

Irony and Transcendence on the Renaissance Stage

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Irony even in its simplest forms involves a measure of transcendence, some assertion of superiority in terms of knowledge or wisdom or social standing. The connection may not always be obvious. It is typically muted when we meet the term as a feature of verbal rhetoric, as for example in the succinct definition offered by Cicero: *aliter sentias ac loquere* – saying one thing and meaning another.¹ Rhetorical practice of this kind must have inhered in human speech well prior to its conceptual formulation. Quintilian's *laudis adsimulatione detrahere et vituperationis laudere*, blaming by seeming to praise,² is readily ratified in speech acts overheard on many a school playground. The required 'put down' is carried through tone, gesture and context, as part of a crude arsenal of mockery which may culminate in sarcasm. Naturally its literary forms are more nuanced, depending on the intellectual command of the practitioner. In his *Scienza Nuovo* (1725), Vico identified irony as one of the four primary tropes, alongside metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy, describing it as "fashioned of a falsehood by dint of a reflection which wears the mask of truth".³ This formulation opens up sophisticated reaches of ironical discourse where much more than verbal strategy is implied. Originally, if we follow the line that irony derives from the Greek *eironeia*, a form of behaviour involving strategic self-abasement of which the Platonic Socrates would be the prime example, then there is inherently a significant discrepancy in knowledge, wisdom, even in *Weltanschauung*, between the Socratic posture of professed ignorance and foolishness, and the hapless objects of his philosophical interrogations, caught as they typically are in habitual, socialised points of view. The professed inadequacy of the interrogator triumphs over, or transcends, the assumed knowledge of those interrogated. The pose, or method, of philosophical ignorance and humility proves to be a device to expose the inadequacy of conventional wisdom. The *ieron* was typically, and quite understandably, abused for his pains.⁴

The later notion of *dramatic* irony was introduced into academic criticism in Britain and the United States largely through the influence of Connop Thirwall's famous

essay of 1833, 'On the Irony of Sophocles',⁵ but it is important to recognise that intrinsically, in its very structure, there is always something dramatic about irony, because there must always be an implied audience. There would be no point in employing irony unless an extended audience of some kind is deemed capable of appreciating the assertion of superiority. Irony is designed to be overheard, which makes it both social and potentially dramatic. A formal consideration of dramatic irony shifts the focus of attention to the possible responses of an attending audience, to the act of overhearing an exchange on the stage, and the range of emotive and intellectual responses that becomes salient. This act of attention, of participation, by the audience is essentially imaginative, an adjudication between two (or more) sides in dialogic interchange. It is an invitation to imaginative transcendence. For instance, while obviously 'staged' in the mind, I would argue that the following passage from the *Iliad* impels some intimation of dramatic irony, in that the reader is forced to adjudicate between the standpoints of gods and mortals:

- - - Athene and the lord of the silver bow, Apollo,
assuming the likeness of birds, of vultures, settled
aloft the great oak tree of their father, Zeus of the aegis,
taking their ease and watching these men whose ranks,
dense-settled,
shuddering into a bristle of spears, of shields and of
helmets.
As when the shudder of the west wind suddenly rising
Scatters across the water, and the water darkens
beneath it,
so darkening were the settled ranks of Achaians and
Trojans
In the plain.
(Book 7: 58-66)⁶

The passage sets before the reader a disturbing double vision where the gods "taking their ease" adopt the guise and perspective of vultures to revel in the impending battle, while the massed armies below carry with them the importunate terrors and heroism of mortal combat, captured in that darkening shudder of the west wind. What matters here is that the gap separating the two positions could be construed either in terms of ontological transcendence, or separation, whereby the spheres of mortals and the gods are distinct but confluent (this would constitute the view of naïve literalism); or else the more sophisticated reader might be aware that he or she is exploring a complex form of dramatic irony which coaxes the 'audience' into recognising the doubleness of the human response to war, part 'vulture', part vulnerable combatant. The sophisticated audience translates fictive ontology into salient epistemology. The

thesis and antithesis within the represented world force the audience to explore a troubling imaginative synthesis more complex than either.

