” (7) confers on humans godlike dignity and unlimited potential. Through the exercise of reason – which he defines as that “by which the soul measures, judges, and examines everything” (15) – human beings move upward in the chain of being toward union

¹³ James Calderwood, *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 169-70.

¹⁴ Calderwood, *Negation*, 173.

¹⁵ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, Trans. Charles Glenn Wallis, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), 4-5. All subsequent quotations from the *Oration* are from this edition

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

with the divine, the realm of authentic being (5). For Pico, the apex of human development is the philosopher, the type of sovereign human selfhood who transcends temporal and somatic finitude, attaining a lofty autonomy through pure rationality:¹⁶ "If you come upon a pure contemplator, ignorant of the body, banished to the innermost part of the mind, he is not an earthly, not a heavenly animal; he more superbly is a divinity clothed with human flesh" (6). Reason for Pico is the defining human trait and the ruling faculty in a divinely ordered inner hierarchy comprising understanding, imagination, memory, will, sense, passion, and appetite. Certainly, this model allows for the possibility of internal conflict between the higher and lower faculties, though it is a conflict in which reason is assured the victory as it brings the passions into harmonious accord (10-1).¹⁷ Pico's affirmation of human reason and dignity is accompanied by a confidence in language or discourse, "the speaking or reasoning art" by which humans move up the ladder of being (10) and communicate truth from mind to mind.¹⁸ Yet the sovereign

¹⁶ In the *Heptaplus*, Pico urges the reader, "let us enter into our very selves, into the inner chambers of the soul...so that we may successfully recognize in ourselves not only all the worlds but also our Father and our home" (Pico della Mirandola, *Heptaplus*, trans. Douglas Carmichael, in *On the Dignity of Man*, [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998], 118).

¹⁷ This is Pico's memorable depiction of inner conflict: "there is multiple discord in us, and we have severe, intestine, and more than civil wars at home: if we are unwilling to have these wars, if we will strive for that peace which so lifts us up to the heights that we are made to stand among the exalted of the Lord, moral philosophy alone will still those wars in us, will bring calm successfully. First, if our man will seek a truce with the enemy, he will subdue the uncurbed forays of the multiple brute, the quarrellings of the lion, and the feelings of wrath. Then if we take the right counsel, and desire for ourselves the security of everlasting peace, it will come and will fulfil our prayers liberally. The slaying of both beasts, like stuck sows, will establish most solemnly a most holy treaty between the flesh and the spirit. Dialectic will calm the turmoils of a reason shoved about between the fistfights of oratory and the deceits of the syllogism" (*Dignity*, 10-1).

¹⁸ Both the rhetorical form and content of the *Oration* imply confidence in the capacity of language to convey truth, especially the adequacy of written texts: "they could not remain long in memory without the mediation of writings" (*Dignity*, 31). We see this confidence as well in Pico's bold assertion that he has harmonized Christian theology with the wisdom of the kabbalistic writings and other occult traditions by drawing out their secret meaning, and brought them to light through his own perspicuous use of language (*Dignity*, 33).

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

self, as Pico conceives it, is resolutely individualistic, even anti-social, little concerned with the communal aspect of communication. Content with the pleasures of disinterested solitary contemplation, he has no abiding need of other human beings and disdains earthly things, including the vagaries of economic life and the good opinion of others. Of his own pursuit of the contemplative ideal, Pico says,

I have never philosophized for any reason other than for the sake of philosophizing...I have neither hoped nor sought from my studies...any other gain or profit than cultivation of soul and knowledge of truth...I have always been so desirous of this truth, and so much in love with it that, abandoning all care of public and private affairs, I gave my whole self over to the leisure of contemplating, from which no disparaging of the envious, no curses from the enemies of wisdom, have been able so far or will be able later to frighten me away. Philosophy herself has taught me to weigh things rather by my own conscience than by the judgments of others, and to consider not so much whether I should be badly spoken of as whether I myself should say or do anything bad.

(18)

Endowed with the capacity for cognitive certainty and a free and effective will, *homo rationalis* can practice moral agency without hindrance from external and internal determinative forces (e.g. fate, fortune, heredity, etc.), making man "the animal that is most happy, and is therefore worthy of all wonder" (3).

In contrast, *Hamlet* conveys an ambivalent view of *homo rationalis*. There is undoubtedly a powerful strain of Piconian humanism in the play. "Godlike reason" (4.4.38), for example, is

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

repeatedly affirmed as the ultimate arbiter in human affairs and actions.¹⁹ Indeed reason is identified as the *sine qua non* of humanity *per se*: "O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/ Would have mourned longer" (1.2.150-1); "Divided from herself and her fair judgment,/ Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts" (4.5.85-6). Like Pico, Hamlet identifies authentic being with rational inwardness and disdains corporeal life as mere appearance or seeming:

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
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 passes show,
These but the trappings and suits of woe.

(1.2.76-86)

Hamlet thinks of the body as a mere "machine" (2.2.124), a "quintessence of dust" (2.2.317), and a "mortal coil" to be shuffled off (3.1.67), and he longs to transcend the flesh through death: "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,/ Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,/ Or that the

¹⁹ For example, Claudius says, "You cannot speak of reason to the Dane/ And lose your voice" (1.2.44-45) and "A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,/ To reason most absurd" (1.2.102-103).

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

Everlasting had not fix'd / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (1.2.129-32).²⁰ The flesh, for Hamlet is contemptibly vulnerable and corruptible, heir to a "thousand natural shocks" (3.1.62) and subject to the humiliation of decomposition (4.3.16-31; 5.1.158-205). He could therefore be contented to "be bounded in a nutshell and count [himself] the king of infinite space" (2.2.254-5), rather than encased in flesh.

Temporal life, the play suggests, is a prolonged assault on human dignity. In the play's most famous soliloquy, the principal criterion for being or non-being is the consciousness of one's own human worth, and the options are weighed according to what is "nobler in the mind" (3.1.57). Death relieves one, not of insupportable suffering or metaphysical uncertainty, but of the burden of being undervalued or insulted by one's inferiors: "For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,/ Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,/ The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,'/ The insolence of office, and the spurns/ That patient merit of th' unworthy takes...." (3.1.70-4). Pico argues in the *Heptaplus* that spiritual impulses toward fame, anger, and revenge are laudable and appropriate to a proper human self-valuation, for "everyone ought to preserve his dignity and not refuse honors obtained in honest ways."²¹ Hamlet too is acutely sensitive to the loss of honour, such as his countrymen being branded drunkards because of the custom of the "heavy-headed revel" (1.4.17-22). He is also profoundly disturbed by the scandalous inability of his contemporaries to distinguish between greatness and infamy, substance and shadow, most pointedly in the substitution of Claudius, "a king of shreds and patches" (3.4.103) for the "gracious figure" (3.4.104-5) of his father.²²

As is the case with Pico, Hamlet's humanistic ideal is the philosopher, the individual

²⁰ The textual crux in Hamlet's first soliloquy is variously rendered by editors as "sallied," "sullied," and "solid," but whether Hamlet's flesh is too tainted or too solid, he wishes for it to undergo a kind of sublimation (1.2.129-30).

²¹ Pico, *Heptaplus*, 124.

²² See also 2.2.263-4 and 3.2.129-30.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

whose intellectual self-discipline makes him invulnerable to both external contingencies and internal perturbation. He perceives such an ideal in Horatio, who is able to subordinate the appetitive demands of "blood" to rational judgment and is thus loftily indifferent to the arbitrary fluctuations of Fortune:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish her election,
Sh'ath sealed thee for herself; for thou hast been
As one in suffering all that suffers nothing,
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.

(3.2.65-76)

Hamlet admires Horatio's neo-stoic constancy, his dignified self-control under pressure. From the Prince's standpoint, Horatio's antithesis is Gertrude whose "o'erhasty marriage" is a shameful surrender of reason to the lower faculties: "You cannot call it love; for at your age/ The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble,/ And waits upon the judgment, and what judgment/ Would step from this to this?" (3.4.68-71).

Yet, even as it articulates this classical-humanist anthropology, the play reveals it to be

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

overstated and untenable. Much of the play's dramatic power derives from the protagonist's painful discovery that *homo rationalis* represents an impossibly idealistic account of both the human condition and his own disordered subjectivity. As Hamlet's paean to Horatio makes clear, instances of *homo rationalis* in the Piconian mold are exceedingly rare, yet, if that is true, does the classical-humanist definition of humanity hold? Throughout the course of the play, various characters, overwhelmed by passion, appetite, or trauma, suffer an impairment of reason, yet it is not at all clear that this abrogates their humanity. Indeed, Gertrude and Claudius are perhaps most fully and characteristically human in their irrational, akratic persistence in incestuous cohabitation, while Ophelia's mad discourse is "pregnant" with signification, insight, and humanity, "a happiness," notes Polonius earlier in the play, "that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of" (2.2.209-11).

Typically, the play's generalizations about "noble and sovereign reason" (3.1.159) are embedded in self-contradictory enthymemes and situational ironies that amount to an inadvertant refutation of *homo rationalis*:

What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unused. Now whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th' event -

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

A thought which quarter'd hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward -- I do not know
Why yet I live to say, "This thing's to do,"
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't.

(4.4.33-46)

This soliloquy is occasioned by the spectacle of the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras and his army crossing into Poland in order "to gain a little patch of ground/ That hath in it no profit but the name" (4.4.18-9), and this context ironically demonstrates the inadequacy of *homo rationalis*. Hamlet begins by asserting with certainty that the God-given discourse of reason is an objective standard by which to judge human actions. According to this standard, his own relative inactivity – sleeping and feeding when he ought to be killing Claudius – constitutes a sub-human abandonment of rationality. But this judgment is only superficially plausible, for Hamlet, as he goes on to admit, does not really understand the source of his own reticence to seek revenge. While it could be attributed to thinking too little ("Bestial oblivion"), it could just as plausibly be the result of thinking too much, which in turn could be his mind's attempt to rationalize its own cowardice.²³ Apparently, rational consideration of the moral consequences of action paralyzes the capacity to act. Seizing on this explanation, Hamlet proceeds to compare himself unfavourably with Fortinbras, "Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd,/ Makes mouths at the invisible event,/ Exposing what is mortal and unsure/ To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,/ Even for an eggshell" (4.4.49-53). In other words, Hamlet reverses his position during the course

²³ The phrase "craven scruple" recalls the play's most famous soliloquy where Hamlet contends that "conscience does make cowards of us all" and "the native hue of resolution/ Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (3.1.83-85). In this astonishingly pessimistic speech, suicide is offered as a rational response to suffering.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

of the speech. In the end, Fortinbras is to be praised for his irrationality, for how else can one characterize the slaughter of twenty-thousand men in the reckless pursuit of military honour, which Hamlet calls a mere "eggshell" and "straw" (4.4.55), "a fantasy and trick of fame" (4.4.61)?

What is the implied status of *homo rationalis* when Hamlet, arguably literature's most intelligent and introspective character, provides such a contradictory account of human reason and fails so miserably to perceive the implications of his own argument? Montaigne, in his "Apology for Raymond Sebond," grounds his critique of human nature on "man in his highest estate...that small number of excellent and select men who, having been endowed with fine and particular natural ability, have further strengthened it by care, by study, and by art, and have raised it to the highest pitch of wisdom that it can attain" (371).²⁴ He nevertheless concludes that "there are few souls so orderly, so strong and wellborn, that they can be trusted with their own guidance" (420). Hamlet, the archetypal Renaissance man, possessing the "courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" (3.1.153) seems a likely exception, but his intellectual potency – his tendency, for example, to think "too precisely on th'event" – proves not only a hindrance to the straightforward achievement of revenge, but renders his own descent into irrationality more threatening, as Claudius notes: "There's something in his soul/ O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,/ And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose/ Will be some danger..../ / Madness in great ones much not unwatch'd go" (3.1.166-9, 190). The mind, says Montaigne, is "a dangerous blade, even to its possessor" (420), "an erratic, dangerous, and heedless tool," particularly for "those who have some rare excellence beyond the others, and some extraordinary quickness" (419). The opinions and conduct of the intellectually gifted often burst the bounds of moderation,

²⁴ Michel de Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," trans. Donald M. Frame, in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 371. All subsequent quotations from Montaigne come from this edition.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

so that "It is a miracle if you find a sedate and sociable one" (419). Moreover, when persons of quick, keen, agile, and subtle mind go insane, they are given to "the greatest and wildest manias," for "[w]ho does not know how imperceptibly near is madness to the lusty flights of a free mind and the effects of supreme and extraordinary virtue?" (363).

