

The Shakespeare  
Project and Ensuing  
Essays



# The Shakespeare Project and Ensuing Essays

By

Ethan Lewis

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By Ethan Lewis

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*To and For my Students*



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Finally, of course, to my parents, step-daughter Nora, and especially my spouse Ms. Corrine Frisch, words fall short to frame my gratitude. “You are my all the world” (S112).



## INTRODUCTION

### *THE SHAKESPEARE PROJECT:* A BOOK IN THREE PARTS

*What's past is prologue.* Twenty years ago on this small Midwestern campus I introduced a seminar series dubbed The Shakespeare Project, its title derived from an ongoing Heidegger Project at Boston College where I'd just received my doctorate.[1] The design afforded students and myself a forum for scrutinizing four-six plays per semester with a cadre of accompanying Sonnets. Master a method of reading the Bard through focus on a small set vis-à-vis a scattershot survey, the syllabi promised, and one not only can but shall want to read Shakespeare all one's life. Our deification of him, eminently just, could tend to mask his extraordinary entertainment value, which subsisted "not for an age, but for all time"[2] *because* of character portrayal *predicated on* the finest poetry. Like the author himself, his genre was often tapped by ten foot poles. Yet his complex idiom proves inevitably comprehensible—indeed, as observe too many scholars to permit mention here than three—I instance Frank Kermode (*Shakespeare's Language*), Harold Bloom (*The Invention of the Human*), and Stephen Greenblatt (*Will in the World*)—his abstrusities more keenly registered consciousness than others' forced clarifications.

Shakespeare found that he could immeasurably deepen the effect of his plays, that he could provoke in the audience and in himself a peculiarly passionate intensity of response, if he took out a key explanatory element, thereby occluding the rationale, motivation, or ethical principle that accounted for the action that was to unfold. The principle was not the making of a riddle to be solved, but the creation of a strategic opacity. This opacity, Shakespeare found, released an enormous amount of energy that had been at least partially blocked or contained by familiar, reassuring explanations.[3]

Bloom similarly postulates an inverse "foregrounding," "a precursory field of poetic...history" intimated "in the poetry itself." "Shakespeare calls upon the audience to surmise just how Falstaff and Hamlet and Edmund got to be the way they are, by which I mean: their gifts,

obsessions, and concerns.... Shakespeare's literary art, the highest we will ever know, is as much an art of omission as it is of surpassing richness. The plays are greatest where they are most elliptical." [4] "That silence could make a contribution to eloquence," underscores Kermode, "that in the theatre you didn't have to lay everything out with the utmost explicitness...was evidently a discovery made in the course of time." This void curiously includes not the not-said only, but soliloquy, "speech in silence, the speech of silence." Against the pail "we register the pace of the speech, its sudden turns, its backtrackings, its metaphors flashing before us and disappearing before we can consider them. This is new: the representation of excited, anxious thought..., the proposing of a theory or explanation followed at once by its abandonment or qualification, as in the meditation of a person under stress to whom all that he is considering can be a prelude to vital choices. Emotional and political." [5]

The gist of such testimony is tested in Part II of this text, *Questions on Character; Responsibilities of Triple Vision*. Before recurring to it there, here Una Ellis-Fermor, who pioneered study of the speech of silence, warrants a last word:

[T]he technique of statement cannot reveal so much or so profoundly as can the evocative technique...that indicates character by touches, by silences, by omissions, but by touches of such rare significance that their presence in those silences evokes in our imagination an ever-growing, living organism, a whole that is a character. [6]

To be taken up again betimes. As for the book's first section: I mentioned syllabi, and that The Shakespeare Project (like its namesake focusing on Heidegger) proved continuous, sustained over several semesters. This would allow me being and time for a phenomenological approach to the Bard. From varied angles, shifting sets of plays I would amass material for my book on Shakespeare.

"My Big Book," I called it to myself, thereby evoking paralysis. In the novel *Gaudy Night*. Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane encounter Harriet's old Oxford tutor, Miss Lydgate, still at work after forty years on her tome on prosody. I read about Miss Lydgate, as I wrote, with Robert McGregor, a book about Lord Peter and his creator, Dorothy L. Sayers. [7] We completed that text, and I've since gone on to author two more books, more or less on my own. [8] My Big Book, however, never quite cohered, though not for want of pages. *Questions on Character; Responsibilities of Triple Vision* reached book length but, notwithstanding its connective interstices, read more like a sequence of essays. No, I was not Frank Kermode or Harold Bloom, or Marjorie Garber or W.H. Auden; though

neither felt I merely their “attendant lord.” My insights, inflected by these mentors, would complement theirs, certainly; still I’d not earned the cache to publish a *Collected Essays on Shakespeare*.