Matters are no different when the elements of dramatic irony move into the theatre proper. There is perforce a tension between naïve imaginative submission to the reality presented, which involves lending credence to the cosmological structure of the presented world, on the one hand; and detached, self-conscious appreciation of its fictive status, its self-conscious theatricality, on the other, in which cosmic transcendence registers as epistemology in the form of irony. In the first case, the gods and their *habitus* are real; in the second their status and interventions on stage are as fictive as the rest of the presentation. Audience members negotiate meaning through exploring this tension in complex interaction with their own outlook and beliefs. My thesis in this essay is, first, that the representation of transcendence on the Renaissance stage, that ‘going beyond’ the human to share the perspective of the gods or the afterlife, is an important means by which the riches of dramatic irony are created for the self-conscious audience. And, second, that there is often a continuum of structured irony at work on the Renaissance stage, from minutiae of verbal interchange up to grand cosmological suppositions, as an important structural principle informing responses to the drama. Take away the machinery of transcendence and what remains is often a repertoire of rather empty ironies celebrating the stage as a metaphor for the world.

Regarded as a simple binary, stage and world from one perspective can seem a sterile pairing. We think, for example, of Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Four Plays in One* (1608?-1613?) which subordinates actual spectators in the theatre to the transports of an entire court audience re-created on stage.⁷ Although this piece is contemporaneous with some of Shakespeare’s boldest essays in theatricality in his mature plays, here the intent is no more than to yoke together four masques or playlets that make up a nuptial entertainment, two by Beaumont and two by Fletcher, by supplying a courtly context. King Emanuel and Queen Isabella of Portugal “take their seat on the throne” half-way through the Induction and, while they are addressed indirectly at the conclusion of each of the four “Triumphs”, their dramatic contribution is negligible. Or we might consider Massinger’s Suetonian piece, *The Roman Actor* (1626), which contains no fewer than three overt ‘plays-within-the-play’: *The Cure of Avarice*, *Iphis*

and *Anaxerete*, and *The False Servant*.⁸ At one point, Aretinus remarks to Paris the Tragedian:

Aretinus. Are you on the Stage,
You talke so boldly?

And Paris responds:

Paris. The whole world being one
This place is not exempted - - -
(I.3.49-51)

This flat, matter-of-fact treatment of the potentially rich and fertile notion of theatre as a metaphor for life is markedly routine and patent. Later in the same play Caesar says:

Caesar. Why are you
Transported thus, *Domitia*? 'tis a play,
Or grant it serious, it at no part merits
This passion in you.
(111.2.283-85)

In the first quotation, the stage is reduced to or merged with the world; in the second the power of drama to impinge on the world is denied. In both instances, the effect is tired, somewhat nugatory. A Baroque climax to this tendency was reached in the *entract* contrived by Bernini for an unidentified comedy presented at his home in Rome for the Carnival of 1637, where, as proceedings started, a curtain separating two audiences, one real, the other 'fictive' and on stage, was withdrawn so that they faced each other. The element of ironical mirroring was central to the conceit. Two braggart artist-clowns (played, in Chantelou's account of Bernini's recollections, by Bernini and his brother) mediated between the audiences, each asserting the reality of *their* audience and the illusory nature of their rival's. Having worked hard to maintain this strict equivalence of ontological confusion and illusion, the two audiences were then separated once more by the curtain. The intended comedy was played before the real audience, accompanied by teasing bursts of laughter from behind the curtain, supposedly emanating from an invisible and unknowable performance occurring there. At the play's end, the two clowns reappeared, one of them heavily out of breath. Asked to explain this, he responded that it was a result of effort expended in producing a spectacle to conclude his presentation behind the curtain. The curtain was again drawn aside to reveal a lengthy and lavish pageant showing an audience leaving a theatre, its sequence rounded off with the figure of Death entering on horseback,

scythe in hand. One of the clowns explained to the audience that death ends all earthly pleasures, and had arrived to end theirs. The actual audience's subsequent departure then deftly mirrored that of the illusory one.⁹ Despite a level of seriousness and visual sumptuousness, from a theatrical point of view it was all a bit over-wrought and meaningless. Here is mirroring without transcendence; irony as *mere* irony. But this, of course, exemplifies the idea of theatricality as a metaphor for life in its decadence – using the term descriptively rather than pejoratively.

To probe the validity of the thesis I have articulated, we must return to an earlier period when the analogically-layered cosmos of Renaissance Neoplatonism, melding with Christian mythography, was the stuff out of which plays were made. The early Tudor playwrights did their best to ally fact, fate, character, environment, human choice and contingency to a ritual pattern familiar from the old plays: the primal Edenic model of paradise, error, fall, descent into suffering and chaos, followed by hope and restitution. We can look as far back as Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1565) or Preston's *Cambyses* (1569-70), a play still graced with morality characters like Shame, Diligence, Common's Cry, Cruelty, and Murder; or forward to later works like *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (c.1588) and *The Troublesome Raigne of King John of England* (c. 1589) to see the events of history tied ineluctably to these older patterns.¹⁰ Such plays embody stories of Kings and their flaws and mistakes, which result in fearful political chaos and suffering for their subjects, a counter-surge of resistance, and the eventual restoration of order under a new, upright monarch. This at base is why Tudor drama is politically conservative: it operates uncertainly and tentatively against the myth of a foundational cosmic order which must ultimately reassert itself. This order is somehow mystically resistant to the presumed folly of political and social transformation, and disruption will be, must be, short-lived, wasteful and ultimately nugatory.

It seems to be the peculiar task of the stage metaphor, the notion of the theatre as a metaphor for life, to interrogate the tension between this inscrutable cosmic order and the limited viewpoints of ordinary humanity. The Neoplatonic presupposition of the stage as a sterile (yet imaginatively fertile) imitation of the world points towards that subversive sense of the 'playwright-gods' arranging matters for their own delectation, in life as in the theatre. This is particularly evident in the revenge genre, where the

revenger often becomes more than a mere actor, and something of a would-be playwright, in apparent tension with the dramatist proper. There are few more cogent examples of the theatrical metaphor working to powerful moral and metaphysical effect than that one-off wonder, Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (1587?), where the revenge *topos* is actualised through overhearing (as an 'audience') or instigating (as *quasi* actor-producers) a sequence of strategic playlets.¹¹ *The Spanish Tragedy* approaches 'life' as an infinite ontological regression of plays-within-plays, related to each other through irony, and offering multiple opportunities for species of *faux* transcendence, all of which collapse save for the final legacy of mordant wisdom which is the play's gift to its audience. Here we see at work the full-blown potential of the play conceived as Neoplatonic microcosm, as a theatrical imitation that works by ontological analogy, drawing any reasonably sophisticated audience into the epistemological nets of dramatic irony.

The play-proper is framed by the story of a dead man, Don Andrea, killed in the war between Spain and Portugal, who in the underworld is promised that revenge will be exacted upon his killer, Don Balthazar. Accompanied by the allegorical figure of Revenge, he returns to the world to watch a play called *The Spanish Tragedy*, thereby offering the audience in the theatre a transcendent vantage point, a fictive perspective beyond the grave, on the cusp of the afterlife. In the story that unfolds, Hieronimo, Marshall of Spain, seeks retributive justice following the murder of his only son, Horatio. The piece insists forcibly that life is not only like a play, but that it is a play. In Act 2 scene 2, for instance, the audience watches as Balthazar and Lorenzo overhear the love-talk between Horatio and Bel-Imperia. In language reminiscent of the passage from the *Iliad* quoted earlier, Susan Joy writes "If, in this scene, Balthazar and Lorenzo are placed above, the two levels existing in the text become a visually sinister tableau, from which, vulture-like, the murderers literally descend on their vulnerable prey":¹²

BEL-IMPERIA

But whereon doest thou chiefly meditate?

HORATIO

On dangers past, and pleasures to ensue.

BALTHAZAR

On pleasures past, and dangers to ensue.

BEL-IMPERIA

What dangers and what pleasures dost thou mean?
HORATIO
Dangers of war and pleasures of our love.
LORENZO
Dangers of death, but pleasures none at all.
(11.2. 26-31)

The neo-Senecan stychomythia emphasises, line for line, the flat contradiction between the lovers' preoccupations and those of their (concealed) audiences, on and off the stage. The real-world audience at this point is contemplating a triple-perspective while working away at a fourth, namely its own. We sympathise with the hapless couple, we recognise the 'vulture-like' motives driving the concealed Balthazar and Lorenzo, we are aware of the even more elevated perspective we share with the watching Don Andrea and Revenge, and we are ourselves grappling with the multiple verbal ironies echoing across this poised structure of impending dramatic ironies. As the play moves forward, we watch with Revenge and the ghostly Don Andrea as they watch the Kings of Spain and Portugal, who in turn follow the performances of Lorenzo, Balthazar, Bel-Imperia and Hieronimo in the play *Soliman and Perseda*, whose plot mirrors the play as a whole, and which Hieronimo stages in order to kill all his enemies. This ultimate play-within-the-play undoes the carefully arranged Chinese-box effect of the other plays-within-plays by reducing most of the cast to corpses. Hieronimo reveals to the appalled wedding guests that the supposedly simulated deaths on stage were in fact real. He bites his tongue off on stage to avoid explanation (a grotesquerie usually achieved courtesy of a sliver of raw liver), then tricks the hapless (and guiltless) Duke into giving him a knife, stabs the Duke and kills himself.

The effect is at once deeply estranging and vivifying, not something that can be intuited merely from studying the text.* The inarticulacy of the corpses speaks volumes, a pungent enactment of the philosophical point made abstractly by the entrance of the figure of Death in the Bellini *finale* discussed above. The cast of the play-within-the-play thought they were acting a multiple murder; they were in fact living it. What if the cast of *The Spanish Tragedy* were similarly tricked and deluded? And we ourselves? – this is the pendant question. Only our privileged fictive position as transcendent observers shelters us from comparable catastrophe and delusion. We are finally situated, with Revenge and Don Andrea, on the fringes of the imagined

world, disempowered and alone, to evaluate the farrago of tangled ironies we have witnessed, something a great deal more disconcerting than the superficial judgments handed down by Don Andrea and Revenge to officially conclude the piece. What energises Kyd's play is the tension between limited human motivation and awareness (here the desire for personal revenge as a form of justice) and ineluctable submission to an ultimate cosmic verdict which plays havoc with any such conscious intervention. The denouement illustrates Schopenhauer's thought-provoking contention that life is organised for the species and cares nothing for the individual.¹³ The collapse of the transcendent perspectives Kyd builds into his play turns serious, responsible human intent into a particularly bleak and desperate form of 'playing', and the audience is left to synthesise a disconcerting epistemological residue of ironies.

As the example of *The Spanish Tragedy* suggests, the power of the theatrical metaphor has much to do with the staged representation of transcendence and its ambiguous collapse into irony. Yet, oddly, and all appearances to the contrary, the unique creative surge of the renaissance in England was not, fundamentally, directed towards transcendence, to that straightforward upward striving for the heavenly city assumed in different ways by philosophy and religion, but instead one of lateral exploration, not only geographical exploration, but political and psychological exploration. It was a pulling against the great hierarchical myths of order inherited from Plato and Aristotle and elaborated by the scholastics. Earlier, in the Italian Renaissance, we note the awe with which the complex figure of Petrarch was regarded, indeed the stress and puzzlement which his own variousness created in the poet himself. With Petrarch, the fiction of singular identity, of the stable role and occupation, undergoes seemingly limitless lateral extrapolation as he matches his literary variety to the range of his interests. He becomes the lover, the textual scholar, the mysterious secular recluse, the confidante and friend, the Christian, the national poet, above all, the exile, the weary wanderer athirst in the desert of his times. In place of a fixed and delimited social character, the medieval stereotype, Petrarch seemingly challenges himself to live out a rich basket of roles, and to dramatise his variousness as the key to his public persona.¹⁴

Petrarch was ahead of himself, exceptional, a monument to the discovery of the malleability of the self. He was also a fore-runner of the Renaissance preoccupation with self-fashioning so ably explored by Stephen Greenblatt in his early book.¹⁵ The triumph of early modern drama starts from measuring actual life, actual people and events, against transcendent ontological schemes inherited from the past. This lateral exploration finds expression in the multifarious manuals purporting to establish the ideal character of particular institutions or occupations. One thinks of Castiglione's *Courtier*, Elyot's *Magistrate*, and Ascham's *Scholemaster*, while More's *Utopia* and Bacon's *New Atlantis* set out to re-fashion whole societies. Alberti studies the Florentine family, Machiavelli, the prince or ruler.¹⁶ In such writings, the variousness of social roles is being elaborated laterally in a manner analogous to the way in which Petrarch had explored the complexity of his own being. These exploratory works express an emergent confidence in the formative power of education in the broadest sense, sounding perhaps the keynote of humanism; but one of the most striking features of this development was its uncertainty about vertical limits, its problematic relation to transcendent aspiration. Often the theatrical metaphor is called on to ironise the transcendent impulse.

The brashest of claims to the liberty of infinite upward mobility in a metaphysical sense is to be found in Giovanni Pico's *Oration*, followed closely by Vives' *Fabula de Homine*. In the former, God tells humanity, "thou - - - shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature - - - thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine".¹⁷ In the latter Vives writes: "The gods were not expecting to see him ['man'] in more shapes when, behold, he was remade into one of their own race, surpassing the nature of man and relying entirely upon a very wise mind".¹⁸ There seems in these thinkers to be not only a pervasive uncertainty as to the limits of humane learning, but an ardent faith in its capacity to take humanity beyond the human. Delight in the power of intellectual formation achievable through study merges imperceptibly with doctrines of transcendence. *Humanitatis* melds into hermeticism without embarrassment. Pico can laud magic as "the utter perfection of natural philosophy" (247), while at the same time telling us that the magus weds "earth to heaven, that is, he weds lower things to the endowments and powers of higher things" (249). We are not far from the cry of Marlowe's Faustus, "a sound magician is a mighty god" (I.1.64)¹⁹ or, indeed, from

Shakespeare's Prospero, whose magical powers have been fostered by his apprenticeship to "closeness" (I.2.90) and "the liberal arts" (I.2.73).

Pico's *Oration* and Vives's *Fable* are each framed in terms of the theatre, Pico's work fleetingly in Abd Allah's opening claim that on this stage of the world, "There is nothing to be seen more wonderful than man" (223); and in Vives's *Fable*, which has as its organising principle the conceit of the world as Jupiter's theatre, we read:

Thereupon, all of a sudden, at a command of mighty Jupiter, since he was all-powerful, by whom alone all things are done, this whole world appeared, so large, so elaborate, so diversified, and beautiful in places, just as you see it. This was the amphitheatre: uppermost, to wit in the skies, were the stalls and seats of the divine spectators; nethermost – some say in the middle – the earth was placed as a stage for the appearance of the actors, along with all the animals and everything else.

(387)

Humanity's self-fashioning is a form of acting, of playing a part, challenging old roles and inventing new ones, impersonating the gods by becoming "that multiform Proteus, the son of the Ocean" (389). The big issue, of course, is whether humans can indeed write their own parts, or whether they can only play parts already written for them by the playwright-gods, the whole enterprise being overshadowed with the suspicion that acting is as immoral in its philosophical implications, as it is socially suspect, delicious, and dangerous. We recall the Duke of Gloucester's claim at the climax of his soliloquy in *3 Henry VI*:

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
And cry 'Content!' to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions.

(III.2.182-185)

He will, he tells us

Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could,
And, like a Sinon, take another Troy.
I can add colors to the chameleon,
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
And set the murderous Machiavel to school.

(III.2.189-193)

The speech is a stunning prospectus for his later career as Shakespeare's Richard III, that chameleon-like, protean Machiavel who takes charge of the play from his opening speech. More interesting from our point of view is Hamlet, who has that lateral variousness of character we expect in a renaissance hero, "The courtier's,

soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" (III.1.154) mourned by Ophelia, and who strives to take charge of his predicament through the medium of the actor's art, trying in vain to "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (III.2.17-18), as he has advised his players to do. This is self-fashioning as acting, using art to shape conduct. As Brian Pearce puts it, Hamlet "tries to use his skill as an actor and a dramatist to alter the course of the play in which he is an unwilling victim. The solution that Hamlet seeks is an artistic one. By perfecting his own performance, he hopes to conquer the political realm" (Pearce 2006).²⁰ In the end, of course, he fails in his intent, but succeeds by accident (if one accepts the presumption that Fortinbras is a harbinger of better days). The ancient contest between free will and determinism, freedom and prescience, lies at the heart of this paradox, and close to the heart of the theatrical metaphor. Hamlet captures it very neatly:

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,

Rough-hew them how we will –

(V. 2. 10-11)

Tom Stoppard recounts what he believes to be a well-authenticated story which casts light on the linguistic matrix from which this figure is drawn:

- - - some fifty years ago a man strolling through the leafy lanes near Stratford-upon-Avon came across two men who were working on tidying up the hedge. He stopped to watch them and saw that they were working as a team, the one in front hacking away at the hedge and the one following snipping at it. On being questioned, the old man doing the hacking explained, "Well, you see, I rough-hews them, and he shapes their ends."

(12-13)²¹

This at base is the same gap between mere human apprehension and an inscrutable cosmic plan we saw in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, conceived here somewhat more modestly from the standpoint of humanity rather than those vulture-like playwright-gods. The figure teasingly amends the traditionally vertical trajectory of spiritual aspiration, the conventional ontological perspective, for one which emphasises an ironical thwarting of ordinary human intent by supplementary divine intervention. Hamlet is consciously far from a Marlovian over-reacher. Indeed, his interjection at II.2.312 reads like a deliberate challenge to the exuberant paeans of transcendent afflatus offered by men such as Pico and Vives:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble
in reason, how infinite in faculty, 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 dust?

(II.2.305-310)

He expressly cautions his actors not to “o’erstep - - the modesty of nature” (III.2.19). Yet, as we see from his behaviour and language, for example in the grave-digger scene, he can ignore his own advice and strut and bellow with the best of them: “This is I, /Hamlet the Dane” (V.1.253-4). This complex contradictoriness, a kind of Petrarchan variousness melding with early modern naturalism, contributes to what Rosenberg describes as the “asymmetry” of Hamlet’s character, noting that he is:

One who can love and hate, mourn and rejoice, befriend and destroy, have faith and doubt and cheer and heart-ache, seek meaning in this life and the next, hope and be hopeless, laugh and weep, meditate and do, philosophize and politicize, seem mad and sane, tell truth and lies, speak soaring poetry and salty prose and sing jingles, play and fight, contrive and fall prey to contrivance, worship one parent and scorn another, cherish and kill – a troubled mortal, and an actor acting one.

(ix-x)²²

This suggestive description of Hamlet’s asymmetry, a paradoxical richness of character that threatens any simple assessment, nudges me towards a further speculation about the relation between transcendence and dramatic irony on the Renaissance stage. In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein has written:

The reason why I cannot understand Shakespeare is that I want to find symmetry in all this asymmetry. His pieces give me an impression as of enormous *sketches* rather than of paintings; as though they had been *dashed off* by someone who can permit himself *anything*, so to speak.

(85)

Shakespeare’s art accepts and rejoices in contingency. Yet art must have form. I suspect that Wittgenstein’s distinction between a sketch and a painting, and his preference for the latter, stems from his sense that a sketch remains implicated in the contingency of the world, it is a tentative model that both hints at, mis-takes and draws on the reality towards which it gestures; whereas a painting lays claim to some kind of autonomous interpretive completeness, like the mirroring picture-world of the *Tractatus*. In contrast, when Wittgenstein characterises his later philosophical effort, in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, it is in terms of a partially ordered but ultimately unsatisfactory collection of sketches and observations made while journeying in a landscape, some retained for later contemplation, many others rejected as inadequate.²³ Perhaps Wittgenstein’s amusingly peevish frustration with

Shakespeare arises from the extent to which the multiple ironies his plays generate leave even the most sophisticated audience with an immense amount of work still to do. Attempting to diagnose “Wittgenstein’s malaise”, George Steiner mischievously cites “a Continental (or, at least, gallic) instinct for orderly, closed forms of vision”.²⁴ No *one*, adequately realised performance or interpretation will suffice with Shakespeare. The finished painting fails to appear. Instead the audience is compelled to work away at a never-to-be completed synthesis, assessing rich dialogic interchanges between characters and situations, while oscillating between the privileged, vulture-like vantage-point of the spectator and feelings of intense empathy with what is happening on stage. The theatre-metaphor offers the audience a putative transcendence, while the purpose of dramatic irony is ultimately to force the audience to enter the imaginary world as active participants. Transcendence and irony must stay in motile tension for the notion of theatre as a metaphor for life to strike home for the audience.

When we look to the plays most commonly acknowledged to represent the apex of Shakespeare’s concern with the theatrical metaphor, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*, what is not sufficiently acknowledged is that their tricky theatricality is matched by an equally powerful, if more subtle, freighting of anti-theatrical, anti-transcendent irony. The statue scene in *The Winter’s Tale*, that *coup de théâtre* which resolves and dissolves the play’s thematic preoccupations, is obviously to be understood in terms both of natural and theatrical magic, as both miracle and trickery. Once more we see gestures towards transcendence being undercut by theatricality and in consequence provoking a demand for ironical synthesis. Paulina is both a benevolent magician – because of the genuine change her actions bring about in Leontes – and a trickster, not too dissimilar from Autolycus, who unbeknownst to everyone preserves Hermione at the cost of deceiving both Leontes and the audience. Her linguistic art which, in partnership with the audience’s greatly abused suspension of disbelief, invokes the illusion of Hermione as a statue, is magnificently fraudulent, and implicates the total theatrical enterprise. The unparalleled deception points directly to mischievous playwright-gods who contrive Paulina as an agent of ‘redemption’, not only for Leontes and his family, but for the audience in the theatre. Read in this way, the play’s profound concern with repentance becomes psychological

rather than miraculous, or rather, miraculous in a resolutely ironical mode. (Think of Wittgenstein's 'duck-rabbit'.²⁵)

This ultimate reduction to the irony of psychological manipulation is not solely a consequence of Shakespeare's preoccupation with the theatrical metaphor. He introduces an inescapable element of psychological realism. In the second scene of Act 1, until line 42, Leontes is presented as a rational man struggling with unwarrantable suspicions concerning his wife's faithfulness. Then Shakespeare does something wholly unprecedented: he dramatises the moment when Leontes' rationality collapses, and he does so in terms borrowed from Renaissance psychology:

Most dear'st, my Collop: can thy Dam, may't be
Affection! Thy Intention stabs the Center.
Thou do'st make possible things not so held,
Communicat'st with Dreames (how can this be?)
With what's vnreall: thou coactiue art,
And fellow'st nothing. Then 'tis very credent,
Thou may'st co-ioyne with something, and thou do'st,
(And that beyond Commission) and I find it,
(And that to the infection of my Braines,
And hardning of my Browes.)
(1.2.137-46)²⁶

Leontes is pursuing rationally the possibility that his excessive perturbation may be the result of an "Affection", a severe mental upheaval occasioned by a delusory psychological image (or "Intention") which plunges to the very centre of his being, by-passing the rational faculty. In other words, the images that torture him of Hermione canoodling with Polixenes may be false, because it is known that such images may on occasion be informed by mere "Dreames" divorced from any basis in reality. Following the caesura in line 42, he reasons as follows: 'If images can cooperate with dreams or delusions, rooted in nothing, how much more can they 'conjoin' (or meld) with realities; and they do, even more than I had anticipated, and it is exactly as I feared: I am a cuckold.' The tortured syntax renders graphically for the actor the terrifying overthrow of Leontes' rational judgment.²⁷ Shakespeare thus provides a naturalistic explanation for the disruption of the Sicilian court, one which in effect ironises the full sweep of moral transgression and repentance that follows in the course of the play. Any reasonably cheerful interpretation of *The Winter's Tale* involving transcendent playwright-gods, patrons of tragicomedy, who contrive the

play's sombre emotional resolution culminating in the statue scene, is drastically undermined by the knowledge that these same gods have that vulture-like quality responsible for instigating the initial psychological aberration, that genetically-based synaptic mis-function (to drag the diagnosis into our own age), which sets the painful train of events in motion at the outset.

Turning to *The Tempest*, we find a similar undercutting of theatrical transcendence. We are familiar with readings that stress the play's meta-theatricality; its use of masque-like interventions to teach the good (Ferdinand and Miranda at their betrothal masque) and upbraid the wicked (the "three men of sin" at the vanishing banquet, and Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo in their pursuit by the Ovidian spirit-hounds), and the rich, overarching sense of life as a dream, ephemeral as a play. The second scene recasts "the direful spectacle of the wreck" as magical illusion; the collapse of the betrothal masque in Act 4 leaves not a rack behind (think of the sound of the word); and audience applause is to fill the sails of an imaginary vessel sending the disenchanted mage back to Naples and Milan. The proliferation of illusions is grounded in the assertion that life itself will prove an insubstantial pageant. This is what Johan Huizinga meant when he wrote in *Homo Ludens* (1944) of the Renaissance play-metaphor being "little more than an echo of the Neo-platonism that was then in vogue, with a markedly moralistic accent. It was a variation on the ancient theme of the vanity of things".²⁸

To leave it at that is to accept the educative power of theatrical transcendence and miss the residual irony bobbing in the undercurrent of sadness *The Tempest* leaves in its silvery wake. The triumph of Prospero's art climaxes when Miranda and Ferdinand are discovered in his cell, quietly playing a game of chess, an aristocratic game which is at once a metaphor for the mating game, and emblematic of the successful political, diplomatic and dynastic games their forthcoming union anticipates. The vignette is a moralising re-write of Virgil, where the equivalent episode is the unhallowed coupling of Dido and Aeneas in the cave, a *faux pas* that almost derails Aeneas's imperial mission to found Rome. In this sense, Prospero's art is immensely powerful, triumphantly successful, a portent for a new empire in the making. But there is a little-noticed passage of meta-theatrical commentary in *The Tempest*, a counter-weight

which proves illuminating. In Act two Scene one, Sebastian says of the good old councillor, Gonzalo:

SEBASTIAN: I think he will carry this island home in his pocket,
And give it his son for an apple.

And Antonio replies:

ANTONIO: And sowing the kernels of it in the sea, bring forth more islands.
(11.1.89-92)

There exists a well-attested strain of proverbial reference treating apples as a cure for inappropriate sexual ardour. Sebastian is mocking Gonzalo as the senex of classical comedy who would thwart nature by attempting to curb his offspring's sexual urges (something Prospero succeeds in with Miranda and Ferdinand, as we have seen). In so doing, according to Antonio's sardonic response, he inadvertently gives rise, thanks to the discarded apple seeds or kernels, to a proliferation of islands, each presumably as unsatisfactory in the jaundiced view of Antonio and Sebastian, as the one on which they are presently stranded. The hint of onanism here, the scattering of "unproductive" seed, helps dramatise the tension between two of the plays most profound preoccupations: the contrast and contest between biological and dramatic ways of reproducing the world or, to put it another way, between the drama of generation and the generation of drama.²⁹

Immediately preceding the apple topos, Gonzalo's identification of contemporary Tunis with ancient Carthage, mocked by Antonio in the reference to Amphion's miraculous harp, together with his utopian prospectus for the island's future governance in the Golden Age speech shortly thereafter, places him in the line of visionary artists and heroes, such as Amphion and Orpheus, who give rise to cities by means of music and eloquence. Antonio and Sebastian (together with all the villains in the Shakespearean canon) clearly belong to the counter-tradition, the tradition of Cain and Romulus, where cities are founded or taken through cunning, treachery, siege and rape. Sebastian's reference to the apple deftly places "imagination" (and, by implication, plays and "playing") among anodyne visions unsuited to the world of *realpolitik*; on a par with the otherworldly sexual communalism characteristic of

Gonzalo's primitivist ideal (see note 28, above). After all, it was Prospero's neglect of his princely duties in favour of exploring the world of art that led to the initial usurpation.

Huizinga's great book, *Homo Ludens*, was shaped in part by its genesis during the Nazi scourge. Hitler claimed he was serious, that he was building a thousand-year Reich. Huizinga told us he was really playing a game, a deadly, brutal, futile game, but a game; and that authentic civilisation is also built on games, but quite different ones. We see many of them in Shakespeare's plays; games of education, contests of eloquence, passages of diplomacy, plays enacted to catch the conscience of the king, songs and catches sung to define forever a mood or a moment. All such games are characterised by rule-governed ethical aspiration. In this sense they offer us models; not sterile desert islands but fleeting Platonic forms. They point away from the legacy of Cain and Romulus, of Antonio and Sebastian, and towards Hippolyta's "something of great constancy" (see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* V.1.26), something that emerges unasked when we play properly, when we nurture cities on music, theatre and eloquence, and learn to treasure Yeats's "Monuments of unaging intellect" ("Sailing to Byzantium").³⁰ Unfortunately, many of those most expert in these games, like Prospero, forget all too readily "the conspiracy of the foul beast Caliban against my life", and until Caliban, in his complex contemporary forms, is offered and accepts a proper place in the city, our revels will continue to be disrupted, and the cloud-capp'd towers will continue to fall. This is an irony Shakespeare insisted upon.

My thesis here is a deceptively simple one, namely, that the power and suggestiveness goes out of the theatre metaphor to the extent that claims for transcendence lose their hold on the human imagination. When the possibility of transcendence fades, what remains is mere irony. We should remember that other roughly contemporaneous Prospero figure from Spain, Don Quixote.³¹ (Shakespeare borrowed from his story for the lost play *Cardenio*.) Where Shakespeare's Prospero loses his lands because his nose is buried in books which he prizes above his dukedom, and only regains them because this hermetic study proves fruitful and providence connives, our Spanish Prospero sells his lands to buy books, wonderful romance nonsenses that fuddle his head and fuel his forlorn and belated quest for chivalric fulfilment. This is Prospero in the age of the novel. The variousness is there, the shaggy asymmetry of contingent

life, the poignant aspiration is there. But belief in transcendent possibility has become matter for gentle fun and constant mockery, while the lesson the Don is so persistently unwilling to learn is that of disillusionment, the *leitmotif* of the novel form.

It will not have gone unremarked that this essay is, in some respects, a-historical. This is deliberate. Contemporary theatre studies seem all too often caught in a sterile conflict between versions of ‘historicism’ and ‘presentism’, with theatre historians making their tangential contributions from the sidelines by tracking diachronic shifts in theatrical conventions. The concept of irony, which under the aegis of the New Criticism once proffered almost talismanic interpretive currency, still has the potential to demarcate a zone of apprehension standing outside the contest between historicism and current relevance. It challenges the sophisticated audience or reader in all ages, going beyond the historian’s question ‘What does this mean?’, to pose the ultimately more important corollary, ‘What does this mean *to me*?’ Irony is not an answer, but a call to respond and judge, either as transcendent ‘vultures’ or with the life’s blood, as the bodies on the stage (‘dead’ or alive) so tellingly remind us.

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Note

* The comment is based on Michael Bogdanov’s 1982 production at the National Theatre in London, with Michael Bryant as Hieronimo.

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