Reason is defined by Montaigne as "that semblance of intellect that each man fabricates in himself" and "an instrument of lead and of wax, stretchable, pliable, and adaptable to all biases and all measures" (425). As such, it produces no certain or indisputable knowledge (414), and training in philosophy provides negligible help in overcoming fundamental human ignorance: "For every philosopher is ignorant of what his neighbor is doing, yes, and of what he himself is doing, and does not know what they both are, whether beasts or men" (402). If anything, humanist confidence in dialectic is a trap. As Montaigne contends, "Reason does nothing but go astray in everything, and especially when it meddles with divine things" (386). For Montaigne, Piconian speculation about the sovereign self's capacity for rational self-formation and divinization would constitute egregious examples of presumption, "our natural and original malady" (330). He argues instead that man, far from being a noble, self-determining being placed in the indeterminate middle of creation, is a miserable and puny creature, lodged in "the mire and dung of the world" (330), yet so ridiculously vain to imagine himself God's equal, the "master and emperor of the universe, the least part of which it is not in his power to know, much less to command" (328-9, 331). Montaigne bases this pessimistic view not merely on general observation but close scrutiny of himself: "I would hardly dare tell of the vanity and weakness that I find in myself" (425).

While *Hamlet* praises reason, it also reveals its vulnerability to corruption and its limited functionality. We see, for example, the cheapening of reason in Polonius whose brain "[hunts]

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

the trail of policy" (2.2.47) rather than truth. In the case of Gertrude, "reason panders will" (3.4.88), feverishly manufacturing rationalizations for sin. But reason may fail quite apart from human intention. The "o'ergrowth of some complexion," for example, may break down "the pales and forts of reason" (1.4.27-8), or fear may deprive one of the "sovereignty of reason" (1.4.73). Hamlet -- perhaps disingenuously, perhaps not -- admits his own rational dysfunction: "I cannot reason" (2.2.265); "My wit's diseased" (3.2.313). While not repudiating philosophy, the play emphasizes its limitations: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/ That are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.174-5); "there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out" (2.2.363-4). And, like Montaigne's "Apology," *Hamlet* voices radical epistemological skepticism, doubt, and uncertainty that call reason's provenance into question: "Doubt truth to be a liar" (2.2.117); "there's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.249-50); "I'll have grounds/ More relative than this" (2.2.599-600), "Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes" (5.2.218-20).

Doubts about reason lead almost inevitably to doubts about the composition and stability of the self. Even though the authorial voice in Montaigne's essays is powerfully individual, one of his most persistent themes is the inconsistency and variability of the self: "My footing is so unsteady, and so insecure, I find it so vacillating and ready to slip, and my sight is so unreliable, that on an empty stomach I feel myself another man than after a meal...Now I am ready to do anything, now to do nothing; what is a pleasure to me at this moment will some time be a trouble. Either the melancholic humor grips me, or the choleric; and at this moment sadness predominates in me by its own private authority, at that moment good cheer" (425). While Montaigne objects to the philosophers' division of the soul into many parts, making man into an imaginary republic (401), he fully acknowledges the chaotic inner diversity which defeats all

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

anthropological taxonomies: "we have as our share inconstancy, irresolution, uncertainty, grief, superstition, worry over things to come even after our life, ambition, avarice, jealousy, envy, unruly, frantic, curiosity. Indeed we have strangely overpaid for this fine reason that we glory in, and this capacity to judge and know, if we have bought it at the price of this infinite number of passions to which we are incessantly a prey" (358). *Hamlet* likewise questions the existence of the authentic, unitary self. Hamlet may speak of his inner integrity and coherence – "I have that within which passeth show" (1.2.85) – and Polonius may counsel, "to thine own self be true" (1.3.79), but often the play presents that self as radically conflicted, unstable, and fractured. In the extreme condition of madness, complete dissociation of the self may occur: "Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet./ If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,/ And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,/ Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it" (5.2.229-32). But even among the sane, the self is hardly an ordered hierarchy of faculties; it seems rather a volatile mixture of competing elements typically colluding to unseat or compromise reason.²⁵ Even though he is considered "The glass of fashion and the mould of form,/ The observ'd of all observers" (3.1.155-6), Hamlet's own discourse of reason is frequently disrupted by the pangs of grief, disgust, rage, fear, dread, self-loathing, and envy, particularly in the soliloquies whose mangled syntax signifies, not only the inherently discontinuous and disordered nature of his thought, but his sense of self-alienation,²⁶ which, like Montaigne, he recognizes through close self-examination: "I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give shape, or time to act

²⁵ Note the fractured sense of self in the following passages : (1.2.92-104) (3.3.38-41) (3.4.68-76, 85-8).

²⁶ See, for example, 1.2.129-59 and 2.2.543-88.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, believe none of us" (3.1.123-30). As strenuously as Calvin, the play affirms the doctrine of universal depravity: "A savageness in unreclaimed blood,/ Of general assault" (2.1.34-5); "Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?" (2.2.524-5); "Nymph, in thy orisons/ Be all my sins remember'd" (3.1.89-90). The moral world, like the physical, is radically entropic: youth and innocence are susceptible to "calumnious strokes," "canker," and "contagious blastments" (1.3.38, 39, 42), while a single defect can corrupt the possessor of virtues which are otherwise "pure as grace,/ As infinite as man may undergo" (1.4.33-4). Ascent to the angelic proves more difficult than descent to the venial, bestial, and demonic. It is not even a fair fight; while the power of beauty transforms honesty (i.e. chastity) into a bawd (3.1.111-2), "virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it" (3.1.117-8).

Humanity's depraved, fallen condition and unstable sense of identity, in both Montaigne and Shakespeare, manifest themselves in the problem of language. Montaigne argues that, owing to the weaknesses and defects in speech, "Most of the occasions for the troubles of the world are grammatical" (392), and that "the world is filled and soaked with twaddle and lies" (403). So too *Hamlet* also calls into question the reliability of language as a vehicle for rational discourse and truth, exposing the various ways that language is abused by those who use it, and how language betrays them in turn. Words in *Hamlet* are either too plentiful ("More matter with less art" [2.2.95]) or too scarce, as characters lapse into enforced or voluntary silence: "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.159).²⁷ Calumny (1.3.38; 3.1.136-8) and mendacity (2.2.178-9; 3.2.348) are ubiquitous, and "To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand" (2.2.178-9). There are persistent contradictions between words and

²⁷ See as well 1.3.59-60, 1.5.13-4, 1.5.144, 152, 159, 185-86, 3.4.198-200.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

intentions ("Words without thoughts"[3.3.98]), and between words and actions ("my deed to my most painted word" [3.1.53]). Language is the instrument of deception *par excellence*. Polonius, for example, describes Hamlet's vows of love as "mere implorators of unholy suits,/ Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds,/ The better to beguile" (1.3.129-31). Language is a devalued currency, of little worth without the collateral of deeds. Laertes, for example, counsels Ophelia to believe Hamlet only insofar as "his particular act and place/ May give his saying deed" (1.3.26-7), while Claudius insists that Laertes, in turn, "show [himself his] father's son in deed/ More than in words" (4.7.124-5). Certainly there are obvious abusers of language like Polonius with his long-winded tribute to brevity (2.2.86-92) and Osric with his "golden words" (5.2.129). But the inadequacy does not wholly lie in the speakers themselves; the inherent fallenness of language as an instrument to convey human inwardness is also implied. Hamlet, for instance, finds it demeaning that he "Must like a whore unpack [his] heart with words" (2.2.581), for, though silence is unendurable, words inevitably falsify what he feels. Overall, the play exposes the enormous potential for misunderstanding that results from human reliance on language.

The anti-humanist critique in *Hamlet* also emphasizes the ineluctable effects of temporality on the human condition. It is no surprise, argues Montaigne, that certainty of judgment is impossible, since both "the judging and the judged [are] in continual change and motion" (455). The perceiving human subject can have "no communication with being" because all things, including the would-be knower, are "coming into being and not yet fully existent" (455). Similarly, in *Hamlet* human beings are depicted as "fools of nature" (1.4.54), caught in an unstable temporal flux and subject to unpredictable change: "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be" (4.5.43-4). Laertes, for example, tells Ophelia to consider Hamlet's

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

professions of love as merely "Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,/ The perfume and suppliance of a minute" (1.3.8-9) because "young" Hamlet is still in a process of becoming: "as this temple waxes,/ The inward service of the mind and soul/ Grows wide withal" (1.3.12-4). While the characters ideally wish to master time – "Take thy fair hour, Laertes, time be thine,/ And thy best graces spend it at thy will" (1.2.62-3) – they find this extraordinarily difficult, and the overall impression is that of temporal dislocation: "The time is out of joint" (1.5.196). The great determinative fact is the brevity of human existence: "a man's life [is] no more than to say 'one'" (5.2.74). From this standpoint, time is in desperately short supply: "Not shriving-time allow'd" (5.2.46); "Had I but time" (5.2.341). Yet, from another standpoint, time may seem intolerably long, especially when "the whips and scorns of time" (3.1.70) inflict protracted suffering. Human beings typically misspend and waste time rather than redeem it; Hamlet, for example, accuses himself of being "lapsed in time and passion" (3.4.108). Some actions, like the killing of Polonius, fail for being "untimely" (4.1.40) or premature, while others, like the killing of Claudius, "come tardy off" (3.2.25). Time-pleasers, like Osric, strive to achieve modishness but only manage to get "the tune of the time" (5.2.186-7). Time frustrates human desires and designs, irrespective of reason or will. Claudius, in counselling Laertes to revenge, brings the problem of temporality into sharp focus:

Not that I think you did not love your father,
But that I know love is begun by time,
And that I see, in passages of proof,
Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.
There lives within the very flame of love
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it,

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

And nothing is at a like goodness still,
For goodness, growing to a plurisy,
Dies in his own too much. That we would do,
We should do when we would; for this `would' changes,
And hath abatements and delays as many
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents,
And then this `should' is like a spendthrift's sigh,,
That hurts by easing.

(4.7.110-23)

As Claudius points out, everything born in time changes and ceases to be; even the strongest passions and best intentions abate in the face of temporal contingencies. As the Player King tells the Player Queen, "what we do determine oft we break," either because the original motivating passion lapses or because circumstances change arbitrarily (3.2.192-219).