Just what had I garnered?

My capital derived from the endeavor as a whole. The great Greek poet C.P. Cavafy, whose “King Claudius” resonates uncannily with *Hamlet* (cf. Chapter 4), likewise limns this *Project* as a text:

When you start on your journey to Ithaca,  
then pray that the road is long, full  
of adventure, full of knowledge.

...

That the summer mornings are many,  
that you will enter ports seen for the first time  
with such pleasure, with such joy!

...

visit hosts of Egyptian cities,  
to learn and learn from those who have knowledge.

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.  
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.  
But do not hurry the voyage at all.  
It is better to let it last for long years;  
and even to anchor at the isle when you are old,  
rich with all that you have gained on the way,  
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.  
Without her you would never have taken the road.  
But she has nothing more to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.  
With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience,  
you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.[9]

In the Project classroom I continually preach *triple vision*—a term adopted from the Middle Eastern scholar Karen Armstrong, to suit a complementary vis-à-vis contentious setting.[10]Shakespeare’s genius obliges us to exercise a three-fold perspective. With the freedom phenomenology allows, we must perceive the plays ‘simultaneously’ as *real life* (hence, must suspend our disbelief); *drama* (as representation of real life in theatrical production); and *poetry* (none greater ever composed). Only so engaged can we best appreciate the Bard. That he meets us more than part way renders our charge not so difficult—in time,

we ‘see’ naturally thus. Something of the same approach informs my *scholarship*, a term initially defined by the *OED* as *studying in a school*. My writing and classwork function dialectically, so much so as to preclude (I realize now) any other form this text could not have taken. Hence, my dedication of it to all the students.

And though no Auden I, that master offered me a compound blueprint modeled after his two books on the Bard, *Lectures on Shakespeare* (1946-47; reconstructed and edited by Arthur Kirsch), and “*The Dyer’s Hand*” (1963). Part IV of the latter, *Shakespeare in the City*, a book-length collect of topical essays, anticipates what I attempt in *Questions on Character; Responsibilities of Triple Vision*. *Lectures* provides a structural paradigm for the syllabi-essays comprised by Part I. Let me add that I have not compiled a book on teaching Shakespeare any more—or less—than Auden had. The extended conceptualization of scholarship informs my notion of the audience. We are all always already at school, ‘studying monuments of such magnificence’ that we would sing.[11]

\*\*\*

About two months out from completion of the text, ‘anchoring at its island,’ so to speak, ‘rich with all gained along the way,’ I submitted to the publisher, Ms. Carol Koulikardi, bullet points limning why I felt this book important:

-It proved a work twenty-plus years in the composing, to which so many (let us say, at least a cast of hundreds, chiefly students), have contributed.

-It authored revisionary reading of three “minor” characters (Emilia [*Othello*], Albany [*Lear*], Siward [*Macbeth*]) in the process of contending for a sensible—not even rapprochement between, rather a coalescence of ‘old-fashioned’ character criticism and New Critical and Poststructural perspectives.

-So also did it formulate an ethic for responsible reading via *triple vision*—perceiving the text as at once reality, poem, and play—a method contended for through addressing ethical matters presented in the works: namely, faith, in *Hamlet*; conscience, in *Henry VIII*; stewardship, in *Timon of Athens*.

-The concluding essay on the *Sonnets* posits a thesis, on complex legacy, corresponding with the book’s overall theme.

These matters I detail as we proceed. The Project, on the whole, I envision as a model for re-infusing Shakespeare as terrain for critical thinking that affects our lives. I.e., by *critical thinking* I refer, first, to questioning specific facets of our culture (religious, social, economic, ideological), that we might live more fully, more ethically; and, to that critical scrutiny we dedicate to texts (call it *critique*)—not, though, as an end in itself but as an instrumental means in accomplishing the foresaid goal of transforming our lives. (So construed, literary, critical activity becomes a constituent of life’s enrichment.) Which segues to