Indeed, with respect to the alleged agency of the sovereign self, *Hamlet* depicts human beings as mere "player" kings and queens, whose wills are tragically limited: "Our wills and fates do so contrary run/ That our devices still are overthrown:/ Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own" (3.2.206-8). Hamlet himself is emblematic of the human condition in that his "will is not his own. For he himself is subject to his birth" (1.3.17-8), and "nature cannot choose his origin" (1.4.26). If Pico instantiates the image of self-fashioned, self-determined human beings ascending to divinization through the exercise of the intellect, *Hamlet*, like Montaigne's "Apology," seems calculated "to crush and trample underfoot human arrogance and pride; to make them feel the inanity, the vanity and nothingness, of man; to wrest from their hands the puny weapons of their reason; to make them bow their heads and bite the ground beneath the

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

authority and reverence of divine majesty."²⁸

Enter *Homo Histrio*

How then does the notion of *homo histrio* represent a viable alternative to *homo rationalis*, mediating between Piconian ideals and Montaignean critique. First, *homo histrio* implies modest claims about human capabilities and potential rather than hyperbolic ones. The actor in Shakespeare's time was often an undignified figure of folly. Alluding to the theatrical profession, the speaker in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 110" laments that he has "gone here and there,/ And made [himself] a motley to the view" (1-2),²⁹ i.e. a public fool. In the Elizabethan context, a player (presuming he was not an unlicensed "rogue" or "vagabond") would possess the official status of a servant in a noble house, a subordinate "coming to offer...service" (2.2.317). Little would be expected from actors besides "abridgement" (2.2.416) or entertaining diversion, even from "the best actors in the world" (2.2.392), as Polonius calls the "tragedians of the city" (2.2.327). Yet *homo histrio* is not simply the antithesis of Pico's sovereign self; rather, the actor exposes the truth that sovereignty itself is merely a role – "He that plays the king shall be welcome" (2.2.318) – not part of the human essence. Theatrical imitation *per se* tends to undermine human pretensions to power, dignity, and freedom, and to level social hierarchies; indeed, the more skilful the imitation, the more we recognize the artificial, 'scripted,' and performative nature of social and political life, and metadrama – which presses the analogy between theatrical and social roles -- intensifies this effect. As we watch Claudius watching the performance of the Player-King, for example, we cannot help but reflect that Claudius himself is merely playing the role of king, and we may judge his "seeming" (3.2.87) as we would that of an actor. Indeed, the mere presence of the actors at Elsinore not only makes visible the staginess of

²⁸ Montaigne, "Apology," 327.

²⁹ *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2007).

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

the conventions by which Danish society coheres, but simultaneously disrupts or suspends these codes, as suggested by Hamlet's half-hearted apology to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "Th' appurtenance of welcome is fashion and ceremony. Let me comply with you in this garb – lest my extent to the players, which I tell you must show fairly outwards, should more appear like entertainment than yours" (2.2.367-71). "With much forcing if his disposition" (3.1.12) and "in the beaten way of friendship" (2.2.269-70), Hamlet complies with the ceremonial forms prescribed by the code of courtesy yet in doing so reveals their empty conventionality. One important function of the courtesy code is to reinforce social hierarchies, in this instance to mark the distinction between the common players and Hamlet's schoolfellows. Yet these distinctions are not observed; Hamlet insists that Polonius entertain the players as social equals: "Use them after your own honour and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty" (525-7).

Homo histrio, unlike *homo rationalis*, does not claim certitude of knowledge or judgment. In the theatrical paradigm, the threshold of human knowledge is narrowly circumscribed. Erving Goffman, in his "dramaturgical" account of self and society, approaches social interaction as a realm of performance in which individuals play social roles, act out "routines" – pre-established patterns of action – and influence others through various forms of concealment and "stage management."³⁰ In the interpersonal realm, he argues, we can ascertain the inner reality of other people – their attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and motives – only indirectly, through inferences based on their avowals and involuntary expressive behaviour.³¹ We see a similar perspective operative in *Hamlet*, where the Prince plots with Horatio to scrutinize Claudius's looks during "The Murder of Gonzago":

³⁰ Goffman, *Presentation*, 6-16.

³¹ Goffman, *Presentation*, 2-4.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,
Even with the very comment of thy soul
Observe my uncle. If his occulted guilt
Do not unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy. Give him heedful note;
For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
And after we will both our judgments join
In censure of his seeming.

(3.2.78-87)

Claudius is an audience member, but his reaction to the play is to be assessed as "seeming" or performance, and, like all theatrical performances, it is ambiguous and open to interpretation. Hamlet not only doubts the ghost's word and his own imaginations, but sufficiently doubts his own power of observation to require confirmation from Horatio. Given the ambiguous and collective nature of audience response, theatrical judgment is a matter of consensus, not individualistic whim: "though it makes the unskilful laugh, [overacting and underacting] cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others" (3.3.25-8). Indeed, Hamlet, despite his evident knowledge of theatre, defers to others when he speaks of those "whose judgments in such matters cried in the top of mine" (2.2.434-5). And, as subsequent events illustrate, he has good reason to doubt. When Claudius rises and yells, "Give me some light" (3.2.263), for example, he is not unambiguously conceding his murderous guilt. The theatrical action which precipitates the interruption of the

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

play is a regicide performed by "Lucianus, nephew to the King" (3.2.239), and it is possible that the court interprets Claudius's response, not as guilt, but as justifiable outrage at being threatened by his own nephew: "The King, sir...[is] in his retirement marvellous distempered...with choler" (3.2.274-8). Then, in the scene that follows, Hamlet totally misinterprets Claudius's performance, assuming that bent knees signify a repentant heart, when in fact Claudius's "thoughts remain below" (3.3.97).

The conception of *homo histrio* also implies a severe circumscription of the individual will. Theatrical art is of necessity cooperative and collaborative, not individualistic. It is significant that none of the players is identified by name; each is distinguished rather by the various theatrical types or 'lines of business' in which he specializes: adventurous knight, lover, humorous man, lady, etc. (2.2.319-24). One of the reasons Hamlet despises ranting actors who "tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings" (3.2.10-1) and the clowns who pander to the "barren spectators" for cheap laughs (3.2.38-45) is that both are guilty of "pitiful ambition" (3.2.44) in a properly collective enterprise; to draw attention to oneself when "some necessary question of the play be then to be considered" (3.2.39, 42-3) is selfish and self-defeating. Good playwrights and actors, according to Hamlet, cultivate subtlety and self-restraint, the subordination of individual aspiration and precocity to the effect of the whole: "I remember one said there were no sallets in the lines to make the matter savoury, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affection, but called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine" (2.2.437-41). This subordination of individual to collective good is a healthy corrective to the solipsism of *homo rationalis*.

Homo histrio also implies a more plausible relation to temporality than *homo rationalis*, one which fully acknowledges human subjection to contingency and finitude, and in so doing

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

provides an alternative to Pico's sovereign self. *Hamlet* emphasizes the players' vulnerability to the vicissitudes of fortune and temporal change in a variety of ways. For example, attention is called to the players' economic dependence. Actors, unlike Pico's philosopher, cannot afford to pursue their art in glorious isolation or to engage in the leisure of disinterested contemplation. Playing is their source of income, as we are reminded a number of times: "his Majesty shall have tribute on me" (2.2.318-9); "the lover shall not sigh gratis" (2.2.320-1); "if their means are no better" (2.2.347-8); "There was for a while no money bid for argument" (2.2.352).³² Actors are likewise painfully subject to changing theatrical tastes and fashions. The city company has been forced to travel because the "little eyases that cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapped for't...are now the fashion" (2.2.337-9); that is, a rival boys' company, specializing in shrill, polemical plays, have diminished their audience share and profit. This threat to the players' livelihood is not attributable to a decline in quality, for "their endeavour keeps in the wonted pace" (2.2.336). Rather the restless, novelty-seeking theatre-going public is only interested in personal attacks, where "the poet and the player went to cuffs in the question" (2.2.353-4). This is not an anomaly. The nature of the theatrical enterprise renders players subject to the praise and blame, no matter how inane, of amateur critics, "who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise" (3.2.11-2). The instability of mass audience taste is not merely a professional hazard for actors, but emblematic of the human condition. Hamlet compares the fickleness of the theatre audience to the Danish public's changing response to Claudius: "those that would make mouths at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little" (2.2.360-2).

Paradoxically, however, *homo histrio*, whose subjection to temporal contingencies is

³² Hamlet himself jokes that, should his own fortunes "turn Turk" (i.e. should he lose his privileged position as prince), he might seek a "fellowship in a cry of players" (3.2.269-72).

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

obvious, may master time in a way which *homo rationalis* fails to do. Theatre, of all the arts, is the most evanescent, and thus a powerful trope for the temporal finitude of human life, perhaps expressed most poignantly in Prospero's "Our revels now are ended" speech in *The Tempest*:

These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And – like the baseless fabric of this vision –
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Lead not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

(4.1.148-58)

As Prospero indicates, the evanescence of the theatrical illusion is a mirror of the human condition. Yet this very quality, as Hamlet observes, makes the actor the authoritative interpreter of the present: "Do you hear, let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live" (2.2.519-22). The purpose of playing, he asserts, is "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.22-4). In both its form and content, drama bears faithful witness to the poignant brevity of human lives.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

Homo histrio may likewise provide an imaginative solution to the problem of language. *Hamlet* implies that theatrical representation, as both text and performance, is a use of language better adapted to the real world than dialectic. "In the corrupted currents of this world" (3.4.57), as *Hamlet* depicts it, direct, earnest, sincere communication is not possible, except in rare circumstances. The truth, as Polonius's metaphors indicate, is virtually always concealed and can only be accessed by means of stratagem and subterfuge: "Your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth,/ And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,/ With windlasses and with assays of bias,/ By indirections find directions out..." (2.1.62-5). Working on the Montaignean premise that language is fallen, the protagonist seeks adaptative strategies rather than longing nostalgically for linguistic purity. Like Polonius, he adopts various "fetch[es] of warrant" (2.1.39), most obviously his "antic disposition" (1.5.180).³³ The most important of these tactics of indirection is theatrical representation:

I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play,
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks.
I'll tent him to the quick. If `a do blench
I know my course.

³³ He even takes sardonic pleasure in the "sport" of outwitting and undermining his enemies: "O, `tis most sweet/ When in one line two crafts directly meet" (3.4.210-1).

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

(2.2.601-10)

Here, Hamlet attributes the efficacy of dramatic language, specifically its ability to penetrate the human conscience, to "the very cunning of the scene" (2.2.586), that is, its self-effacing artfulness. Another virtue of effective dramatic language is "modesty" or restraint; Hamlet praises an unnamed but exemplary play as "well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning" (2.2.435-7) and instructs the players, "o'erstep not the modesty of nature" (3.2.19). Dramatic language, as he conceives it, is inherently disingenuous, hiding its deadly seriousness and its learning behind the pretense of inconsequentiality: "they do but jest – poison in jest" (3.2.229). Plays are effective because people normally think of them as trivial; thus, they circumvent the audience's psychic defences, eliciting, for example, involuntary admissions of hidden guilt: "the play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.600-1). Just as "A knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear" (4.3.22-3), a good play is "a knavish piece of work" (3.2.234), mischievously deploying irony ("Marry, this is *miching malicho*. It means mischief" [3.2.135]), "That's wormwood" [3.2.176]) and testing its auditors' wit.

And yet, despite these adaptations to a corrupt world, dramatic language may serve as a powerful instrument of truth, holding the mirror up to nature (3.2.20-3). One cannot, of course, take its truth for granted or construe it simplistically. As Kernan writes, the meaning of the internal plays in Hamlet are deeply ambiguous, and they demonstrate "that plays can be used to conceal truth as well as reveal it, and that they can be used to manipulate reality for base purposes as noble ones."³⁴ While it is a cliché that mirrors tell us the objective truth about ourselves, we all know that mirrors can be arranged in such a manner as to deceive sight. Yet theatrical language has, in addition to its indirection and modesty, an advantage over ordinary discourse. The merely verbal may degenerate into "words, words, words" (2.2.192), while the

³⁴ Kernan, *Playwright*, 109-10.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

merely gestural, like the dumb show which precedes "The Mousetrap," may leave its audience in a state of incomprehension (3.2.134). As Hannah Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*, "Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is human disclosed by the word..."³⁵ Words are not in themselves enough, nor are actions, but perhaps a disciplined synthesis of word and action can reliably represent internal and external reality, and drama is precisely such a synthesis: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (3.2.17).

Homo histrio provides a more nuanced and plausible conception of the self than *homo rationalis*, mediating once again between the ideals of Pico and the critique of Montaigne. The self is neither, as Pico would have it, a rigid hierarchy with reason on top, nor a chaotic torpor as Montaigne depicts it, but rather a dynamic equilibrium in which various human faculties, the irrational and corporeal included, cooperate, taking predominant roles in turn. In theatrical terms, one might call the self an 'ensemble piece' rather than a 'star-turn' for rationality. Plays are certainly the products of human rationality; common Elizabethan synonyms for play and plot are "argument" (2.2.352; 3.2.136) and "question" (2.2.354; 3.1.42-3), terms drawn from the rhetorical lexicon. Yet theatre, for both performers and audiences, equally engages the emotions. Upon arrival, the First Player is asked to deliver "a passionate speech" (2.2.427) which is nevertheless delivered "with good accent and good discretion" (2.2.461-2). As the speech progresses, the player's performance becomes increasingly passionate and intense, so that Polonius finds the display of emotion unseemly: "Look whe'er he has not turned his colour and has tears in's eyes. Prithee no more" (2.2.515-6). Hamlet's response gets closer to the heart of

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 178-9.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

the matter:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned;
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing,
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her?

(2.2.545-53)

Hamlet contrasts his own inadequate reaction to the seduction of his mother and the murder of his father with the actor's remarkable emotional identification with Hecuba, a mere fictional character. He goes on to amplify the contrast first by accusing himself of apathy, then by indulging in a fit of uncontrolled rage, and finally by reproaching himself for losing his temper at all. If we look at the scene emblematically, we see that *homo histrio* (in the person of the First Player) succeeds in achieving what *homo rationalis* (in the person of Hamlet) cannot: a satisfying emotional release in the context of affective discipline and harmony. He succeeds, not through philosophical reflection or mere repression, but through the exercise of imagination or "conceit" (2.2.547, 551), which directs the player's entire being -- soul, voice, facial expressions, bodily gestures -- toward the rational end of representation. This is precisely the balance Hamlet

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

recommends in his advice to the players and often lacks in himself: "in the very torrent, tempest, and as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.... Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor" (3.1.5, 16-7). That is, *homo histrio* recuperates *homo rationalis*'s objective of passional discipline through a different set of means.

One common sense objection to this is that the actor's passions are "fake" and those of Hamlet "real." Yet the play confounds this distinction: "What would he do/ Had he the motive and the cue for passion/ That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,/ And cleave the general ear with horrid speech, / Make mad the guilty, and appal the free,/ Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed/ The very faculties of eyes and ears" (2.2.554-60). Though he is ostensibly contending for the depth and authenticity of his own passion, Hamlet puts himself and the player on the same footing by using theatrical terms like "motive" and "cue," and by imagining a theatrical representation of his emotional turmoil. Moreover, repeatedly, the unrestrained indulgence of Hamlet's putatively authentic emotions produces melodramatic over-acting, such as his volcanic self-reproach (2.2.561-78), his murderous rage toward, and outrageous rebuke of, Gertrude (3.2.379-90; 3.4.65-101), and his ranting attempt to outdo Laertes's grief over Ophelia's death (5.1.247-79). That is, Hamlet is guilty of precisely the sort of "o'erdone" performances against which he cautions the players prior to "The Murder of Gonzago": "O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious, periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings.... I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant. It out-Herods Herod. Pray you avoid it" (3.2.8-14). Thus, the line between authenticity and inauthenticity, between being and seeming, is blurred. Is Hamlet "really" ready to "drink hot blood" (3.2.381) or does his love for Ophelia "genuinely" exceed

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

that of 40,000 brothers (5.1.264-5). It is impossible to know for certain.

Perhaps, the play implies, an obsessive concern with authenticity in defining the self is counter-productive, and one should be content merely to play one's role with integrity and skill. Under the aspect of *homo histrio*, the self is neither a fixed, timeless unity nor a void. In playing a role, the actor engages in a form of self-fashioning, as Pico would have it, but it is not creation *ex nihilo*. In the formation of character, the actor enjoys a measured rather than boundless freedom; his choices are limited by a variety of factors: the dramatic text, theatrical convention, collaboration with other actors, and his own talent. The self, as exemplified by *homo histrio*, might be described as fluid and mutable, but this is not to say, as has sometimes been claimed, that the actor has no identity whatsoever.³⁶ As Richard Hornby observes, the recognition that human identities are not innate but are rather, like theatrical roles, relative, acquired, constructed, and revisable, does not therefore render the self an arbitrary fiction; in fact, people with a weak sense of identity generally make poor actors, while an actor with a strong sense of identity can afford a flexible ego boundary so that the "role extends his sense of self but does not displace it."³⁷ The acquisition of human character, as in Hamlet's exhortation to Gertrude, is a disciplinary process involving imagination, imitation, and rehearsal:

Assume a virtue, if you have it not.

That monster custom, who all sense doth eat,

Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,

That to the use of action fair and good

He likewise gives a frock or livery

³⁶ Colin McGinn, for example, interprets the actor as a figure for what he variously calls Shakespeare's pessimism, skepticism, nihilism, and naturalism. In a rather gross overstatement, he claims that, early in the play, Hamlet has no character whatsoever, and that he turns to acting to fill the abyss he finds within (*Philosophy*, 15, 45-6, 49).

³⁷ Hornby, *Metadrama*, 71, 72, 113.

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence; the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either curb the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency.

(3.4.162-72)

The phrase "put on" suggests an actor putting on a mask or a costume, working from the external to the internal. Later, Hamlet describes in a letter to Horatio another theatrical assumption of virtue: "Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compelled valor, and in the grapple I boarded them" (4.6.17-8). The key question, from the standpoint of *homo histrio*, is not, "Who am I, really?" but "What does the occasion require me to be?" The actor is committed to the principle of decorum or propriety, and must accordingly thread the needle between discretion and indiscretion, deliberation and rashness: "Rashly --/ And prais'd be rashness for it: let us know/ Our indiscretion sometime serves us well/ When our deep plots do pall.../ . . . / Being thus benetted round with villainies -- / Ere I could make a prologue to my brains,/ They had begun the play -- I sat me down, / Devised a new commission, wrote it fair" (5.2.4-9, 29-36). Plots, prologue, play – the passage is unquestionably metadramatic and a powerful counterpart to Hamlet's earlier exhortation to the actors, "let your own discretion be your tutor" (3.2.16-7). *Homo histrio* recognizes that sometimes decorum requires performing the lines as they are set down in the script (3.2.38-9) but other times requires inspired improvisation.

Finally, *homo histrio* constitutes an imaginative solution to Hamlet's anxieties about human agency or the lack thereof. Hamlet longs for freedom and autonomy, and can imagine

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

nothing worse than being a kind of musical instrument "played upon" by Fate, Fortune, or another human being. But, as the play demonstrates, not even the most eminent among us are free in the absolute sense; human nature is conditioned and the human will bounded by powerful determinative forces:

...these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery or fortune's star,
His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. The dram of evil
Doth all the noble substance often dout
To his own scandal.

(1.4.30-8)

This tragic circumscription of individual will and agency is analogous to the actor being cast in a dramatic role; both constitute the imposition of a narrative destiny: "but heaven hath pleased it so,/ To punish me with this, and this with me,/ That I must be their scourge and minister" (3.4.175-7). Hamlet is evidently dissatisfied with his own role; he does not wish to play the clichéd revenger's part, for which he is unsuited in terms of disposition and inclination. And if he must play the role, he wants to dictate the conditions of performance: that his actions be honourable and just in his own eyes, and perspicuous to those who are "but mutes or audience to this act" (5.2.340):

Report me and my cause aright

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

To the unsatisfied.

. . . .

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,

Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me.

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,

Absent thee from felicity awhile,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

To tell my story.

(5.2.344-5, 349-54)

Just as he interpolates "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (2.2.535) into "The Murder of Gonzago" and, chorus-like, interrupts it (3.2.240), Hamlet attempts to rewrite the revenger's role from within, imposing his will on recalcitrant materials and questioning the assumptions on which the revenge play is based. Rather than perform the role according to the standard cultural "script," Hamlet resists and delays. He monologues incessantly, bringing the action to a standstill. In the scene where he refrains from killing the praying Claudius, Hamlet not only delays, but appears to usurp the role of cosmic playwright by judging Claudius's inner motivations and insisting that he be eternally damned for his crimes (3.3.73-96). Yet these resistance efforts are largely futile, producing a string of lost opportunities, blind alleys, and unintended disasters.

The question of agency is tentatively resolved, however, after Hamlet returns from the sea voyage. As Marjorie Garber notes, instead of speaking soliloquies full of questions, conditionals, infinitives, and passive constructions, Hamlet now engages in dialogue with others,

JACOBSEN: "WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN": THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

and his language is full of active "doing" verbs.³⁸ More importantly, he apparently ceases to "write" the play from within and accepts the more limited role of being "directed" by Providence: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.9-10); "even in that was heaven ordinant" (5.2.48); "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow....The readiness is all" (5.2.215-6, 218). As Maynard Mack observes in his classic essay "The World of *Hamlet*,"

Till his return from the voyage he had been trying to act beyond these, had been encroaching on the role of Providence,He had been too quick to take the burden of the whole world and its condition upon his limited and finite self. Faced with a task of sufficient difficulty in its own right, he had dilated it into a cosmic problem -- as indeed every task is, but if we think about this too precisely we cannot act at all...Hamlet has sought to play at God....Now, he has learned that there are limits to the before and after that human reason can comprehend.....[T]he roles of life are not entirely self-assigned....Hamlet is ready now for what may happen, seeking neither to foreknow it nor avoid it."³⁹

I do not mean to suggest that *homo histrio* is an all-purpose solution to the enigma of human nature in *Hamlet*, a play whose complexity and richness are inexhaustible. Hamlet himself appears to warn the would-be critic to beware of reductive interpretations which presume to know the unknowable: "Why look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass....`Sblood, do you

³⁸ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 502.

³⁹ Maynard Mack, "The World of *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism*, Rev. Ed., Ed. Leonard F. Dean, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 260. See as well Kernan, *Playwright*, 109-10.

JACOBSEN: “WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN”: THEATRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN
HAMLET

think I am easier to be played upon than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me” (3.2.371-80). Within the play, there are obvious failures of theatricality as a strategy, and the players are not held up as paragons.⁴⁰ But in fact this evident imperfection makes *homo histrio* more representative than *homo rationalis* in an age of indeterminacy where radical critique like Montaigne’s was unsettling established patterns of thought. As Hornby argues, the signature metadramatic trope – the play within the play – engenders perceptual estrangement by inviting the theatrical audience to consider their own existence as illusionary and thus tends to be widely used during periods when root notions are being questioned and challenged.⁴¹ *Homo histrio*, as *Hamlet* depicts it, is a figure which mediates between optimistic and pessimistic perspective on human nature, providing a modest and tentative solution to the human enigma in an age of uncertainty, “grounds/ More relative” (2.2.599-600), not absolute.

⁴⁰ See for example, Hamlet’s anti-theatrical “heckling” of the players during “The Mousetrap” (3.2.135, 137-42, 147, 246-8).

⁴¹ Hornby, *Metadrama*, 46, 180.

“GOATS AND MONKEYS!”: SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

Andrew Moore
St. Thomas University
ajmoore@stu.ca

As he stands outside Brabantio’s house in the dead of night, while all is yet quiet and Othello’s marriage to Desdemona still a secret, Iago tells Roderigo that he hates the Moor his commander. He is indifferent to duty, he says, and follows Othello only to serve his own “peculiar end.” Iago boasts of his treacherousness, summarizing his duplicity with the line, “I am not what I am” (1.1.41-65). If Roderigo were a little smarter, he might take this assertion as a warning, a sign that Iago is not to be trusted. To the audience the statement is decidedly unsettling. It is one thing for a man to claim he is not what he *seems*; it is another thing entirely for him to claim he is not what he *is*. The paradoxical character of the line exerts a certain philosophical pressure on us. The significance of “I am not what I am,” like “To be or not to be,” seems to extend beyond its particular context. It seems to be about something more than just the duplicity of this one character. In this essay I am going to argue that we can read Iago’s “I am not what I am” as a succinct Shakespearean account of human nature. Further, I am going to suggest that this Shakespearean account of our nature anticipates the account of human nature we find in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*.