*-Shakespeare and Spielberg, and the Detroit Institute of Arts:* How often to my students have I equated WS with SS as consummate entertainers/artists/teachers accessible (truly *belonging*) to all. To conceive what has in part happened with respect to reading the Bard, let us conjecture this thought experiment—Presume, a century or two hence, *A.I. E.T., Jerassic Park (I,II,III), Empire of the Sun, The Color Purple, Schindler’s List, Amistad, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Raiders of the Lost Ark (et sequels), Poltergeist, Continental Divide, The Sugarland Express, Captain Philips, Saving Private Ryan, Men in Black (I,II), Minority Report, Jaws, Catch Me if You Can, War of the Worlds, Terminal, The Haunting, Memoirs of a Geisha, Letters from Iwo Jima, True Grit, 1941, Munich, Lincoln*—having all been, as it were, officially, authoritatively, *rightly* canonized as classics. Yet by tragic virtue of that very designation, they are also co-opted by and for an Elite, sealed from the public. Now, match that inventory, in quality and variety, to a catalogue comprising *Midsummer Night’s Dream, Richard II, Richard III, Edward III, 1,2 Henry IV, 1,2,3, Henry VI, King John, Henry VIII, Hamlet, Lear, Othello, Macbeth, Timon of Athens, The Merchant of Venice, Love’s Labor’s Lost, Much Ado about Nothing, All’s Well that Ends Well, The Taming of the Shrew, The Tempest, The Winter’s Tale, Coriolanus, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra* (about which Auden wrote that “had we to burn all of Shakespeare’s plays but one—luckily we don’t—I’d choose *Antony and Cleopatra*”[12]), *Twelfth Night, As You Like It, A Comedy of Errors, The Merry Wives of Windsor, Two Gentlemen of Verona, Pericles, Cymbeline, Troilus and Cressida, Titus Andronicus*. ( I had thought to excise half-a-dozen, to numerically accord with Spielberg’s List; but, bardolater as I am, would not part with nary a play—for even the apprentice efforts (*TA, TGV, I,II,III, HVI*), offer matter commensurate to art ; which you may pare upon the cutting floor with, say, *Harry and the Hendersons, Shrek, Men in Black II*.—But (Auden as so often charting our trajectory) why part with one, if one could help it? Yet suppose ‘it couldn’t be helped’ (a cowardly, passive construction), in the shucking of oysters for meat whereby “pearls that were his eyes” (*Tem.I.ii.100*;[ or sacrifice any other set of five plays; or just cut throats at random, with *Hamlet, Lear, Measure for Measure for starters*])—sundry treasures, are sunk into

the bottom of the sea. Pardon, please, the passion, which I fear veers from the mark—much in the way Mercutio’s lecture on Mistress Mab (*RJ*, I.iii.32-103) spins out on its own riotous energies, till the courtier concedes “I talk of dreams.” Would that I were also. Grant the unlikelihood of privateering Spielberg’s *oeuvre* for some select so-called elect. But history does repeat—often in avatars unrecognized.

The Detroit Institute of Arts has been compelled to auction off its international collection of Masterworks, which the city holds in trust, to creditors. The children of Detroit, already bereft, can no longer muse on Fra Angelico’s *Madonna* or Franz Hals’ *Clown*—purchased, now, by some wealthy recluse. Not so overtly, though just as genuinely, *Hamlet* is being held hostage from so many (never mind one), due to an atrocity in thought, in approach, in the barring from approach. This book (mine, my students’) can, however slightly, push against that trend. It’s a beginning—and of course, we’re not alone. To the cast of co-creators, then, would I add the roll of extraordinary critics on whom my students and self have drawn for so much insight. As we engaged the Bard, so did we them; because, like him, they elicit our critical participation. Their efforts, at once pellucid and complex, attest to their enlistment in our Project. To invoke again Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* predicates *Shakespeare For All*. And as for his own self-reflections: In a codicil to my syllabi I explain why I continually quote the Bard in our discourses: because Shakespeare proves his most illuminating critic. Here, though, grant a disciple, another Will, the last word:

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.[13]

\*\*\*

**Notes for Reading Perhaps** (with once again, a tug of the ulster toward Yeats, whose title *Words for Music Perhaps* [1933] appears considerably more sensible than my ostensive oxymoron. But “I would meet you upon this honestly.”[14]) Part III of this book comprises endnotes—many of which, yes, merely acknowledge, or suggest for further research; though they compass as well innumerable (I suppose one could tabulate, though the loose criteria for the genre complicates calculation) *pensees* (Fr : thinkings—little essays elaborating- or embarking- on trails somewhat tangential to the context, though not to the



trend of our discourse. The intent to integrate notes as part of the text is indebted to Nabokov and Borges, but owns critical antecedents, most notably in my experience F.O. Matthiessen's remarkable scriptora in *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (1959). As in Richard the Bard "beget[s]" in us "A generation of still-breeding thoughts...peopl[ing] world[s]" (*RII*. V.v.7-10), beings for whom we must build rooms—though not so elegantly as does the Dean of St. Paul (not to mention Shakespeare) "in [as it were] Sonnets" (cf. Donne, "The Canonization," l. 32). Yet if I've thrived, there will be found "much music, excellent voice, in th[ese] little organ[s]" (*Ham*. III.ii.368)). The *Notes*, interspersed for ready access, are yet relegated to respective chapters' ends so as not to distract. Pitched in a minor key, they are meant to descant in harmony with Parts I and II, completing a critical analogue to *triple vision*.

## Notes

- 1.) Conducted for many years by Dr. Thomas J. Owens, to whom (as to Dr. Arthur Madden, Chair of the Philosophy Department at Boston College), I am keenly indebted.
- 2.) Ben Jonson's famed encomium, in his dedicatory to the First Folio, "To the Memory of my beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare, and What He hath Left Us," l. 43. "For, if I thought my judgment were of years, I should commit thee surely with thy peers, And tell how far thou didst't our Lyly outshine, Or sporting Kyd, or Marlowe's mighty line" (27-30). Even so, the passage betrays a method to the madness of 'committal (juncture) with his peers.' Shakespeare, transcending them, likewise proved "Soul of the Age." Marjorie Garber's extensive monograph (one cannot, her title acknowledges, call any engagement with the Bard "exhaustive"), *Shakespeare After All* [2004], likewise covers Jonson's bases.
- 3.) Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004) 323-4.
- 4.) Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998) 737-8.
- 5.) Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2000) 11-7.
- 6.) Una Ellis-Fermor, *Shakespeare the Dramatist and other Papers*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1962) 30. 34-5.
- 7.) Robert Kuhn McGregor, with Ethan Lewis, *Conundrums for the Long Weekend: England, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Lord Peter Wimsey* (Kent State University P, 2000). Sayers aptly surnames the Oxford Don, after John Lydgate (?1370-1449), "The poet who saw his role as the consolidator of Chaucer's innovations in style, versification, and vocabulary." (Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* [Clarendon, 1966], 66) As Lydgate was notoriously "prolix," so his namesake (on whose prose style Sayers does not remark), spent close to a lifetime on her encyclopedic treatise concerning "the

Prosodic elements in English verse from Beowulf to Bridges.” But Professor Lydgate completed her text; she and her creator number among my literary heroines.

8.) Ethan Lewis, *Modernist Image* (Cambridge Scholars P, 2010); *Reflexive Poetics* (CSP, 2012).

9.) “Ithaca,” *The Complete Poems of C.P. Cavafy*, trans. Rae Dalven, intro. W.H. Auden (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 36.

10.) Cf. Karen Armstrong, *Holy War* (New York: Anchor, 2001) her contention for causal ties ‘twixt the Crusades and present problems in the Middle East. She would compass “the points of views of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.” This triadic perspective better approximates objectivity in a context too complex for a “‘both’ sides of the question” (xv). Yet where Armstrong’s topic, however many times divided, persists *oppositionally*, triple vision in Shakespeare functions harmoniously.

11.) Cf. W.B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium.”

12.) W.H. Auden, *Lectures on Shakespeare* [1946-7]; rec. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton UP, 2000)242.

13.) William Carlos Williams, “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” II, *Collected Later Poems* (New York: New Directions),

14.) Cf. T.S. Eliot, “Gerontion.”

**PART I**

**SYLLABI FROM SUNDRY SHAKESPEARE  
PROJECTS**



# FROM SUNDRY SHAKESPEARE PROJECTS

ENG 400

**The Shakespeare Project XV:  
'Re-membering things past'**

T, 6-9:30

Brookens 476

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Office Hours: M, W, F

11:30-1, and by appointment.

## **Texts (available at UIS Bookstore)**

*The Riverside Shakespeare*, G. Blakemore Evans, gen. ed.

(I recommend this complete collection, the cost of which approximates that of severally purchasing the featured plays and a volume of *The Sonnets*. Yet you may use any unabridged version of the particular works. Excerpts from *The Riverside*, like material required though not mentioned in this list, will be distributed in class.)

Tillyard, E.M.W., *The Elizabethan World Picture* (opt.)

William K. Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*

A superior *Dictionary* (e.g., *Webster's*; *Random House*. You shall also wish to consult *The Oxford English Dictionary*, in Brookens Library, on-line, or in my office)

## **Foreword**

“The unity of Shakespeare’s work is such that you not only cannot understand the later plays unless you know the early plays: you cannot understand the early plays without knowing the late ones.”[1] T.S. Eliot’s comment, itself a hybrid of the Hermeneutic Circle and his stand on Tradition[2], I’ve invoked in prior Shakespeare seminars to justify our Project generally. Study any play—we premise—still better, scrutinize six in relation—and you are more equipped to enjoy the Bard for a lifetime than had our brief span together raced through a definitively scattershot survey.[3] How tragic, what we oft inflict on a classic, as on what Billy Collins said “they” (elitists; those who would avenge their deprivation) do

to a poem: “strap it to a chair and torture it with a rubber hose.”[4] We strap *ourselves* in, really, when not discerning a Classic, but rather hollowly confirming what we’re told is One. The latter attitude opts out of close reading through which entertainment is discovered.