In *Leviathan*, at the very beginning of his discussion of the Commonwealth, Hobbes claims that the “final cause, end, or design” of humankind is the creation of the social contract, thereby escaping the state of nature, which he characterizes as

MOORE: “GOATS AND MONKEYS!”: SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

that miserable condition of war which is necessarily consequent [...] to the *natural* passions of men, when there is no visible power to keep them in awe and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants and observation of those laws of *nature* set down in the [previous] chapters.¹

Here Hobbes argues that our *natural* passions incline us towards liberty, power, and consequently “that miserable condition of war.” He goes on to say that it is only through the creation of a sovereign whose authority is enforced that we can make human beings obey the *laws of nature* and create an ordered society. Strangely then, it is our natural passions that cause us to disobey the laws of nature. And so we might say, according to Hobbes, that human nature causes us to do unnatural things. As if recognizing the ambiguity of this position, Hobbes restates it immediately in a slightly condensed form:

For the laws of nature (as *justice, equity, modesty, mercy*, and in sum, *doing to others as we would be done to*) of themselves, without the terror of some power to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like.²

On one level this argument does not seem particularly revolutionary. Certainly a vision of human nature “divided against itself” is common enough in the early modern period.³ Built into the Postlapsarian logic of Christianity is a conception that our rational part is perpetually at war with our passionate part. But this is not Hobbes’ argument. In

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. A. P. Martinich (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002), 125. Emphasis added.

² *Ibid.*

³ Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 12-13.

MOORE: “GOATS AND MONKEYS!”: SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

Leviathan Hobbes actually collapses the binary division between passion and reason:

“For the thoughts are to the desires as scouts and spies to range abroad and find the way to the things desired.”⁴ In Hobbes’ account there is no tension between reason and passion. Reason is something like Appetite’s sidekick: both of them involved in the same enterprise – survival and felicity – fighting against the same enemies – death and pain.

What Hobbes seems to be saying, then, is not what Aristotle or Aquinas might say – that our soul is constantly at war with itself; rather what Hobbes describes in *Leviathan* is how precisely a human can become a wholly different kind of being dependent on context. He is trying to track not just an attitudinal shift – a change in habit – but a quasi-ontological transformation from one kind of being into another. For Hobbes we have the capacity to be something other than what we are by nature.⁵ Iago’s “I am not what I am,” understood in the context of *Othello*’s dramatization of one man’s slip from civility to savagery, gestures towards this Hobbesian position: our human capacity to be not what we are.

This capacity to act against our nature is at the very core of Hobbes’ political philosophy. For Hobbes, humans, prior to the formation of political community, are violent, selfish, greedy, jealous, and predatory. But according to Hobbes we are also able to escape this state of nature. Through politics we are able to leave behind our natural state and become another kind of being: a civil, cooperative, much nicer being. We achieve this state when we adhere to the laws of nature and thus, confusingly, this state

⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 57.

⁵ Quentin Skinner describes this in a similar fashion, claiming that Hobbes draws a distinction “between two different worlds that we simultaneously inhabit, one of which is described as the world of nature and the other as the world of artifice.” *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 126.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

also seems to be, in some sense, a natural state. Our "fear of death" and our "desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living" incline us to peace and so our "reason suggesteth convenient articles of peace upon which men may be drawn to agreement."⁶

As I will demonstrate in this essay our human capacity to oscillate between different ontological states is one of the central preoccupations of *King Lear* and *Othello*. In each play Shakespeare dismantles what he considers erroneous accounts of human nature, both traditional and emergent, in order to advance an account of our nature this is premised on human liberty, which the playwright depicts as a capacity to act against nature. *King Lear* and *Othello* illustrate how the absence of political restraints allows characters to slip from a civilized state, what we might call 'the state of natural law,' into an environment defined by fear, violent competition, and jealousy, a state much like Hobbes' imagined state of nature. The plays therefore demonstrate the precariousness of the received 'natural' order, particularly the ease with which it can be dissolved; simultaneously they grope towards a new, more stable foundation for political community.

Before proceeding it is probably necessary to explain what virtue there is in reading Shakespeare through a Hobbesian lens. My contention is that by demonstrating how Shakespeare explores *dramatically* the same political dynamics that Hobbes would later analyze *philosophically* we gain a clearer understanding of Shakespeare's account of human nature and his particular understanding of early modern statehood. Perhaps more importantly, by drawing connections between Shakespeare and Hobbes we can better

⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 97.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

understand the cultural climate that preceded Hobbes, the intellectual background that makes his philosophy possible. While Robin Headlam Wells urges us to "be wary of attributing to [Shakespeare] political theories that were not to emerge for another half a century,"⁷ I am suggesting that we can see in Shakespearean drama the ideological groundwork which necessarily preceded the development of important philosophical concepts like the social contract. In this sense I am adapting a strategy employed by Valerie Traub whose exploration of cartographic and anatomical imagery in *King Lear* allowed her "to chart a genealogy of some of our culture's key concepts."⁸ In this essay I am trying to situate Shakespeare within the western tradition of social contract theory. After examining two of playwright's major tragedies it will become clear that Shakespeare, like many of his contemporaries, was interrogating the very foundations of early modern political community, and that interrogation was premised on a revolutionary account of human nature.⁹

That Shakespeare was a serious political thinker has been widely acknowledged.¹⁰ Various critics have also focused on the playwright's engagement with particular political

⁷ Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Politics* (London: Continuum, 2009), 17.

⁸ Valerie Traub, "The Nature of Norms in Early Modern England: Anatomy, Cartography, *King Lear*," *South Central Review* 26, nos. 1 & 2 (2009): 45.

⁹ For contemporary debates about the nature of nature in early modern England see John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949); Peter R. Moore, "The Nature of 'King Lear'." *English Studies* 87, no. 2 (2006): 169-90; Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Politics* (London: Continuum, 2009).

¹⁰ See Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Political Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1988); John Alvis and Thomas G. West, eds. *Shakespeare as Political Thinker* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1981); Alan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa, eds. *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1964); Derek Cohen, *The Politics of Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

philosophers.¹¹ However, research into the Hobbesian character of Shakespeare's political thought is sparse. Sustained analyses such as Eric Heinze's essay, which claims that Shakespeare's first tetralogy is an essentially Hobbesian exploration of the relationship between brute force and the rule of law, are atypical. Even the recent volume of essays, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, which adapts the frontispiece of *Leviathan* for its cover, turns out to be a tease. The collection of 13 essays features only three references to Hobbes – two passing, one parenthetical. Those studies that do explore the intellectual kinship between Shakespeare and Hobbes are older and tend to focus on *King Lear*. For example, William R. Elton periodically referenced Hobbes throughout his study, *King Lear and the Gods*, and James Black once argued that Nahum Tate's famed adaptation of *King Lear* was written with Hobbes in mind.¹² Similarly, the most thorough exploration of Shakespeare's Hobbesian representations is *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear*, written in 1949 by John F. Danby. Danby argues that through its depiction of Edmond, Regan and Goneril, *King Lear* examines the Hobbesian account of human nature, which is contrasted with the more orthodox Christian humanist account in the play represented by Lear, Gloucester, Edgar, and Cordelia:

We have maintained that Hobbes is Edmund's philosopher. Hobbes's world of the 1640's is only different from the world of the 1600's in being

¹¹ See Barbara L. Parker, *Plato's Republic and Shakespeare's Rome* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004); John Roe, *Shakespeare and Machiavelli* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002).

¹² According to Black, however, though Tate intended to bring what he saw as the play's Hobbesian elements to light, it does not seem that Tate understood Hobbes particularly well. "The Influence of Hobbes on Nahum Tate's *King Lear*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 7, no. 3 (1967): 379.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

a slightly more developed form of the same thing... Hobbes took over
Edmund and made him his basic pattern.¹³

Several recent critical studies have echoed elements of Danby's argument, and I will likewise be building upon it here.¹⁴ Over the course of this essay I intend to demonstrate not only that Shakespeare's intellectual affinity with Hobbes extends beyond *King Lear*, but also that Shakespeare's representations of human nature and political community anticipate Hobbes' philosophy, particularly this peculiar notion of our ontological flexibility and its political consequences.

The Nature Problem

What is the nature of nature's power with respect to humans? That is the question that *King Lear* insists on asking us over and over again, as we watch Edmond betray the father who loved him, and Cordelia risk all for the father who banished her. In what sense does nature govern human conduct? Or, as Lear asks in the Folio after being cast out in the storm: "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (3.6.32-3). Finding a satisfactory answer to these questions proves nearly as difficult for the audience as it does for Lear, especially because nature is, as Jacob Klein says, "multidimensional."¹⁵

First, in both the world and the play, there is widespread disagreement about which behaviours, attitudes, relationships, and institutions we can call natural. Second, it is unclear, even after we have identified the natural things, in what sense we are compelled to love, obey, pursue, foster, or respect those things. Monogamy is a good

¹³ Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, 46-7.

¹⁴ See Traub "The Nature of Norms in Early Modern England," 45, and Moore, "*The Nature of 'King Lear'*," 170.

¹⁵ Jacob Klein, "On the Nature of Nature," *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1979): 108.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

example. An exclusive sexual partnership between two people might be described variously as natural and unnatural. Those who believe monogamy is a mutually beneficial and therefore rational relationship, the very foundation of family and community, are inclined to think of sexual exclusivity as natural. Those who disagree consider monogamy merely a customary arrangement, often oppressive and contrary to humanity's natural impulses – particularly the male's desire to procreate as often as possible with as many partners as possible. Thus both proponents and opponents of monogamy can invoke nature to defend their positions. The reason for this is that each constituency is relying on a different definition of nature to make its case. The contest between these two definitions of nature, a source of both interest and anxiety in the early modern period, is among the major preoccupations of *King Lear*.

For instance, I have not chosen this monogamy example arbitrarily. I mention it here because it is the example Shakespeare uses at the beginning of the play. Before the King has split his kingdom in two, before Kent and Cordelia have been banished, before Lear has even entered the room, we are introduced to the product of a monogamy crisis named Edmond. As Gloucester tells Kent, in excruciating detail, how Edmond "came something saucily into the world before he was sent for" he explains that he has another son "by order of law, some year elder than this" (1.1.17-21). When we consider too Edgar's pitiless pronouncement on the justice of his father's suffering near the end of the play, "The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes" (5.3.162-3), it seems clear that Edmond is not just a child born out of wedlock, but more specifically the product of adultery. Edmond's bastardy thus signals the play's preoccupation with competing definitions of nature. We are prompted to consider whether Edmond is a

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

product of Gloucester's natural impulses or his unnatural impulses? Edmond is among the very first characters we meet because he is a figuration of a debate about human nature with which the play is particularly concerned, the same debate that raged throughout the early modern period as traditional notions of a divinely ordered universe were threatened by the empirical observations of the new science.

Nature, in its traditional sense, was "a rational arrangement" and "an ideal pattern" set down by God.¹⁶ All created things were called to conform to this pattern, and humans in particular rejected conformity at their peril. The laws of nature were discernible by reason, and they provided the foundations for human law and government. When characters such as Lear and Gloucester talk about nature, this is the nature they are talking about: a divine rule that applies uniformly to "physics, meteorology, botany, zoology, sociology, and ethics."¹⁷ This is the nature of the Great Chain of Being, the chain that "stretched from the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects,"¹⁸ a network of "interlocking hierarchies"¹⁹ that dictated humanity's place in the cosmos, as well as each human's standing relative to every other human.

In *King Lear* this traditional sense of nature is contested by an emergent, atheistic understanding of nature. In this alternative account humans are motivated by instinctual drives to survive, copulate, and dominate. This is the account of nature championed by Edmond, Goneril, and Regan. It is the nature of the state of nature, and it challenges the

¹⁶ Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, 23-4.

¹⁷ Moore, "The Nature of *King Lear*," 169.

¹⁸ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1958), 23.

¹⁹ Georgia Brown, "Defining Nature through Monstrosity in *Othello* and *Macbeth*," *Early Modern Ecocriticism*, ed. Thomas Hallock, Ivo Kamps, and Karen L. Raber (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 70.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

claims to inevitability made by certain human institutions. Humans in this account are no different than weather phenomena or trees, more complicated perhaps, but not categorically different. This is "[t]he idea of nature as a self-running machine, set going by an absentee deity, capable of being measured and investigated – the nature, in other words, of science."²⁰ It is an empirical account of our nature based on observation of the human animal. And importantly, in this account, nature is not the law's foundation, but rather its object. The purpose of law is to restrain our natural impulses, which are necessarily contrary to the orderly functioning of peaceful society.²¹

King Lear juggles both of these accounts. The result is a murky, muddled depiction of human nature, one that has prompted Traub to conclude that "because nature in *King Lear* paradoxically is a reflection of the divinely sanctioned hierarchical, patriarchal social order; and an instinctual repulsion from it, it is impossible to settle on its ultimate meaning."²² I am not quite so pessimistic, though I agree that the play's representation of nature is exceptionally complex. Achieving clarity is particularly difficult because in addition to these two competing definitions of nature the play also calls into question the scope of nature's authority – the nature of nature's power with respect to humans. Shakespeare is not only interested in these differing accounts, but also

²⁰ Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, 36

²¹ William R. Elton describes an earlier and related version of this argument that took place between philosophers and theologians in the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth. The earlier question was about whether human affairs were governed by God's providence or by an indifferent and amoral force like fortune (9-33). Elton even identifies the second camp with Hobbes (29). *"King Lear" and the Gods*, (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1966).

²² Traub, "Nature of Norms," 62. Speaking more generally, Georgia Brown argues similarly that "the natural and the unnatural, ultimately escape definition and complete articulation" in early modern England (56).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

in the problematic status of the *unnatural*, the category with which any account of nature must come to terms.

On some level, nature must be non-negotiable. That is what defines nature as a concept, and what differentiates it from custom, tradition, inclination, and statistical probability. But how then do we account for those instances where nature's authority lapses? This is the question Lear confronts throughout the play: first he is desperate to understand "the cause" of his elder daughters' "hard hearts," and later, once he is convinced of the essentially self-centred nature of humanity, he cannot understand how Cordelia, who does have "some cause" to hate her father, is able to forgive him (4.6.68). However, by grappling with the existence of the unnatural Shakespeare is able to articulate a coherent, if complex, account of our nature.

Within the traditional Christian humanist paradigm, unnatural human behaviour was understood to be a consequence of our Postlapsarian condition. Proponents of the Great Chain of Being acknowledged "the unique capacity of human beings to sink below type" and descend to the level of animals.²³ Consequent to the fall, human beings were thought to be plagued by contradictory impulses towards the divine and the bodily, the intellectual and the sensual. This argument was rooted in a conception of the tri-partite

²³ Bruce Boehrer, *Shakespeare Among the Animals: Nature and Society in the Drama of Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 27-8. According to Boehrer this is one of three conventional theories about the relationship between humans and animals operating in the early modern period. Other theories drew clearer distinctions between people and beasts. Boehrer also makes it clear, however, that these three theories coexisted (if somewhat uncomfortably) and were deployed variously depending on circumstances. Erica Fudge has thoughtfully outlined numerous instances of animal behaviour that troubled these categorical distinctions. She recounts early modern debates about a dog's ability to use syllogisms, for example (101-4).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

Aristotelian soul.²⁴ The fundamental problem that Shakespeare perceives in this account is that the 'unnatural' is, in fact, quite typical, perhaps even more common than the natural. On some level nature is supposed to be non-negotiable, but the Great Chain of Being proves frighteningly easy to break. For instance, in *King Lear*, and *Othello* too, this traditional account of nature is threatened, as the received natural order, supposedly buttressed by God and the universe, is dismantled as easily as a young girl says 'no' to her father. Shakespeare thus exposes the folly of trying to base a political community on such a fragile foundation.

In place of this account another emerges, one that incorporates the empirical reality of human selfishness and cruelty.²⁵ This emergent account anticipates Hobbes insofar as it acknowledges that "neither the rational content of the law of nature as a way to peace nor the belief in it as the command of God suffices to establish its status and obligatory force as actual law."²⁶ In *King Lear* Edmond is the prime example of a character who subscribes to the idea that we are no different from animals, that we prioritize self-preservation and bodily satisfaction over all else, and are essentially governed by instinctual processes beyond our control. Edmond has made a "goddess" of this emergent nature (1.2.1). Consequently, he is completely self-interested. Morality and religion have no hold over him. However, though Shakespeare clearly supplies Edmond

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1102a 5-1103a 10.

²⁵ It is important to reiterate that there is no contest in this account between our rational state and our passionate state. The dualism that the Greeks and Christians saw in our nature does not exist in Hobbes because the tripartite soul is collapsed in his account. Humans are as rational in the state of nature as they are in the state of natural law; it is simply that the wildly different contexts change the standard of rational behaviour.

²⁶ Zagorin, Perez, *Hobbes and the Law of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 52.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

with several intelligent arguments, he remains a villain – a traitor, a usurper, and an unfaithful lover – and so we cannot align Shakespeare completely with Gloucester’s bastard son. Shakespeare will not go so far as to argue that we are governed by “[m]echanical necessity.”²⁷ He perceives in human beings a capacity to resist their instinctual natures, just as he recognized the capacity to deviate from the divinely ordained natural order. Edmond’s deathbed declaration, “Some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature,” illustrates this awareness (5.3.271-18). Shakespeare recognizes in our innate desire for security and felicity the simultaneous presence of communal and anti-social drives, and so anticipates the tension in Hobbes’ *Leviathan* between our natural passions and natural law. What we are left with in *King Lear* is a depiction of human nature that emphasizes our innate liberty, our ability to both deny the natural order and resist our natural instincts, our capacity to be something other than what we are by nature.

The clearest indication of this Shakespearean account comes as Lear stands on the threshold between the political world and the wilderness. Decrying what he calls the ‘unnatural’ behavior of his daughters and refusing to give up his one hundred knights, the king gives us an account of our nature premised on our essential liberty. In response to Goneril and Regan’s demand that he justify his need for such a large retinue, the king argues that to request such a justification is to fundamentally misunderstand what it means to be human:

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.

²⁷ Danby, *Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature*, 25.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady.
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou, gorgeous, wear'st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm.

(2.2.430-6)

Here Lear claims that unlike other natural beings, we are not governed entirely by necessity. If we were, our clothes would be totally functional, not beautiful.²⁸ The human tendency to wear unnecessary things – diamond rings, bowties, polka dots – marks the difference between humans and animals. As Cantor writes,

If human beings actually behaved according to a strict standard of necessity, they would choose their clothing solely on the basis of utility, wearing simpler garments that would fulfill better the basic function of shielding the human body from the hostile elements.²⁹

Hobbes makes a related point about the origins of political community. For Hobbes the state is based on covenant. Covenants are the means by which we transcend our natural state and they are a uniquely human invention. According to Hobbes to "make covenants with brute beasts is impossible" as is making a covenant with God, except by "revelation supernatural."³⁰ Moreover, Hobbes also claims that while "certain living creatures, as bees and ants, live sociably one with another," these animal communities do not have the

²⁸ Danby discusses this speech at some length, though I believe he misinterprets it as an indictment of Goneril's opulent attire (29-31).

²⁹ Paul A. Cantor, "The Cause of Thunder: Nature and Justice in *King Lear*," *King Lear*: *New Critical Essays*, ed. Jeffrey Kahan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 247.

³⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 104.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

same character as human communities precisely because "the agreement of these creatures is natural." The implication here being that humans can become something other than what they are by nature; they "strive to reform and innovate" in a way that beasts cannot.³¹

What Lear reveals with his clothing example (somewhat unwittingly) is that we have a kind of liberty that is atypical amongst living beings. The thing that differentiates humans from other types of beings is that nature does not have authoritarian control over us. We have a kind of essential liberty from necessity that makes us unique. This liberty allows Edmond to betray his father and Kent to risk his life for the master who banished him. We have a capacity to be something other than what we are by nature, and this capacity, as Shakespeare will illustrate, has profound political consequences. Our innate liberty allows us to create political community out of chaos and to dismantle political community with relative regularity. According to Camille Wells Slight, a new conception of individual identity emerged in the sixteenth century, which supplanted the "older political concept, in which social communities were taken as givens, with a new concept of political atomism, in which the basic social unit is the individual, whose membership in community must be created."³² This conception of political community as a manufactured thing (as opposed to a divinely ordained thing), a system produced collectively by a mass of autonomous individuals, is clearly on display in *King Lear*.

³¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 127-8.

³² Camille Wells Slight, "Slaves and Subjects in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1997): 378.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

Towards a Secular Political Science in *King Lear*

In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes contends that we are born as a species with rights limited only by our capacities. Our foremost right is the right to preserve our lives insofar as we are able, using whatever means are at our disposal. It follows then that we have a right to seize or secure anything that we believe will be conducive to our own preservation and our good. Thus, humanity's primal condition is one in which "every man has a right to every thing, even to one another's body."³³ As a consequence of this radical individual liberty we are all understandably endangered by our fellow humans' pursuit of security and felicity. Our situation is especially precarious because of the general equality that Hobbes sees between all people. As far as humans go, he claims, "the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself."³⁴ Since we are all imperiled by the liberty of our fellow human beings, the logical move is to enter into a contract with them, agreeing not to do to them what one would not have done to himself or herself – "to seek peace and follow it."³⁵ After that, we need to establish something that can guarantee our mutual adherence to this agreement, a sovereign power that will ensure everyone's good behaviour. This is the social contract, and it guarantees the conditions most conducive to safety and contentment; within it human beings are able to pursue the objects of their desire free (or relatively free) of the fear of violent death.

The great concern for Hobbes, of course, is that at any moment we can slip back into a pre-political state, the state of nature, in which our anti-social impulses are given

³³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 98.

³⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 93.

³⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 99.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

free reign as our self-centred drive for security and felicity pits us against our fellow human beings. Such a slip can occur whenever there is a crisis in the sovereignty of the state, such as during a civil war or any other period of political upheaval, something like the succession crisis with which *King Lear* begins.

Importantly, Lear's false confidence in his succession plan, like his false confidence in the outcome of his love game, is based on a rigid and decidedly un-Hobbesian understanding of the relationship between human nature and political community. He is confident that "the political order is rooted in the natural, that nature supports human justice and in particular his own decrees as king."³⁶ Specifically, his political strategy is premised on the notion that his daughters are *naturally* obedient to him. Lear believes his daughters' devotion is akin to the rising and setting of the sun: it is a law of nature that his children are compelled to obey. This understanding of the nature of fidelity leads him to believe he can somehow "retain / The name and all th' addition to a king" while simultaneously handing all responsibility over to his children and their husbands (1.1.133-4). Lear has a naïve faith in the permanence and immutability of what he considers natural: namely monarchical institutions, Judeo-Christian values, and the patriarchal family.³⁷ The rest of the play is essentially a prolonged demonstration of how wrong Lear actually is.

³⁶ Paul A. Cantor, "The Cause of Thunder," 231.

³⁷ In a useful essay on service and slavery in *Othello* Michael Neill suggests that any form of disobedience to an established authority was understood as an instance in a great pattern of rebellion and betrayal typified most notably by Lucifer and Judas. "His master's ass': Slavery, Service and Subordination in *Othello*," *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*, eds. Tom Clayton, Susan Brock and Vincente Forés, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 223.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

After Lear angrily divides his country in half at the end of the first scene, Hobbes could have easily predicted what comes next. In *Leviathan* he warns that a division of sovereignty "must needs divide that power which (if men will live in peace) is indivisible, and thereby reduce the multitude into the condition of war, contrary to the end for which all sovereignty is instituted."³⁸ The play progresses as a kind of Hobbesian nightmare as the sovereignty crisis created by Lear's abdication thrusts the kingdom into a war "of every man against every man."³⁹ Children betray their fathers. Brothers turn on brothers, and sisters murder sisters.⁴⁰ Confronted by the empirical reality of overwhelming human cruelty, Lear is forced to abandon his prior understanding of what natural human conduct is. When he meets Poor Tom in the storm, he adopts a new position, claiming that, "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.95-6). However, Lear is mistaken yet again. In his new account we are nothing more than nature's slaves. While he has adjusted his definition of nature to accord with empirical evidence, he still ascribes to nature more authority than Shakespeare seems to believe it has.

One of the major questions the play considers is whether or not there is a natural juridical form, whether or not nature's jurisdiction extends to the political realm. When Edmond wonders aloud why being "some twelve or fourteen moonshines / Lag of a brother" (1.2.5-6) should make him deficient in the eyes of the state, he levels a powerful criticism against the custom-based world of Lear's kingdom. Modern audiences are

³⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 140.

³⁹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 95.

⁴⁰ Danby argues that having two wicked daughters is necessary to illustrate the imperatives of fear and competition, which are essential features of the Hobbesian account (39-42).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

especially receptive to his argument because we have been conditioned to believe in the innate wrongness of discrimination on biological grounds. Edmond's early arguments, supported by the absurdity of the succession crisis in the first scene – a necessary product of a patrilineal monarchy – undermine the monarchical world order that Lear cherishes. However, the state that replaces the old world order, the state that Edmond helps bring about, is obviously horrible: "In the absence of any notion of justice and law, society becomes bestial and self-destructive and thus no longer *human* society at all."⁴¹ As Hobbes says of the state of nature, "The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place."⁴² Thus with the abolition of convention on the grounds that it is somehow unnatural, a new state of being is revealed that is far more inhuman, necessitating a return through violence to a state of being more like that at the play's beginning.⁴³ The play therefore rejects both a rigidly hierarchical account of human nature and a strictly bestial account. Essentially the play is groping for a new foundation for political community, one that is more stable than the traditional conceptions of naturalized monarchy and patriarchy with which the play opens. By revealing first the illusory quality of traditional accounts of nature, and then the horrifying character of humanity's apolitical condition, Shakespeare argues that, yes, political community is desirable, but it is only stable if based on an account of our nature that recognizes our essential liberty from natural necessity.

What Shakespeare demonstrates in *King Lear* is that the state of nature and its opposite, the state of natural law, exist in a dynamic relationship to each other. The

⁴¹ Cantor "The Cause of Thunder," 234.

⁴² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 97.

⁴³ Cantor describes this as a transition from convention to nature and back to convention (244-6).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

qualities associated with the state of natural law – justice, mercy, charity, and kindness – the qualities Lear and Gloucester prize so highly are, in fact, desirable, but they are also conditional. We always have the capacity to deny natural law just as we have the capacity to resist our natural passions, to become something other than what we are by nature. Shakespeare further contends that the shape and structure of political community is not imposed on us by divine or universal edict, by God or the Great Chain of Being. Rather, politics is presented here as something that must be decided upon and maintained.⁴⁴

Following this Hobbesian reading, it seems significant that in the opening scene, Cordelia, the most admirable character in the play, articulates her love for her father as a kind of contract: "You have begot me, bred me, loved me. / I return those duties back as are right fit – / Obey you, love you, and most honour you" (1.1.94-6). The affectionate relationship between father and daughter, much like that between king and subject, is here represented not as inevitable but as an act of will. Cordelia acknowledges that her life and love are made possible by Lear's care for her; the relationship is thus defined as reciprocal. It is worth noting too that Cordelia takes issue with her sisters' speeches precisely because their hyperbolic rhetoric violates the contracts they have made with their husbands: "Why have my sisters husbands if / They say they love you all?" (1.1.97-8). For Cordelia the tenor of her sisters' proclamations reveals only how careless Goneril and Regan are with covenants.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Nor is the depiction in *King Lear* unique; Headlam Wells argues that the "social world" of Shakespearean drama is always "a fragile order where anarchy is an ever-present possibility," 4.

⁴⁵ The play also begins with a broken contract, insofar as it begins with an account of Gloucester's adultery.

MOORE: “GOATS AND MONKEYS!”: SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

In her work *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*, Erica Fudge reminds us that reason, the defining characteristic of human beings according to most early moderns, is not something with which people are born. Rather, reason is an *acquired* trait. In her words “reason cannot be displayed until something that is not natural but cultural has taken place.”⁴⁶ This is a position that Hobbes holds as well: “By this it appears that reason is not, as sense and memory, born with us, nor gotten by experience only, as prudence is, but attained by industry[.]”⁴⁷ In *King Lear*, Shakespeare makes a similar case for the conditional quality of civilized human behaviour. As a species we do not obey the laws of nature until something cultural has taken place: until we are secured by the state. Without that security we become something else; we enter into the state of nature, which seems paradoxically *inhuman*. Therefore, though A. G. Harmon asserts that “the understanding of the law’s philosophical underpinnings” in early modern England “was basically that of Thomas Aquinas,”⁴⁸ we can perceive in Shakespeare a shift towards another grounding for political community, one that is based on our essential human liberty and the rational need to restrain that liberty for the good of all concerned.

Contractual Humanity in *Othello*

Othello is a play about contracts. At its center is the marriage contract between Othello and Desdemona, an agreement that is threatened by indignant fathers, would-be adulterers, and sociopathic ensigns. The play’s emphasis on contract is displayed near its

⁴⁶ Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning*, 42.

⁴⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 37.

⁴⁸ A. G. Harmon, *Eternal Bonds, True Contracts: Law and Nature in Shakespeare’s Problem Plays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 4.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

beginning. As Desdemona breaks the news of her elopement to her father, she sounds remarkably like Cordelia contractually professing her love for Lear:

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you: you are the lord of duty,
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband;
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.

(1.3.179-88)

What Cordelia speaks of hypothetically – dividing her loyalties between father and husband – has become a reality for Desdemona. Informed by what Mark Matheson calls the “liberal institutions” of republican Venice, Desdemona articulates her status as Brabantio’s daughter as “a relationship of power in which the daughter is the father’s possession as guaranteed by a specific set of cultural arrangements.”⁴⁹ Like Cordelia, Desdemona understands her relationship to her father as something deliberate, not something inevitable. Interestingly, like Lear, Brabantio views his daughter’s disobedience as a deviation from nature; only what Lear calls ‘unnatural’, Brabantio calls

⁴⁹ Mark Matheson, “Venetian Culture and the Politics of *Othello*,” *Shakespeare and Politics*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 172-3.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

'supernatural', claiming his daughter has been seduced "By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks" (1.3.62).

In this way *Othello*, like *King Lear*, begins its examination of "the parameters of the human."⁵⁰ Both plays begin with a father asserting that naturalness of the Christian humanist paradigm. Here Brabantio insists on patriarchal authority and racial hierarchies, but his arguments come off as impotent bluster. As Hobbes says, "Ignorance of the causes and original constitution of right, equity, law, and justice disposeth a man to make custom and example the rule of his actions[.]"⁵¹ And as in *King Lear* a traditional account of human nature is challenged by an atheistic, animalistic account of our nature. In *Othello* it is Iago who consistently claims that humans (especially women and Moors) are no different from animals driven primarily by instinct. Trying to incense Brabantio against the Moor, Iago memorably cries out, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88-9). Iago consistently refers to Desdemona's feminine 'nature' as the thing that will lead her to stray from her husband. He tantalizes Roderigo with fantasies of Desdemona's sexual liberality: "She must change for youth: when she is sated with his body she will find the errors of her choice. She must have change, she must" (1.3.343-5). One of the most memorable images in the play comes in the seduction scene when Othello demands Iago show him proof that his wife is a whore, and Iago responds, "It is impossible you should see this, / Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross / As ignorance made drunk" (3.3.404-7). In other words, even if Cassio and Desdemona were as sexually uninhibited as animals, Othello still would not catch them in the act. The image of

⁵⁰ Brown, "Defining Nature through Monstrosity in *Othello* and *Macbeth*," 60.

⁵¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 79.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

Desdemona and Cassio rutting like beasts clearly sticks with Othello, as later in the play when he is informed that Cassio will take his place in command of Cyprus "Goats and monkeys!" becomes the Moor's exclamatory epithet (4.1.255).⁵²

Brabantio characterizes the match between Othello and Desdemona as "Against all rules of nature" (1.3.102), and is shocked both by his daughter's willfulness and her atypical romantic preferences. Later in the play Iago tells Roderigo that once Desdemona's "blood is made dull with the act of sport" then "very nature will instruct her" to exchange Othello for another (2.1.221-9). For Brabantio, then, Desdemona's true nature is obedient and chaste, while for Iago it is deceitful and lascivious. However, these opposing theories of nature are challenged not just by each other, but also by the atypical match between Othello and Desdemona, which cannot be explained by either Brabantio's or Iago's position. Their love illustrates the problem of interpreting humans too rigidly as slaves to the natural order, however one conceives of that order. Othello is noble and capable, able to do much more than simply tell stories for Brabantio's entertainment. Desdemona is chaste and faithful. Despite Iago's slanders, and Emilia's morally ambiguous counsel, Desdemona is virtuous; her behaviour is consistently beyond reproach. Thus what Desdemona's relationship with Othello reveals is the key facet of the Shakespearean account of human nature: our ability to transcend the limits that nature supposedly sets for us.

Othello is a play that focuses especially on the precariousness of civilized human conduct; it places special emphasis on the tenuous hold both Desdemona and Othello

⁵² See Boehrer for a discussion on the animal imagery attached to cuckolds in the period (71-98).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

have on human status given the prejudicial context in which they live.⁵³ Fudge tells us that in the early modern period "[t]he being called human, by failing to use its rational part, risks losing its humanity. Such failures are almost always figured as a descent to the level of the animal."⁵⁴ For Shakespeare, however, as for Hobbes, it is politics not reason that secures our civilized humanity.⁵⁵ For Shakespeare civilization is not inevitable but rather contractual. It is the social contract that prevents us from becoming violent and brutish. The reason that the perceived dissolution of the marriage contract in *Othello* causes so much carnage is that contract both symbolically and actually secures Othello's place in human community.⁵⁶ Othello's vow to love Desdemona until doomsday, "when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (3.3.91-2), is suggestive of this dynamic. Othello's human status is something fragile, and conditional, dependent on the contract he has made with Desdemona and the Venetian social contract that secures his position in the community.

Something that is not often emphasized in discussions of *Othello* is that Desdemona and Othello are both victims of false accusations. Othello accuses Desdemona of infidelity, and Brabantio accuses Othello of stealing Desdemona (1.3.61). What I want to suggest is that the reason things turn out differently for Othello than they do for Desdemona is that Othello is protected by the institutions of Venice and

⁵³ See Neill for a discussion of how Othello is "insecurely fitted to the received hierarchies by which Shakespeare's Venetians order their world" (219).

⁵⁴ Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning*, 35.

⁵⁵ Consider that Iago and Edmond are arguably both the most rational and the most savage characters in *Othello* and *King Lear* respectively.

⁵⁶ Harmon examines in some detail the positive version of this representation – familiar to any student of Shakespeare – that the marriage contract regularly symbolizes the social contract; its solemnization at the end of Shakespeare's comedies serves to reify the community's legal infrastructure (8-23).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

Desdemona is not. In Venice, Othello is given a hearing. Witnesses are called. The state intervenes in a conflict between its citizens. By contrast, in Cyprus, there are fewer legal and political mechanisms to protect Desdemona.