But again, we have vaulted from Eliot to so contend before, in the process of construing Shakespeare under varied lenses. This semester, let us grind his point into our glass, *viz.*: Shakespeare’s last series of plays, all of which arguably—though certainly, *The Tempest*—he composed as his farewell to the stage[5], have baffled (pleasantly) by resistance to conventional categorization. Neither *Tragedy*, *History*, or *Comedy*, but some amalgamation of all, for which the titles *Romance* and *Tragicomedy* imperfectly suffice, they are labeled by many simply *Late* or *Last Plays*. Such catch-all sobriquets serve when, as the excerpt below posits, the adjectives are fully fathomed *eschatologically*. We shall view these last plays mainly as re-visions—reconciliations and minor though moving and important supplements to Opera Magna of an earlier epoch. Hence, our reading list in one sense is divided; in another, intertwined: however comparably thinner than *Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*, the late plays augment understanding of earlier ones—and vice versa.

So much for a prologue to a prologue—though, consistent with our temporal interactions, what follows also prefaces the prior paragraphs.

\*\*\*

[From an essay on the Bard’s Last Plays:]

In what he thought the closing gesture of his career[6], Shakespeare composed a quartet of (characteristically) extraordinary, but difficult to categorize dramas. These are called, variously, Romances, Tragicomedies, even The Late or Last Plays—gallant monikers, but each itself insufficient. Each attempt at indexing, however, underscores the foursome as a distinct group, apart from the Tragedies, Histories, and Comedies.

To briefly examine the appellations and their shortcomings: *Romance* in this particular context—amalgamating many of the not quite exhaustive definitions enumerated by Nabokov[7], from the medieval French, *roman*—denotes an episodic tale, including among its myriad adventures at least one love story; foregrounding the exotic (“rich and strange” [*Tem.* I.ii.402]), and trumpeting indomitable spirit. The English Renaissance *may* be deemed the most romantic of literary epochs, outgaging even *Romanticism* proper. With the sinking of the Armada and the discovery of new lands (notably, two of the four plays with which we deal relate yarns largely of the sea; the two others involve sojourns in foreign realms), the

*Elizabethans* (named after their buoyant Bess) thought the world their oyster. With James, and recurring religious tensions, confidence cooled considerably—but in such a climate *adventure on the stage* would be all the more sought for its escape value. The Renaissance of this so-called Romance begins circa 1610. Yet the somewhat manic temper of that time suggested for its drama another title (of equal, thus but partial adequacy).

*Tragicomedy*. The name practically enacts what it presents—a double plot foreshortening, especially of Tragedy; but also (if one accords the *c* to *tragic*) of Comedy (broadly construed, denoting a happy ending; though these works provoked laughs aplenty in the modern sense—partly due to the ridiculous devices enabling the pleasing outcomes). The hero and heroine are wrapped in a web of disaster, suddenly violently inverted.

Both plausible titles, *Romances* and *Tragicomedies*, intimate thin characterization and truncated plot; hence, a lesser genre than Tragedy, Comedy, or History (wherein escapades are grounded in legend and manifest destiny). Critical consensus on the dimming of the dramaturgy rivals the all but universal praise for *Hamlet* and *Lear*. The party spin imparts a tired Will (pun intended, in deference to both Sonnets 135-36, and Borges' masterful "Shakespeare's Memory"[8]). Having been there to Elsinore, Inverness, Venice, Verona, Rome, et al.—and done that in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, et cet.—he'd readied himself to break his staff, and live off the fat of fame and Stratford. Perhaps, too, he was somewhat miffed. "Theodore Spencer's fantasy that a deputation of the King's Men called upon their old friend and urged him to leave the writing to John Fletcher" sounds plausible enough.[9] However much he taught Fletcher, it could not but irk the Bard to be out of vogue, while less skilled craftsmen garnered kudos. As at the outset of his career he could outvie the University Wits at obeying the silly Unities[10], so now he could play the young guns' game of authoring, in essence, musical comedy. He would satisfy the Public's pandering—might even pander to It; only better suit his audience than his protégés had theirs. As unanimous as the mild censure I've reported, rings the critical acclaim for the *wonderfulness* of the Late Quartet, which to so designate aptly sets them with Beethoven's last profound string quartets, Op. 130-33, and Eliot's twilight *Four Quartets*.

In this twilight I propose another classification. Let us study these final plays *eschatologically*. *Eschatology*, the science (how numerically harmonious) of 'the four last things': death, judgment, heaven and hell. On parallel planes, Shakespeare takes these texts as opportunities for settling accounts in preparation for life after. Park Honan has detailed how the

many reconciliations, between fathers and daughters especially, redress tensions ‘twixt William and his girls—Judith and particularly Susanna[11]—along with working out aesthetically some of his “troubled attitudes” toward the fairer sex.[12] But in the world of the plays we can perceive reunion as a *righting/writing* of past wrongs. *Contrast* Pericles/Marina, Cymbeline/Imogen, Leontes/Perdita, Prospero/Miranda, to Juliet, Ophelia, Cordelia, Desdemona, paired with their pitiful Pops. On a lesser though noteworthy scale, the respective late rulers’ embrace of princes revises tragic outcomes. That neither Pericles nor Posthumus (never mind the still more slight Polixenes and Ferdinand) engage us in Hamlet’s (or even Romeo’s) internalness, is in one sense beside the point. With the earlier figures in the Bard’s and audiences’ psyches, no need to reenact the pain; simply allude to it:

Let us not burthen our remembrances with  
A heaviness that’s gone.

(*Tem.* V.i.199-200)

So also, Iachimo puts to rest the poisonous Iago[13]; Guiderius and Arviragus answer for Edgar, as Belarius, Philario, and Camillo do for Kent; likewise, Paulina for Emilia.

*In one sense*, I remarked, the superficial portrayals have no bearing on the result. Yet their dearth also serves *essentially*. To truly instance letting go, these plays must efface identity. Harold Bloom astutely calls the characters in the Last Plays emblems[14], representative of everyman—especially when, prior to crossing over, one becomes *any* one. To instance through comparison:

*Lear.* No, no, no, no! Come let’s away to prison:  
We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage;  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down  
And ask thee forgiveness. So we’ll live,  
And pray, and sing, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too—  
Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out—  
And take upon ‘s the mystery of things  
As if we were God’s spies; and we’ll wear out,  
In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones,  
That ebb and flow by the moon.

*Edmund.* Take them away.

(V.iii.8-19)



Lear lobbies for escape, but *into a prison*. He longs for release *with* the world too near—on the hither side of iron bars, such that the banter over losing and winning confirms the barrier. “Great ones...ebb and flow by the moon,” but some “pack” or “sect” will serve to remind him what once he had. Within walls, too, in captivity with Cordelia, he courts memorializing penance (“When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down And ask thee forgiveness.”) Shadows of like masochism, however justified, Leontes casts in *The Winter’s Tale*, with Paulina’s unremitting aid. Still, Sicily’s king *would*, under happy circumstance, be shut of his self-loathing—why else marry off Paulina to Camillo?[15]

More fundamentally, Shakespeare, by shallow characterization, suggests an emptying of self *period*. No Lear Leontes he; neither could Cymbeline wear that tragic Briton’s beard. Even Prospero, necessarily more complex than any figure in the last works, would renege the individuality that Lear, having forfeited all else, insists on keeping.

Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves,  
 And ye that on the sands with printless foot  
 Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him  
 When he comes back; you demi-puppets that  
 By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,  
 Whereof the ewe not bites; and you whose pastime  
 Is to make midnight mushrumps, that rejoice  
 To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid  
 (Weak monsters though ye be) I have bedimm’d  
 The noontide sun, call’d forth the mutinous winds,  
 And ‘twixt the green sea and the azur’d vault  
 Set roaring war; to the dread rattling thunder  
 Have I given fire, and rifted Jove’s stout oak  
 With his own bolt; the strong-bas’d promontory  
 Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck’d up  
 The pine and cedar. Graves at my command  
 Have wak’d their sleepers, op’d and let ‘em forth  
 By my so potent art. But this rough magic  
 I here abjure; and when I have requir’d  
 Some heavenly music (which even now I do)  
 To work mine end upon their senses that  
 This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff,  
 Bury it certain fadom in the earth,  
 And deeper than did ever plummet sound  
 I’ll drown my book.