Like *King Lear* then, *Othello* examines the consequences of our transition from the political world, represented here by Venice, to the pre-political world, represented by Cyprus. As Othello and Desdemona leave Venetian civilization for militarized Cyprus, sailing across the sea and through a storm, we move from a community governed by the rule of law and rational debate to a border territory marked by passion, jealousy, and violence. Cyprus had much different associations than did Venice in early modern England. While, for Shakespeare, Venice was the seat of republicanism and trade, Cyprus was a hotspot for feuding between Christian Europeans and the Turk, a war zone of some repute and an outpost, situated at the threshold between east and west.

This reading is supported by a significant image early in the play. When Roderigo and Iago first awake Brabantio by announcing that he has been robbed, Brabantio initially rejects these claims as nonsensical: "What tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice: / My house is not a grange" (1.1.105-6). Brabantio asserts that his house is safe from invaders because it is *located within* the city. His house's situation in Venice is significantly contrasted to that of a "grange," a country house, an isolated (and therefore more vulnerable) living space positioned at a distance from the rest of civilization – as Cyprus is situated at a distance from western centres of power.

As in *Lear*, as characters move from the political world into the state of nature, we witness a transformation into a different state of being. Othello is the prime example. Consider the changes we see in Othello once the political context is altered. In Venice,

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

Othello is exceptionally dignified. The ease with which Iago poisons his mind in Cyprus is all the more amazing when we consider how calm and restrained Othello is when confronted by an angry mob on the streets of Venice. There he does not threaten or boast, or vow revenge before "yon marble heaven" (3.3.460). He does not call for blood, despite the vitriol and slanderous innuendo that is deployed against him. Instead he volunteers to be taken before the authorities: "Whither will you that I go / To answer this your charge?" (1.2.84-5). It is in Cyprus that Iago is able to work his magic. It is in that context that Othello can be turned into a savage.

In the Shakespearean account, humans have the capacity to oscillate between two different states of being. Othello's transformation from loving husband and respected general into a savage murderer is a clear representation of the slip from civilized to brutish. This slip is facilitated primarily by Iago who convinces Othello of a particular account of human (especially female) nature. The transition from Venice to Cyprus is partially a symbolic one. However, this change in context also plays a substantive role in the plot. When Othello strikes Desdemona in Act 4, Lodovico responds, "My lord, this would not be believed in Venice, / Though I should swear I saw't" (4.1.233-4), suggesting a real difference between the way people behave in the republican city-state and the way they behave in the military outpost. Though Lodovico pleads with Othello to make amends with Desdemona, he does not restrain Othello's wrath as the Venetian senate restrained Brabantio's. While Fudge claims that reason is often identified in the early modern period as the criteria for human status, both Shakespeare and Hobbes emphasize a different threshold: for both, political community, not reason, is the primary border between the state of natural law and the state of nature. And so for both the

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

playwright and the philosopher, what we can call 'natural' human conduct depends largely on context.

Conclusion

The term "slave" recurs a number of times in *Othello*.⁵⁷ Othello, of course, recounts to the Venetian senators how he was "sold to slavery" (1.3.138), but the term "slave" appears most often as an insult. Once Iago has convinced the Moor that Cassio is sleeping with his wife, Othello wishes "that the slave had forty thousand lives" so that he could murder him over and over (3.3.443). Emilia speculates that "Some cogging, cozening slave" has slandered Desdemona, and Iago calls Roderigo a "murd'rous slave," just before murdering him (5.1.61).

Most of these references to slavery happen in close proximity to Iago, and in the play's final scene Iago is called a slave multiple times. Montano calls him a "damnèd slave" after he has killed Emilia (5.2.242); Lodovico calls him the same thing – "damnèd slave" – as he laments Othello's downfall (5.2.290). As Othello mourns for his wife and cries out "O cursèd, cursèd slave!" (5.2.275), he might be talking about Iago or about himself. There is no ambiguity, however, about the play's final invocation of the term as Iago is taken away to be tortured: "For this slave, / If there be any cunning cruelty / That can torment him much and hold him long, / It shall be his" (5.2.331-4).

In early modern England slavery had specific connotations. It "bore little or no relation to discourses of 'racial' difference in early modern thought," instead it was used rather literally to mark the difference "between master and servant, or between bond and

⁵⁷ Wells Slights, "Slaves and Subjects in *Othello*," 382-3.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

free".⁵⁸ Slavery was understood as a fate that could befall almost anyone; it was not considered the natural condition of any particular race or ethnic group. There are relatively few actual slaves in Shakespeare. Caliban, Ariel, and the Dromio brothers are exceptions. Sokol notes that the term slave most commonly appears in Shakespeare, as it does in *Othello*, as an insult, synonymous with "churl, lout, wretch, rogue, reprobate, or knave." The word typically denotes "a person degraded in behaviour or sensibility."⁵⁹ That said, Shakespeare uses the term very deliberately in *Othello*, and it is especially significant that Iago is the character most commonly referred to as a slave. The consistency of the insult reflects an attempt by the various characters in the play to explain Iago's motivations, which are notoriously hard to pin down.⁶⁰ It would be comforting to imagine that Iago is a slave to nature, like an animal, that he does what he does because his will is overcome by fear or desire, but this does not seem to be the case. The problem is that Iago is not characteristically slavish. For instance when we first meet him, he significantly says of Othello, "I follow him to serve my turn upon him" (1.1.42), and "In following him, I follow but myself" (1.1.58). Such lines are indicative of Iago's sense of his own liberty, and Iago is not mistaken. The term "slave" actually proves an inadequate label for Iago, because his villainy is premised on his terrifying autonomy, his freedom from all social and moral constraints. The monstrous thing about Iago is not that he is slavish, but that he is *free*. Consider his response during the seduction scene, when Othello demands to know Iago's thoughts: "Good my lord, pardon me: / Though I am

⁵⁸ Michael Neill, "'His master's ass'," 217.

⁵⁹ B. J. Sokol, *Shakespeare and Tolerance*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 146.

⁶⁰ See Zender, "The Humiliation of Iago," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 34, no. 2 (1994): 323-4, and Sokol, *Shakespeare and Tolerance*, 147-9.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

bound to every act of duty, / I am not bound to that all slaves are free to" (3.3.137-9).

These lines are crucial because the impenetrability of Iago's interiority (along with the impenetrability of all human interiority) is one of the play's central thematic crises.⁶¹

What Iago reveals in these lines though has great relevance to our examination of the Shakespearean account of human nature because what Iago effectively argues here is that all humans, even slaves, are fundamentally free. The frightening thing about Iago, then, is not how bestial or slavish he is, but how human he is.

There is a related moment in *King Lear* as the old king shouts at the storm and applies the "slave" label to himself: "Here I stand your slave, / A poor infirm, weak and despised old man" (3.2.18-20). Lear makes this claim after Goneril and Regan have cast him out and only shortly before his encounter with Poor Tom when he asserts that "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal" (3.4.95-6). At this point in the play Lear is convinced that humans are nothing but necessity machines, slavishly obedient to their instinctual nature. Thus he proclaims himself a slave to the storm, the play's most prominent figuration of nature. Lear's assessment of human nature is clearly mistaken in this moment for his model for natural man, Edgar, is, in fact, faking it. Edgar is not what he is, or, as he says just before assuming the guise of Poor Tom, "Edgar I nothing am" (2.2.178). Lear's assessment of our slavish, animalistic nature is thus ironic. Just as Goneril, Regan, and Edmond are free to overturn the received order of the universe, so Cordelia, Kent and Edgar are able to transcend the imperatives of the Shakespearean state of nature.

⁶¹ See Joel B. Altman, *The Improbability of "Othello"* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 9-18.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

Hobbes identifies liberty as the first right of nature and describes it as "the absence of external impediments."⁶² Both *King Lear* and *Othello* question the degree to which nature imposes limits on human beings. Both plays suggest that our natural autonomy, our essential liberty is the thing that makes us human. In early modern England there was an emergent sense that the "subject no longer locates the self as an inherent part of a meaningfully ordered cosmos." Instead "the basic social unit is the individual, whose membership in community must be created."⁶³ Shakespeare's argument is essentially that the political order needs to account for this human autonomy. In this way his plays evidence a transition from an understanding of politics as divinely ordered to one that understands human community as constructed, a movement in early modern political thought that would later be advanced dramatically by Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

⁶² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 98.

⁶³ Wells Slights, "Slaves and Subjects in *Othello*," 377-8.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

References

- Altman, Joel B. *The Improbability of "Othello"*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Alvis, John and Thomas G. West, eds. *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1981.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999.
- Armitage, David, Conal Condren, and Andrew Fitzmaurice, eds. *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Berry, Ralph. "Shakespeare's Venice." *Contemporary Review* 272, no. 1588 (1998): 252-7.
- Black, James. "The Influence of Hobbes on Nahum Tate's *King Lear*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 7, no. 3 (1967): 377-85.
- Bloom, Alan and Harry V. Jaffa, eds. *Shakespeare's Politics*. New York: Basic Books, 1964.
- Boehrer, Bruce. *Shakespeare Among the Animals: Nature and Society in the Drama of Early Modern England*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Brown, Georgia. "Defining Nature through Monstrosity in *Othello* and *Macbeth*." *Early Modern Ecostudies*. Edited by Thomas Hallock, Ivo Kamps, and Karen L. Raber. New York: Palgrave, 2008. 55-76.
- Cantor, Paul A. "The Cause of Thunder: Nature and Justice in *King Lear*." In *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, edited by Jeffrey Kahan, 231-52. New York: Routledge, 2008.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

- Cohen, Derek. *The Politics of Shakespeare*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993.
- Danby, John F. *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*. London: Faber and Faber, 1949.
- Elton, William. "*King Lear*" and the Gods. San Marino: Huntington Library, 1966.
- Fudge, Erica. *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Harmon, A. G. *Eternal Bonds, True Contracts: Law and Nature in Shakespeare's Problem Plays*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- Hadfield, Andrew. *Shakespeare and Republicanism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Headlam Wells, Robin. *Shakespeare's Politics*. London: Continuum, 2009.
- Heinze, Eric. "Power Politics and the Rule of Law: Shakespeare's First Historical Tetralogy and Law's 'Foundations'." *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 29, no. 1 (2009): 139-68.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by A. P. Martinich. Peterborough: Broadview, 2002.
- Klein, Jacob. "On the Nature of Nature." *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1979): 101-109.
- Leggatt, Alexander. *Shakespeare's Political Drama*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Matheson, Mark. "Venetian Culture and the Politics of *Othello*." *Shakespeare and Politics*. Edited by Catherine M. S. Alexander. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 169-84.
- Moore, Peter R. "The Nature of *King Lear*." *English Studies* 87, no. 2 (2006): 169-90.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

- Neill, Michael. "'His master's ass': Slavery, Service and Subordination in *Othello*." *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*. Edited by Tom Clayton, Susan Brock and Vincente Forés, 215-29. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004.
- Parker, Barbara L. *Plato's Republic and Shakespeare's Rome*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004.
- Roe, John. *Shakespeare and Machiavelli*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002.
- Shakespeare, William. "The History of King Lear." *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, et. al., 2318-2472. New York: Norton, 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. "The Tragedy of King Lear." *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, et. al., 2319-2473. New York: Norton, 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Ed. Michael Neill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.
- Skinner, Quentin. *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Print.
- Sokol, B. J. *Shakespeare and Tolerance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Tillyard, E. M. W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1958.
- Traub, Valerie. "The Nature of Norms in Early Modern England: Anatomy, Cartography, *King Lear*." *South Central Review* 26, no.1 & 2 (2009): 42-81.
- Wells Slights, Camille. "Slaves and Subjects in *Othello*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1997): 377-90.
- Zagorin, Perez. *Hobbes and the Law of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE
STATE OF NATURE

Zender, Karl F. "The Humiliation of Iago." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 34,
no. 2 (1994): 323-9.