(*Tem.* V.i.33-57)

The freedom sought, indeed already felt, is reflected in the dominance of enjambed lines: 19 in 25—with runs of up to 9, plausibly 11 verses to enact the overflow.[16] Enjambments, variegated caesurae, and feminine endings, all rising steadily throughout the Bard's career, radically increase in the last years. The impression, albeit fleeting, of psychological depth is thus effected by limpid idiom rather than, as earlier, through extensive soul searching for which the verse served mainly as a vehicle. Heightening the aural pellucidness, the *quantitative prosody*: attunement to relations of syllable sounds. Note the string of 'oo's' briefly abrupted by the 'ump' (35-42); the wounding (pronounced WOUNDING at the time) concatenation (enhanced alliteratively) of "deeper than *did* ever plummet *sound* I'll drown" (56-57). But these pitches play on our emotional pulses indirectly; directly, resonate as musical tones. And there, to point the contrast, "lies the rub." When in *Hamlet* Laertes and Gertrude chorus that Ophelia's

drown'd?  
Drown'd, drown'd.  
(IV.vii.183-84)

—this distresses the ear, as do cats in heat. Nevertheless, the effect is yielded mainly via the meaning of the word, and the pathos of its repetition. (*Compare* Lear's "Never, never, never, never, never" [V.iii.309][17]).

To register that difference returns us from digression on technique to our thesis on characterization. Prospero's *intrinsic complexity*, his far keener portraiture than any other late dramatis personae, derives not from his identity, rather from his role as Shakespeare's double. The achievements listed in his speech match what one would expect in a wizard's resume—but the evidence alludes to the Bard. Those 'demi-puppets make the green sour ringlets' by the moonshine of *A Midsummer's Night*. The present tempest was preceded by the damp and roiling winds of other storms in *Macbeth*, *Caesar*, and notably *Othello* and *Lear*. With "twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault set roaring war" compare

The wind-shak'd surge with high and monstrous mane,  
Seems to cast water on the burning Bear, etc.  
(*Othello* II.i 12ff.)

; by "rifted Jove's stout oak..." set

Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunder-bolts  
Singe my white head! etc.

(*Lear* III.ii 5ff.)

This last contrast deepens when we remark Lear commanding that the bolts *singe him*....

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We likely overstep to note the use of “bolts” in *Lear* vis-à-vis the naming of the grotesque, comic pimp *Boult* in *Pericles*. That stretch acknowledged: the sound diluted of its connotations resembles Homer Simpson’s expletive, or The Three Stooges’ yelp. However coincidentally, the different applications reinforce the chasm between the Tragedies and Last Plays, and the bridging of that gap. Time now, though, to chop wood, as Shakespeare *actually* “pluck’d up...pine and cedar” (*Tem.* V.i 47-48) in *Macbeth*. We focus some on the Bard’s biography, but less so than on characters’ lives relative to prior characterizations. Prospero’s parting allusion—

Graves at my command  
Have wak’d their sleepers, op’d and let ‘em forth  
By my so potent art

(V.i 48-50)

—*is* executed in the Last Plays, though not as King Hamlet was reared from the dead.

The purpose behind the resurrections stays constant—i.e. *to emend*—even as the spirit of emendation has considerably altered. In their final avatars, the ghosts of plays past grace their predecessors, and in themselves shine in the late light.

Yet consistent with character analysis *and* ‘past playing prologue’ [cf. *Tem.* II.i.253], we need first examine the final tragedies, *Coriolanus* particularly,[18] as watershed works signaling the transformed temper of the prosody; for, to adapt Dame Helen Vendler, words and numbers (i.e. verses) number in the cast.[19]

### “The thunder-like percussion of thy sounds” (*Cor.* I.iv.59)

The Last Plays as different animal owing to their altered verse is adumbrated by *Coriolanus*, for whose protagonist *different something* certainly applies:

From face to foot  
 He was a thing of blood, whose every motion  
 Was turn'd with dying cries.

(II.ii.108-10)

For “turn’d” one glosses also “tun’d.” Though, again, similar imagery notwithstanding, the violent music oughn’t be aligned with this rabid roar:

head to foot  
 Now is he total gules, horridly trick’d  
 With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,  
 Bak’d and impasted with the parching streets.  
 ....  
 Roasted in wrath and fire,  
 And thus o’er sized with coagulate gore,  
 With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus  
 Old grandsire Priam seeks.

—at once pastiched and perfected in all its hyperbolic clank[20], in the first play within *Hamlet* (II.ii.456ff). Neither does likening to the “bloody man” intensity of *Macbeth* (I.ii.1) inform save via contrast. How, then, does the verse create this blood thing? Its—his gall assaults at once. “What’s the matter, you dissentious rogues,” constitutes the first phrase spewed from Martius’ mouth. Yet the prefatory “Thanks.” beats just as brashly. Never mind his entering on chaos. Indeed the smugness registers *just because this proves no time for words*. Either waste none (and Martius lops locutions as he does limbs), or spare three in response to Menenius’ “Hail, noble Martius!” Here, our hero (barely) barks contempt *for his friend*. He would strike at anyone—which reveals ire unconnected to an object, hence wholly kindled from within, as perhaps the salient facet of his “noble” nature.

Poetically, that kindling translates into self-generated speech:

Thanks. What’s the matter you dissentious rogues,  
 That rubbing the poor itch of your opinion  
 Make yourselves scabs?

The verse gathers intensity as it goes (—effective missiles, I’m told, do that). As scabs literally emerge from scratching, so the figure “make yourselves scabs” grows out of the trope preceding (“rubbing the poor itch”). An impressive birth, certainly; less miraculous, though, than that enacted just before, where the “dependent” clause (“That rubbing the poor itch”) bears no *semantic* relation to its antecedent.

*Come, your reason, Jack, your reason.*

*Roundly:*

*Coriolanus* merits all the praise given its compression; yet this compactness differs greatly from *Macbeth*'s. In that play, the lines are stuffed:

As canons overcharg'd with double cracks, so they  
Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe.

(I.i.37-8)

In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare gains a similar effect by suggesting that the lines cannot hold enough; their content overflows into a second line, then a third. An insult that ought to have comprised five feet takes up twelve. And yet, the diatribe *is* clipped; compression, paradoxically, is wrought via hyperbole. And, to read the poetry back into characterization, it presents a speaker who (in his words) “means to vent [his] superfluity” (I.i.225-26).

To synopsise what the speech so far tells us: Coriolanus knows no object for his anger, and his anger knows no bounds.[21] He lashes indiscriminately, incessantly. Let us add (though to make explicit seems unnecessary, to do so corresponds with the play's compressed hyperbole) that he packs a wallop.

This *impact* is conveyed principally through hard alliteration and particled nouns. Quite a one-two combination—exacerbated by being thrown throughout the play by those around the hero as well as by the Champ himself. (Such tropic *contagion* recalls, actually precedes, the hyperactive discourse in *Cymbeline*.) As though the cast of *Coriolanus* were cudged into imitation out of “agued fear” wrought by “his mail'd hand” (I.iv.38; I.ii.35). Those examples, like the term itself, point up that a *participled noun* equals the mass of two words: its own, and that of the gerundive driven into it. The first word more than modifies the second, actually welds its quality (and quantity) into what it modifies. Contrast ‘ague and fear.’—That locution would constitute hendiadys, the rhetorical figure straining one-through-two and thereby complicating meaning. As Kermode and others have remarked, Shakespeare wields hendiadys, in *Hamlet* especially, to increase semantic tension by ‘reconciling’ terms expressive of more than a single idea. The device enhances “questions of identity, sameness, and the union of separate selves.”[22] *Coriolanus*, to the contrary, imposes monoliths. Where the alliteration that intensifies “hard hand,” likewise dilutes the sense, “Mail'd hand” packs its detonative

denotative burden solely into “hand”; likewise, “fear,” “agued,” seems to have contracted disease. There appears in fact no “ague” and “fear,” no “mail” and “hand.” The thing has been absorbed by what thinged it, which in turn “infectiously itself infects” (TC II.ii.58) Purport, furthermore, simply adds to the effect. The sense smites: even “soft-conscienc’d men” [I.i.37], and “veil’d dames” with “gawded cheeks” [II.i.215, 217] similarly assault.

So “Cushions” properly contextualized within a hard alliterative pattern, bears the weight of “leaden spoons”:

See here these movers that do prize their hours  
 At a crack’d drachma! Cushions, leaden spoons,  
 Irons of a doit, doublets that hangmen would  
 Bury with those that wore them, these base slaves,  
 Ere yet the fight be done, pack up. Down with them! (I.v.4-8)

And Hamlet claimed *he’d* “speak daggers” (*Ham.* III.ii.396).

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“There is more to be said of the late verse of Shakespeare, as to what makes it seem ‘late,’ than talk of verse paragraphing, of weak and feminine endings, can yield....Students come to recognize a certain extraordinary harshness of diction and violence of imagination as characteristic” of the elder Bard. That, from Kermode’s *Riverside* preface, which concludes, “this inhospitable play is one of the supreme tests of a genuine understanding of Shakespeare’s achievement.” Indeed, *Coriolanus* serves as lynchpin-text for the great critic’s scrutiny of evolving complexity in *Shakespeare’s Language* (2000). Taking cues from Kermode, I would isolate two peculiarities emerging from *Coriolanus* (albeit rooted in prior plays).

*Extraordinary harshness of diction and violence of imagination.* Over and again especially in *Cymbeline* (fittingly, pronounced *Kymbeline*) we are struck, as were the Corioles, “like a planet.” The lovers’ mutual thralldom, viscerally sounded at their parting,

thither write, my queen,  
 And with my eyes I’ll drink the words you send,  
 Though ink be made of gall.

(I.ii.99-101)

—recalls the “penance” proposed in Sonnet 111: