

# The New Criterion

April 2016

A monthly review *edited by Roger Kimball*

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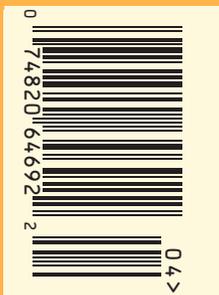
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# The New Criterion *April 2016*

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# Notes & Comments: April 2016

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## *Glaciers and sex*

Taxpayers of Oregon, Unite! You have nothing to lose but your drive!

We'll come back to the picked pockets of Oregon in a moment. First, another allusion to Karl Marx. Even those of our readers who, having led charmed lives, are innocent of the writings of that pestilential sage will have caught the allusion to *The Communist Manifesto*. They doubtless also will recognize what might be Marx's single best line, from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."

A curious feature of this phenomenon is how the goal posts for what counts as tragedy and what counts as farce keep moving. Back in 1946, George Orwell observed that "In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning." Fast forward a few decades and you have the owlsh gibberish of deconstruction, the inanities of postcolonial studies, and kindred exercises in polysyllabic grievance-mongering, not to mention the grimly risible productions from the repellent partisans of "gender studies."

The late Denis Dutton, the founder of the storied Arts & Letters website, performed a public service when, in the mid-1990s, he inaugurated the Bad Writing Contest in his maga-

zine *Philosophy and Literature*. Running from 1995 to 1998, this competition provided a salutary warning to parents and students of what sort of rubbish they were likely to encounter in their sojourn in the hallowed halls of academia. The winner in 1996 was the philosopher Roy Bhaskar, founder of the movement known as "Critical Realism." Just how real the movement was you might be able to gather from a snippet of a sentence from the first prize-winning piece—yes, it's just part of one sentence:

Indeed dialectical critical realism may be seen under the aspect of Foucauldian strategic reversal — of the unholy trinity of Parmenidean/Platonic/Aristotelean provenance; of the Cartesian-Lockean-Humean-Kantian paradigm, of foundationalisms (in practice, fideistic foundationalisms) and irrationalisms (in practice, capricious exercises of the will-to-power or some other ideologically and/or psycho-somatically buried source) new and old alike; of the primordial failing of western philosophy, ontological monovalence, and its close ally, the epistemic fallacy with its ontic dual . . .

Someone actually published this catastrophe.

Professor Bhaskar (who died in 2014) was moderately eminent but was no academic superstar. Several winners of the Bad Writing Contest, however, were conspicuous lights in that tenebrous firmament. Consider, for example, the winner for 1997, the celebrated Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson, as glittering an academic cynosure as the processes of tenure produced in the later part of the twentieth century. His win-

ning contribution to world knowledge was the opening sentence of his book *Signature of the Visible*: “The visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object; while the most austere films necessarily draw their energy from the attempt to repress their own excess (rather than from the more thankless effort to discipline the viewer).”

But perhaps our favorite winner from the annals of the Bad Writing Contest was the angry feminist philosopher Judith Butler, another academic celebrity, who perpetrated this gem of opacity:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

Gosh.

One thing to notice about these examples is the way they combine bloviating unintelligibility with a certain patina of *menace*. This is particularly the case with the specimens from Professors Jameson (what can it possibly have meant to say that “the visual is essentially the pornographic”—“essentially,” forsooth) and Butler (“hegemony,” “power relations,” etc.).

You might be tempted to think that this verbal confetti is meaningless. That is not quite right. It is evidence of cognitive failure, no doubt, and an even more thoroughgoing moral collapse. But such verbal productions are not quite meaningless. They are so prized in the academy because they are effective ambassadors of a message: not an intellectual message, to be sure. As the philosopher David Stove observed of such writing, the intellectual content of feminism, Marxism, deconstruction, etc. is  $0 + 0 + 0 = 0$ .

But utterances can be devoid of intellectual content and still carry an emotional or political payload. And that’s the significance of such utterances from Professors Bhaskar, Jameson, and Butler and their many, many academic *confrères* (and *soeurs*). It is just possible that the perpetrators of such prose actually believe they are saying something—that they believe, we mean, that their vatic ululations possess some discernible cognitive content. The adulation that they are accorded by their peers would doubtless serve to reinforce this delusion. In their heart of hearts, however, unless they are mad, they must suspect the truth: that the nonsense they produce as a spider excretes its web has meaning only in so far as it embodies a certain *negative attitude*, what Lionel Trilling, way back in the 1950s, called the “adversary culture of the intellectuals.”

We have, in these pages, had regular occasion to peek into the dismal workshops where the witches’ brew of these semantic abortions is concocted. These opaque gems from the recent past seem almost fusty now in the age of “micro-aggressions,” “safe spaces,” and “trigger warnings.” The campus battles now seem louder, more guttural, more visceral: they feature spoiled undergraduates screaming obscenities at their college masters (though of course we must no longer call them “masters”) and agitated female professors at university rallies calling for “muscle” to shut down free debate. And yet even now a verbal sausage of such spectacular preposterousness is occasionally vouchsafed us that a titter—half of despair, half of amusement—can be heard throughout the land. And this brings us to the weary taxpayers of the great state of Oregon. For the distinction of perpetrating the latest such gift from Babel goes to Mark Carey, a dean and professor of history at the Robert D. Clark Honors College at the University of Oregon, who, with three co-authors, recently published an essay called “Glaciers, gender and science: A feminist glaciology framework for global environmental change research.” This 14,000-word knot of politically correct gibberish was published in *Progress in Human Geography*, “the peer-review journal of choice for those wanting to know about the state of the art in all areas of human geography research.” Note that they say *all* areas.

Longtime readers will remember our report in 1996 on the so-called “Sokal Hoax,” the publication of an essay called “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” in the trendy lit-crit journal *Social Text*. Written by the physicist Alan Sokal, it was deliberately the purest nonsense. He sent it to *Social Text* to make a point: that arrant nonsense could be published by today’s “peer-reviewed” academic establishment so long as it was dressed up in the right sort of trendy jargon. Sokal sprinkled lots of deconstructionist fairy dust throughout his article. “It has become increasingly apparent,” he writes near the beginning of the essay, “that physical ‘reality,’ no less than social ‘reality,’ is at bottom a social and linguistic construct,” that “scientific ‘knowledge,’ so far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it,” etc., etc. Note the masterly deployment of deflationary scare quotes around the terms of cognitive or existential achievement, as if reality were not real or knowledge, knowledge.

Sokal’s impish trick was the occasion of much consternation among the academic brotherhood, much hilarity and contempt in the world at large. When we first encountered the handiwork of Professor Carey and his colleagues, we suspected it was Sokal redux, a hoax. But no. It is utterly in earnest, but not a whit less witless than Alan Sokal’s delicious send-up. Behold: “A critical but overlooked aspect of the human dimensions of glaciers and global change research is the relationship between gender and glaciers.” Overlooked, eh? “While there has been relatively little research on gender and global environmental change in general, there is even less from a feminist perspective that focuses on gender . . . and also on power, justice, inequality, and knowledge production in the context of ice, glacier change, and glaciology.” How could this be? “Feminist theories and critical epistemologies [?]—especially feminist political ecology and feminist postcolonial science studies—open up new perspectives and analyses of the history of glaciological knowledge.” Do they now? “Given the prominent place of glaciers both within the social imaginary of climate change and in global environmental change research, a feminist approach has im-

portant present-day relevance for understanding the dynamic relationship between people and ice”—really, this goes on for twenty-four pages. The authors propose to “decipher how gender affects the individuals producing glacier-related knowledges,” “to analyze how power, domination, colonialism, and control—undergirded by and coincident with masculinist ideologies—have shaped glacier-related sciences,” etc.

And this is just what Kierkegaard would call a “preliminary expeoration.” The deep purpose of this travesty is to “decenter the natural sciences,” i.e., call into question their objective and cognitive success. Along the way, there is an abundance of inadvertently hilarious PC filigree. Quoting one authority, the authors explain that glaciers are “willful, capricious, easily excited by human intemperance, but equally placated by quick-witted human responses. Proper behavior is deferential. I was warned, for instance, about firm taboos against ‘cooking with grease’ near glaciers that are offended by such smells. . . . Cooked food, especially fat, might grow into a glacier overnight if improperly handled.” Pity competes with contempt. Pity abdicates.

Responding to the tsunami of ridicule that greeted this travesty, Professor Carey sniffed that “nonspecialists” were not up to understanding the intricacies of his “research.” As if. And although the taxpayers in Oregon should demand an accounting—why are their tax dollars paying for such tendentious rubbish?—so should the rest of us. For Professor Carey’s preposterous piece of politically correct pseudo-research was supported in part by a “continuing grant” of \$412,930 from the National Science Foundation, that is, from the fisc supported by U.S. taxpayers.

George Orwell understood that bad writing was generally the sign of bad thinking. But even he didn’t appreciate quite how out of touch with reality pampered intellectuals could get. The bad writing we have adduced here betokens not just cognitive confusion but a deep moral failing: a failure to face up to the basic realities of our common life. So-called “higher” education in America *circa* 2016 is anything but “higher.” The question is, how long will a credulous public go on supporting an enterprise that is not only irrelevant to the better aspirations of our culture but are positively antithetical to them.

# The Jacobean dramatist

by Denis Donoghue

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James Shapiro believes, and so do I, that Shakespeare's plays and poems were written, on the whole, by one William Shakespeare, "a young man of ill condition, a lout from Stratford," as Henry James, in conversation with Percy Lubbock, quaintly called him. In *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (2010), Professor Shapiro examined the evidence in favor of other Elizabethans for whom a claim of authorship of the plays and poems had been made, notably Francis Bacon and Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford. He conceded that "literature in support of alternative candidates—both print and digital—dwarfs that defending Shakespeare's claim." No matter: he ended with a strong chapter in favor of Shakespeare. Many readers have found that chapter decisive, and have thanked Shapiro for closing a not-endlessly-exciting debate.

I am one of the grateful. I demur only at one point, where Shapiro lists Henry James among the Baconians. He was never a paid-up member. Shapiro quotes a sentence from James's letter of August 26, 1903 to Violet Hunt which goes as far as he was prepared to go. I take the point of the italicized *almost*.

I can only express my general sense by saying that I find it *almost* as impossible to conceive that Bacon wrote the plays as to conceive that the man from Stratford, as we know the man from Stratford, did.

Shapiro comments: "Bacon was an unlikely candidate, but Shakespeare unlikelier still." But

the qualification, "as we know the man from Stratford," is ambiguous.

Besides, when James was a theater critic, he knew Shakespeare when he heard him. In Act I of *Richard III*, Gloucester says to Anne:

No, when my father York and Edward wept,  
To hear the piteous moan that Rutland made  
When black-fac'd Clifford shook his sword at  
him.

The bravado of that phrase, "black-faced Clifford," convinced James that he was attending a play by the Master, the lout from Stratford. Further: three years after his letter to Violet Hunt, he wrote an "Introduction to *The Tempest*" for Vol. XVI of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by Sir Sidney Lee. He took the date of "its first recorded performance" as February 1613. Modern scholarship, including Shapiro's, has settled for November 1, 1611 as the likelier date. James talks himself into a mystery, where there is not even a problem. How could Shakespeare, he asks, at the height of his powers, having written such a transcendent play as *The Tempest*, give up the theater, and "spend what remained to him of life in walking about a small, squalid country-town with his hands in his pockets and an ear for no music now but the clink of the coin they might turn over there"? Like many other readers, James takes Prospero's speech in Act IV—"Our revels now are ended"—as Shakespeare's farewell to the stage and to London, "his own self-despoilment, his considered

purpose, at this date, of future silence.” He finds that silence incomprehensible. In the end, he says, Shakespeare the man is not to be found anywhere, he sinks into the artist, and the artist sinks further into “the lucid stillness of his style.” “The subject to be treated” in *The Tempest* “was the simple fact (if one may call anything in the matter simple) that refinement, selection, economy, the economy not of poverty, but of wealth a little weary of congestion—the very air of the lone island and the very law of the Court celebration—were here implied and imperative things.” The congestion, I assume, is the crowdedness of the histories and tragedies, and the density of the language that answered those demanding occasions. James’s sentences in the essay on *The Tempest* coil around the shadow of Shakespeare until it begins to recede and in the end to disappear. But it is Shakespeare who disappears. There has never been a sign of Bacon or Oxford. Nor is there a mystery. After *The Tempest*, Shakespeare wrote, or partly wrote, at least three plays: *King Henry VIII* (a collaboration with John Fletcher, performed on June 29, 1613), *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (again with Fletcher, performed some time in 1613), and a lost play, still with Fletcher, *The History of Cardenio* (1612–1613). He did not give up. He retired to Stratford in proper course to put his domestic and commercial life in order. Meanwhile, if Shapiro is right, Shakespeare is “a man who mingles easily with princes and paupers but who deep down is fundamentally private and inscrutable.” He saw enough of princes by walking the picture galleries of the Queen’s palaces in which his theater company often played, and observing the “who’s in, who’s out” of her Court. He saw enough of paupers by walking, eyes open, the streets of London.

In *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1996), Shapiro calls himself “a cultural historian.” That seems right. He does not present himself as a literary critic, though he has a pretty good hand with that discipline, too. When a hard question of language or close reading arises, he directs readers to Frank Kermode’s *Shakespeare’s Language*. Shapiro does not offer to lead his readers through the plays, as Harley Granville-

Barker did with his Prefaces. He assumes that we know the plays well enough to follow his references. Mostly, he mentions a scene or a speech without analyzing it: that mention, he thinks, is enough. But I wish he would do more close work. I still recall the thrill of reading William Empson’s commentary, in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, on Macbeth’s speech:

Come, seeling night,  
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;  
And with thy bloody and invisible hand  
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond  
Which keeps me pale.

Shapiro has other commitments. He understands that the duty of an historian is to propose a master narrative to enable us to understand an era. A cultural historian brings forward relations among several contemporary or near-contemporary episodes, as if to say that readers of the play will have a keener sense of it if they are aware of these episodes and of the relations proposed among them. Sometimes the items brought into relation are ideas, sometimes political acts, sometimes violences of weather—a summer plague, and its deaths. For instance, these three: In 1599 Queen Elizabeth dispatched a ragamuffin army under the Earl of Essex to put down a revolt in Ireland led by Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone. On Ash Wednesday of that year, Lancelot Andrewes delivered a sermon in the royal chapel of Richmond Castle on Deuteronomy 23:9: “When the host goeth forth against thine enemies, then keep thee from every wicked thing.” And at the same time, Shakespeare was finishing *Henry V* in which Henry, addressing Westmoreland at Agincourt, recites, as Shapiro says, “the two strands of Andrewes’s argument in this sermon: the theological justification for an aggressive offensive war and the need for those who go off to war to purge themselves of sin.” Shapiro brings forward these three events which we are urged to hold in our minds: he doesn’t prescribe the orders of their magnitude, or say whether or not one of them might be allowed to stay at the back of one’s mind.

For Shapiro, the play's eventually the thing. But before that, the other plays in its vicinity. In *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* (2005) he studied the plays of that year, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, and a draft of *Hamlet*. In *The Year of Lear* the plays are *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.<sup>1</sup> In no particular order thereafter Shapiro recognizes the playwright, the other playwrights with whom Shakespeare worked in immediate or remembered rivalry—mainly Marlowe and Jonson, according to Shapiro's *Rival Playwrights* (1991)—or worked in cooperation, as in the several plays that issued from many hands, Shakespeare's but also those of Peele, Middleton, Wilkins, and Fletcher, the hands also inspected in Brian Vickers's *Shakespeare, Co-Author* (2002). Shapiro then turns to the theaters, the actors, the audiences, the local conditions, and finally—but not always finally—the social and political events, inescapable, in “early modern England,” as he calls it. After these—perhaps too long after them—there is Shakespeare's imagination, which is respected but gets only a walk-on part.

Shapiro likes to give himself some space. Sometimes a word—but not any word—is enough to set his researches astir. *Shakespeare and the Jews* is a study of those two entities and of the relations between them, but it is also a history of Jews as presences in England between the fifteenth century and the eighteenth. Shapiro does not confine himself to Shakespeare's vital dates, 1564 to 1616. He asks: What is a Jew? Are there several versions of being a Jew? What is an Englishman? What about a mixed marriage, Jew and Gentile, and a child of such? What did English citizens think of Jews? What about the anti-Semitic riots in England in 1595? What did Shakespeare feel about Jews? (Impossible to say.) What did it mean to claim, as some Jews did in March 1656 after the outbreak of war with Spain and the declaration that all Spanish goods and shipping were lawful prize, that their legal status was that of “the Hebrew

1 *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*, by James Shapiro; Simon & Schuster, 356 pages, \$30.

nation and religion”? Shapiro examines these questions, and a hundred more. But it is typical of his concerns that he concentrates on the word “alien” as Portia, disguised as the doctor of laws Balthasar, uses it in IV.1 of *The Merchant of Venice* when Shylock tries to leave the court:

Tarry, Jew:

The law hath yet another hold on you.  
It is enacted in the laws of Venice,  
If it be prov'd against an alien  
That by direct or indirect attempts  
He seek the life of any citizen,  
The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive  
Shall seize one half his goods; the other half  
Comes to the privy coffer of the state;  
And the offender's life lies in the mercy  
Of the duke only, 'gainst all other voice.

Shapiro reports that “many readers, and I count myself among them, have found something troubling about this speech.” I wonder why. This is a play, a work of fiction, not a sermon or an essay. Portia as Balthasar is presented as a brilliant defense counsel, indeed a trickster. She has already defeated Shylock with the tricks of the “pound of flesh,” “nothing but the penalty,” and “thou diest and all thy goods are confiscate.” “The law hath yet another hold on you” is the final blow. That is the force of the laconic “Tarry, Jew.” It is the Venetian equivalent of punitive damages in a modern court. Shapiro comments:

Venetian society cannot punish Shylock because he is a Jew. But in the terms of the play it can convict him as a threatening alien. In order to accomplish this delicate maneuver in the space of these dozen lines, the nature of Shylock's difference is reconstituted: a Jew at the start of the speech, three lines later he is an alien. Yet once Shylock is convicted as an alien, he can be punished, not as an alien, but as a Jew, who must “presently become a Christian.”

Of the nouns in Balthasar's speech, the crucial ones are “Jew,” “alien,” and “citizen,” each prominent at the end of its verse line. Antonio is a citizen, Shylock is not. He is both a Jew

and an alien; he does not cease to be the one by being called the other. He remains differently vulnerable in each designation. Besides, it is Antonio, not the Duke or Balthasar, who demands that Shylock become a Christian; and he makes this demand as one part of a bargain. The other part is that Shylock will have the use of half his wealth for the rest of his life. When Balthasar asks him, "Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?" he says: "I am content."

Shapiro notes that the conversion of the Jews was at least a talking point in the later years of Elizabeth's reign. In Chapter XI of his Epistle, Paul said to the Romans: "And so all Israel shall be saved." That promise could not be voided, but if you asked when the salvation would be effected, the distancing answer might come: immediately before the Last Judgment. And Andrew Marvell could laugh, in "To His Coy Mistress," at Paul's promise, telling the lady, "And you should, if you please, refuse/ Till the conversion of the Jews," a convenient rhyme. Coercion of Jews into Christianity was pointless: they could not have enriched the social mixture. If it was faith, it was bad faith. It seems right that in *The Merchant of Venice* the conversion should be demanded by the wretched Antonio.

*A Year in the Life* is Shapiro's study of Shakespeare as an Elizabethan dramatist. *The Year of Lear* studies him as a Jacobean. Queen Elizabeth died childless on March 24, 1603, and King James VI of Scots acceded to the throne of England as James I, without fuss, in the same month. Not that the English loved him: on the contrary, they disliked him as a Scot. But he was the only feasible candidate. Philip II's daughter, the Infanta Isabella, did not come into serious consideration. James hoped to persuade Parliament that he was the embodiment of the Union of England and Scotland. In his first speech in England, he said: "What God hath conjoined let no man separate. I am the husband and the whole isle is my lawful wife." But he misjudged the mood of the English; Parliament kept putting legal and other obstacles in his way, commissions set up to discuss problems kept

the problems on the agenda forever. When James died in 1625, he had still not brought Union about. Great Britain did not come into existence till 1707.

The main event in *The Year of Lear* is the Gunpowder Plot—that is, if you take it seriously. Historians of the seventeenth century are divided on the issue. The Plot, discovered on November 5, 1605, was either an immense political crime with acute consequences or an absurd adventure engaged in by thirteen recusant Catholics, which could not have been kept secret. If the Plot had any aim at all, it was not to persuade James to treat Catholics decently but to make England Catholic again, as if his successor could be forced to undo the Reformation, completing the work that James's mother, Mary Queen of Scots, failed to do. The idea may be preposterous, but it had a long minor life. The poet Hopkins expressed it again in the last stanza of "The Wreck of the Deutschland": "Our King back, oh, upon English souls! . . ." "More brightening her, rare-dear Britain, as his reign rolls. . . ." King James, preserved by God, as he claimed, kept the Plot fresh by having it remembered in sermons by William Barlow and other preachers. The fact that it failed was not allowed to matter. Shapiro calls the legal event "a show trial" but he has no doubt that the Plot was a monstrous plan to set on fire sixty barrels of gunpowder at a time when King, Lords, and Commoners were known to be one floor above. He narrates the Plot, crime and punishment, with the skill of a good historical novelist. I hesitate only when he claims, of Guy Fawkes and his associates, that "along with Shakespeare's late plays and the King James Bible, the story commemorated every Fifth of November is the only cultural artifact created during the first decade of King James's reign that still matters four hundred years later." The folk verses, dating from about 1870, begin—

Remember, remember the fifth of November  
The Gunpowder Treason and Plot  
I know of no reason why the Gunpowder  
Treason  
Should ever be forgot.

Perhaps not, but to whom does it matter? The date is—or was—a holiday, a day off, a bit of a romp.

Shapiro's chapters on *Macbeth* in *The Year of Lear* are the most convincing display of his method. The word he brings forward is "equivocation." Before the Gunpowder Plot it was an esoteric word, available mostly to theologians and logicians. But on December 5, 1605, a month after the Plot was discovered, Sir Edward Coke, doing detective work in a chamber of the Inner Temple "wherein Sir Thomas Tresham used to lie," came upon a manuscript of sixty-one pages, a treatise on equivocation, essentially a manual to teach Catholics how to lie under oath. Four methods were described, the fourth being the most insidious, a form of "mental reservation" by which your words and your thoughts are at odds, though as Shapiro explains, "the person with whom you were speaking could have no idea that this was the case." I was not taught by Jesuits, but if I were put under oath, drastic interrogation, and the certainty of torture, I would have no problem in lying, since I believe that my truth is known to God, who understands and forgives. Coke made equivocation public at the trial of the eight surviving plotters on January 27, 1606, explaining what mental reservation meant, the plotters "reserving a secret and private sense inwardly to themselves, whereby they are, by their ghostly fathers, persuaded, that they may safely and lawfully elude any questions, whatsoever." Within no time, the word "equivocation" and its variants were in everyone's mouth, as if a new sin or a new desire had been discovered. So the porter in *Macbeth*, running to open the gate as if it were the gate of Hell, shouts—

Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven: O, come in, equivocator.

The equivocator could not equivocate to heaven, because God already knows the truth. Macbeth, in the last Act, when a messenger tells him that Birnam Wood is coming toward Dunsinane, exclaims,

I pull in resolution, and begin  
To doubt th' equivocation of the fiend  
That lies like truth

"Pull" is textually doubtful, but the OED gives it for "pull" 26d: to check or bring oneself to a stop in any course, as in reining in a horse. "Resolution" is conviction, settled judgment. "Equivocation" is ambiguity, a statement that you could take either way. Macbeth has taken the weird sisters the way he liked, but now he is beginning to take them the hard way. Shapiro gives an elaborate account of the lives and deaths of the Jesuits Robert Southwell, who did not get a chance to equivocate, and Henry Garnet, who did, but to no avail.

Shapiro takes as an event, an intervention in the world, whatever he pays attention to: the three great plays, the social conditions, the theaters, the audience, most of all the Gunpowder Plot. His mind, generous without a fault, moves strongly among these events and their consequences. His books gratify to the extent of their plenitude. Reading them, I have been sure that I was listening to a complete scholar of his subject, a stylist at his choice work.

# Give sorrow words

by Kevin D. Williamson

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Some years ago, when I had the honor of being the theater critic for this journal, it happened that there were two productions of *Macbeth* in the same week, both of which interested me. So I went to see them both. There was another the next week, and then one in Connecticut, and an interesting semi-professional performance in Queens, and I went to those, too. But I hadn't lost my appetite for Shakespeare's shortest tragedy, and so I thought it would be amusing to go see every *Macbeth* I could get to for the next couple of months. As it turns out, there are a lot of *Macbeths* going on at any given time—and, eventually, more *Macbeths* than your typical obsessive-compulsive theater critic has friends to go see *Macbeth* with him. (My advice: go alone.) Over the next couple of years, I saw more productions of the play than I can count or remember, from scrappy little productions in church lofts to Alan Cumming's one-man (almost) version on Broadway.

It is a play for our times.

Shakespeare's political tragedies understand the world and its politics as a kind of vast algebraic equation rendered in iambic pentameter, equations that have to be balanced when one of the variables changes. It is a clockwork universe, a universe-as-machine, an idea that would capture the imaginations of those Enlightenment scientific thinkers who followed shortly behind Shakespeare (the *Principia* was published about eighty years after *Macbeth*), challenging the moral assumptions underpinning Western societies. Samuel Clarke criti-

cized the idea in a letter to Gottfried Leibniz: "The Notion of the World's being a great Machine, going on without the Interposition of God, as a Clock continues to go without the Assistance of a Clockmaker, is the Notion of Materialism and Fate, and tends, (under pretence of making God a Supra-mundane Intelligence,) to exclude Providence and God's Government in reality out of the World." There is a great deal of the supernatural in *Macbeth*, but nothing of the God Whose absence, if only rhetorical here, so worries Clarke. There is no God the Father, nor God the Judge, in *Macbeth*, only pitiless mechanics and the God of Passing Time.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

The cardinal value in Shakespeare's political tragedies is order: a place for every man, and every man in his place. When the great order is upset or inverted, then the machine begins to break down, and the out-of-place cogs and wheels are by remorseless necessity broken and removed. Out of place, the flower of a man's virtue is indistinguishable

from the serpent lurking under it: Macbeth's great virtue is his physical courage, which is expounded upon at some length (some slightly tedious length, in truth) in the play's opening. The will to do what other men will not do, or cannot bring themselves to do, makes heroes: anyone reading an account of the valor of Edward Byers, the Navy SEAL awarded the Medal of Honor in February for deeds in Afghanistan that would be rejected as implausible if they'd been included in a Michael Bay movie script, must be at least as much struck by the fact that he could do what he did as that he would. But that superhuman courage is deeply and intricately related to the inhuman extremities to which the men against whom Byers et al. fought are willing to go: burning children to death in cages, raping women to death, etc. In both cases it bears meditating upon the literal meaning of an often asked rhetorical question: how could they bring themselves to do it? At a moment in time in which a likely major-party presidential nominee cheerfully contemplates murdering the families of suspected terrorists as a national-security prophylactic, the Keyzer Soze theory of political power comes into play: "They realized that to be in power, you didn't need guns or money or even numbers. You just needed the will to do what the other guy wouldn't."

Macbeth has half a will to do what the other guy wouldn't:

I dare do all that may become a man;  
Who dares do more, is none.

The other half he borrows from his wife.

Lady Macbeth appeals to the supernatural ("Come, you spirits . . . you murdering ministers . . . sightless substance"), but in reality her concerns are strictly biological: "Unsex me here." There is a certain irony there: Treason and assassination are a man's work. She may be eager to cajole her husband into stepping out of his own place into the king's, but it is assumed from the beginning that she cannot do that herself, stepping out of the feminine world of manipulation into the masculine world of murder. Poor Shakespeare, creature

of the dark ages that he was, had never heard of "gender affirmation surgery."

On that subject, *Macbeth* contains with it what surely is the darkest and the strangest example of sexual ambiguity in all of Shakespeare's work, a situation with which the playwright had an obvious fascination not entirely explained by his weakness for shaggy-dog plot devices: the Weird Sisters. One would think that, given the current state of cultural politics in theater, a genuine episode of sexual ambiguity would be capitalized on to the maximum by our contemporary producers. Oddly enough, that has seldom been the case. Instead, the witches more often have been portrayed as scantily clad sexpots, with one performance I attended verging on something like softcore lesbian pornography. While I do not have any objection in principle to attractive, young, largely naked women writhing on stage (let him among us with a free hand with no Crazy Horse stamp on it cast the first stone and all that), that makes no sense at all, visually or dramatically, when Banquo observes: "You should be women/ And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/ That you are so." This is another unhappy example of Shakespeare modernizers attempting to inject a little hipness into the play or—angels and ministers of grace defend us!—to make it "relevant." (As though it were anything but that in its unadorned form.) In truth, the most disturbing stagings of the play I have seen are those in which the witches are as suggested in the text itself: ghostly, ghastly, bearded, sexually ambiguous (I've seen them played both by men and by women), and impossibly *alien*. My cynical assumption is that *Macbeth* producers sex up the Weird Sisters for the same reason that Tony Soprano conducted business in a strip club rather than in a wrecker's shop, why the people who write *Game of Thrones* sometimes find themselves obliged to say: "Thanks for sitting through eleven minutes of expository dialogue—check out the hooters on Emilia Clarke!"

In general, getting the visuals right on *Macbeth* does not seem to me something that should be very difficult to do, but it seldom is done. Alan Cumming's adaptation was set in what appears to be an early twentieth-century

mental hospital; it wasn't quite *Macbeth*, but it was *Macbeth*-ish. For that creepy, blood-on-dirty-tiles institutional vibe, the real deal is New York's long-running *Sleep No More*, an immersive take on the play in which members of the audience are obliged to strap on *com-media dell'arte* masks and wander through a warren of rooms in which scenes from *Macbeth* are being acted out with varying degrees of extravagance and innovation, from a spectacular witches' Sabbath set to rave music to a dramatic hanging of the play's principal malefactor. (For a Valentine's Day performance a few years back, the strung-up Macbeth was hoisted to the ceiling and then replaced by a disco ball as the performance dissolved into a dance party.)

Conversely, the small-budget performances generally come closer to getting it right: Seth Duerr of the York Shakespeare Company, in an act of theatrical endurance, directed and played the lead in back-to-back performances of *Macbeth* and *Richard II*. (He was also excellent in the Folding Chair Classical Theatre's *Titus*.) His Weird Sisters were properly weird, and properly bearded. He himself brought an appropriately large physicality to the role of Macbeth. (That presence was quite diminished the last time I saw him, presumably as the result of a successful fitness program and not of his being a literally starving artist.) Marc LeVasseur wasn't quite so martial in the Secret Theater performance of the play by the Queens Players (their name refers not to Her Royal Highness but to the New York borough) though he played the right kind of weakness when overwhelmed by his Lady Macbeth (Rachel Cornish was terrifying in the role). But Alan Cumming is fearsome mainly in a Norman Bates kind of way—it is impossible to imagine him as the claymore-swinging badass described in the play's opening. ("Unsex me," indeed.) Likewise, Ethan Hawke's version, which was rather too close to Cumming's, asked us to imagine Macbeth as a drug-addled rock star in the midst of a Kurt Cobain-style mental breakdown. The Macbeth of *Macbeth* is nothing of the sort, and playing him that way puts the performers at odds with the material. I have remarked

that the man who looks the most like Macbeth as I imagine him is the B-movie and A-television actor Danny Trejo. If Robert Rodriguez ever gets around to the Scottish play . . . one shudders to consider it. It's been said that Mel Gibson was far from the best actor to portray Hamlet, but he was definitely the best fencer; we might say something similar of Michael Fassbender's 2015 cinematic *Macbeth*: at the very least, the man looks the part. That cannot be said of the Manhattan Shakespeare Project's all-female version.

But *Macbeth* can bear a great deal of bastardization before it falls apart entirely. Cumming's version was compelling in its way, and *Sleep No More*, which doesn't even quite claim to be a performance of *Macbeth*, has been both provocative and delightful in its many evolving versions—it is *Macbeth* in spirit, if not in fact. It is a play that seems to me to have more to say each time I see it, rather than less. One never becomes quite familiar with *Macbeth*—it is far too strange for that—but after however many viewings, I feel a little like I take the play into the world with me when I exit the theater.

*Macbeth* is, of course, a succession drama. The king is dead, long live the king. One would think that living in a 240-year-old republic would put some emotional distance between American viewers and a tragedy of royal missuccession. Indeed, the entire idea of kings must seem faintly ridiculous even to those living in modern monarchies. (Some time ago I was visiting Norway and enduring a lecture from one of my hosts on the wonders of Norway's deeply egalitarian culture: "Students call their professors by their first names as a matter of course," he said with some pride. When I asked whether egalitarian Norwegian informality extended to the country's king—and I had to suppress a snicker at the word "king"—I saw my first angry Norwegian, perhaps the first since the age of the Vikings, or at least since the *Nasjonal Samling*.) What could kings mean to people like us?

We should resist the voguish habit of reading literature through the lens of current

affairs, and particularly through the lens of current politics, but I cannot help but feel that *Macbeth* hits so hard just now because we have spent the past decade and a half going through something like a succession drama of our own. The closely contested election of 2000 left Democrats—and some Americans who were not partisans or ideologues—convinced, or at least suspicious, that there was something not entirely legitimate about the presidency of George W. Bush. The emotional convulsions of September 11, 2001, the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the intrusions of terror-consciousness into American domestic life raised the emotional temperature of the nation's politics. For the Right, there was a backlash: loose talk of "treason" became all too common on both sides of the aisle, but there was something monarchical in Republicans' reaction, as though their rivals had falsely cast aspersions of bastardy upon the rightful heir. ("Nor should thy prowess want praise and esteem/ But that 'tis shown ignobly and in treason.") The prevalence of daft conspiracy theories—that Bush was responsible for the 9/11 attacks, that Obama is a Manchurian candidate from Kenya or Indonesia or wherever—and the extraordinary emotional volatility of the current political moment suggests a mood that is indeed Shakespearean: a belief that the machinery of our society is somehow broken, that something or someone is out of joint, that somewhere a rightful heir has been dispossessed of his patrimony and scepter.

"Truth will out," Launcelot assures us in *The Merchant of Venice*. Three hundred years later, Robert Frost answered him: "Blood will out." Frost had read his *Macbeth*.

It will have blood; they say, blood will have  
blood:  
Stones have been known to move and trees to  
speak;  
Augurs and understood relations have  
By magot-pies and choughs and rooks  
brought forth  
The secret'st man of blood.

Shakespeare is the great poet of secrets. No secrets, no Shakespeare: no *Macbeth*, no *Romeo and Juliet*, no *Midsummer Night's Dream*, no *Much Ado about Nothing*. Ours is a time in which there really are no secrets: it's all right there in *The Wall Street Journal*. No great secrets, nor much in the way of great poetry, either. There is nothing occult in the sources of our dissatisfaction, and the broken clockwork is plainly visible, as with an open-backed wrist-watch. We can watch the gears move on C-SPAN and Fox News. There are witches in *Macbeth*, but there isn't really any witchcraft: they are only the bearers of news—not makers of fate, but revealers of it. *Macbeth's* world is a world of Macbeth's making—his, and Lady Macbeth's, and Duncan's, too: no one is quite innocent. In the end, balance sheets must balance.

Things without all remedy  
Should be without regard: what's done is done.

# Shakespeare's rotten weeds, Shakespeare's deep trenches

by William Logan

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When forty winters shall besiege thy brow  
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,  
Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,  
Will be a tottered weed of small worth held.  
Then being asked where all thy beauty lies,  
Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,  
To say within thine own deep-sunken eyes  
Were an all-eating shame, and thriftless praise.  
How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use  
If thou couldst answer, "This fair child of mine  
Shall sum my count and make my old excuse,"  
Proving his beauty by succession thine.

This were to be new made when thou art old  
And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st  
it cold.

(Sonnet 2, 1609 Quarto)

About the early history of the sonnets, we know almost nothing. The first reference comes in 1598, when Shakespeare already had a reputation on the stage—the plays behind him included *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. That year Francis Meres praised him in *Palladis Tamia* as the "most excellent" English playwright, like Plautus and Seneca a master of comedy and tragedy. Shakespeare had first come to attention as author of a popular pillow-book, *Venus and Adonis* (1593), and what he called a "graver labor," *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). Meres remarked that the "sweet witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare, witness his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugared Sonnets among his

private friends." The sugared sonnets were eventually published in quarto as *Shake-speares Sonnets* (1609).

Who those private friends were and what they possessed has excited speculation ever since. If not an outright liar, Meres was close enough to that circle to have heard of these private verses. Perhaps he had seen a few—"sugared" sounds like firsthand acquaintance, not gossip. In the surviving manuscripts of the next century, there are almost 250 copies of Sidney's poems, over seven hundred of Jonson's, and more than four thousand of Donne's. Of Shakespeare's there are only twenty-six, almost all dating to the 1630s or later, none probably earlier than 1620. Either Shakespeare's private circle was very small, or its members guarded the sonnets closely. The poems were probably untitled and for the most part unpunctuated, like his contribution to *The Book of Sir Thomas More*.

In 1599, possibly late the year before, two sonnets appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrime*. By *W. Shakespeare*. Of the score of poems included in this slight octavo volume, probably only five were Shakespeare's—three from *Love's Labour's Lost* and two of the Dark Lady sonnets, 138 and 144. Differences between these and the versions published in the Quarto (Q) imply that Shakespeare later revised the poems. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Colin Burrow have pointed out that revision and rearrangement of sonnet sequences—for instance, by Samuel Daniel and Michael Drayton—were not unusual. Though a good number of Shakespeare's

surviving manuscript sonnets derive from printed versions, those for sonnet 2 contain striking variants. Of the thirteen manuscripts, twelve appear closely related.

Heminge and Condell, in their preface to Shakespeare's First Folio, claimed that "we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers." Ben Jonson replied in *Discoveries*, "Would he had blotted a thousand." We know from various passages in the plays that Shakespeare must have revised his work, and his additions to *Sir Thomas More*, however fluent, have blots enough. Such changes give us a glimpse of Shakespeare in the workshop. Do the dozen manuscripts preserve sonnet 2 in an early form? Since Gary Taylor's closely argued article, published in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* in 1985, reactions among editors of the sonnets have been mixed: Duncan-Jones against; John Kerrigan and G. Blakemore Evans in favor; Burrow, though skeptical, not prepared to dismiss the idea.

It's impossible to tell beyond doubt whether the manuscripts preserve the rewriting of cloth-eared copyists or an older version of lines Shakespeare later revisited. The conservative meter and echoes from plays of the 1590s tell us the sonnets were started early in his career; but, however sophisticated modern stylometric analysis, which suggests that many were written or revised in the following decade, how much he touched them up, if at all, is a question almost beyond answer. Sonnet 2 may be the rare case where something hidden is revealed. I have nothing to add to the historical arguments, but I wish to compare the two versions poetically, judging the gains and losses.

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow  
 And **trench** deep **furrows** in **that lovely** field,  
 Thy youth's **fair** livery, so **accounted** now,  
**Shall be like rotten weeds** of **no** worth held.  
 Then being asked where all thy beauty lies,  
 Where all the **luster** of thy **youthful** days,  
 To say, "Within **these hollow** sunken eyes,"  
 Were an all-**eaten** **truth**, and **worthless** praise.  
**O how much better** were thy beauty's use  
 If thou couldst say, "This **pretty** child of mine  
**Saves my account** and **makes** my old excuse,"  
**Making** his beauty by succession thine.

This were to be new **born** when thou art old  
 And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st  
it cold.
 (Westminster Abbey, MS.41, f. 49)

I have used Taylor's transcription of what is apparently the best copy, dropping only his title, "Spes Altera," which comes from another group of manuscripts. I have modernized the manuscript text (hereafter, W) and marked in bold the differences between this and Q. Quotations elsewhere have also been modernized.

The argument of sonnet 2 in Q goes something like this: "At forty your fair skin will be wrinkled, your once fine clothes ragged. If someone asks where all that beauty went, you'll answer that there's a little left in your eyes—but you'll feel ashamed. Use your beauty, have a boy, be able to say he's got your good looks. Then you'll feel young again."

The sonnet starts with a long prospect of the future, the destruction of beauty over forty winters, a phrase more dirgelike than a hopeful "forty springs." Duncan-Jones objects that the manuscript's "trench deep furrows" (instead of "dig deep trenches") "substitutes a clod-hopping metaphor of ploughing furrows in a field" for an image of siege war and "introduces associations with seed-sowing and eventual harvest which are wholly inappropriate." Perhaps it's not so simple. Though furrows derive from the art of farming, not the art of war, "trench" is a violent verb: in its earliest uses, "to cut; to divide by cutting, slice, cut in pieces," as the *OED* has it. You can see it doing military service for Caxton in 1485—" [He] gave him a stroke upon his helm so sharply that he trenched more than 95 mails" (that is, rings of mail).

Trenching, in its oldest meaning, required sword or blade. Shakespeare used a boar's tusk for the task ("The wide wound, that the boar had trenched/ In his soft flank" *Venus and Adonis*), but employed it of love in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: "This weak impress of Love is as a figure/ Trenched in ice" (a drawing scratched or cut into ice, not figure skating). Despite its domestication early in the sixteenth century for digging up ground, the

verb remained slightly brutish: “The place . . . so broken digged or trenched” (1541). “Trench” was a military noun from the first, but its uses for war lie uneasily against uses in peace. The swords were also ploughshares.

By Shakespeare’s day, “trenches” could be merely a synonym for “furrows” (“Thy garden plot lately, well trenched and mucked” [OED], 1573), so “dig deep trenches” was little more than “trench deep furrows”—little more, except that Q conjures up age’s long siege against the face, while the manuscript looks across beauty’s furrowed fields. (We still speak of someone “furlowing” his brow.) If the line alluded to old ridge-and-furrow ploughing, furrows would have been much deeper than on modern farms. Shakespeare saw that loss of beauty wasn’t just farm husbandry; it was a war only age could win.

Why alter one phrase for the other? By the middle of the fifteenth century, a trench was a “long, narrow ditch dug by troops to provide a place of shelter from enemy fire and observation.” Trenches would have caused more damage to beauty, retaining associations with wounding or scarring. The trenches in Q reinforce the metaphor of war, but “besiege” doesn’t have to overwhelm the poem with violence—it was already modulating toward more ironic or comic uses: in *Foole upon Foole* (1600), by Robert Armin (Shakespeare’s fool after Will Kempe), a man “snatched the hawk, and having wrung off her neck begins to besiege that good morsel.”

War’s trenches savagely mimic ploughed fields. Still, the manuscript version cruelly undermines the very purpose of farming—sowing and harvest. The furrows are prepared year by year, but never seeded. The implications of “seed” (child, semen), a word implied though never invoked, go back centuries earlier. Duncan-Jones prefers a field scarred by military trenches; the first thoughts of the manuscript have the field cut by furrows that never bear a crop, insulting in its mockery of husbandry (a buried pun is not impossible—note the appearance of “husbandry” in sonnets 3 and 13). The deeper sense is that the furrows of age are destructive only if we do

not seed a new generation, our ruined brows reborn as their smooth, unmarked ones.

It’s tempting to dismiss the manuscript’s “lovely field” as unimaginative, though for Shakespeare “lovely” wasn’t a watered-down synonym for “beautiful” or “attractive,” but a word that could rise to something more robust: “Lovable; deserving of love or admiration.” If the Quarto version is an improvement, the advantage lies partly in the shift to “thy beauty’s field,” the Fair Youth becoming landowner of beauty, a characterization more dramatic than just calling the brow lovely. The manuscript, however, cannot easily be dismissed as incompetent rewriting. Those trenched furrows are more vivid.

To a modern ear, “fair livery” seems pallid compared to Q’s “proud livery”; but our ears need a slight adjustment to hear what the Elizabethans heard. Modern usage has been denatured. In Old English, “fair” meant beautiful or pleasing to the eye, a sense retained in phrases like “fair weather.” Meanings exclusive to women (“fair sex,” for instance) come only in the fifteenth century. The sense of beautiful language or speech (“polished, elegant; eloquent”) is very early, again Old English, and gave rise to the distinction between fair copy and foul papers. The main modern definition, “free from bias, fraud, or injustice” or “honest, just; reasonable,” was applied to conduct in the late fourteenth century and to people only in Shakespeare’s day; but we’re mistaken to let uses dominant now overwhelm the earlier meanings embedded in “fair livery.” “From fairest creatures we desire increase,” Shakespeare wrote in sonnet 1, and it might not have been accidental that “fair” was still in mind. That the sonnets in Q were arranged in the order composed is unlikely, but poems intimately tied may have been written about the same time.

The phrase, then, is not mere filler, not merely equivalent to “nice clothes,” though it doesn’t have the striking reach and implication of Q’s “proud livery.” There the transferred epithet creates a tiny vignette of a youth proud of his clothes (or the clothes are the source of pride—“Of public honor and proud titles

boast,” sonnet 25). No one is threatening to disinherit the boy, but his failure to continue the blood line is itself a disinheritance. The appeal is to his vanity—when his beauty is as ruined as his old clothes, he’ll have nothing to show for it if he doesn’t have a child. The livery stands metaphorically for the young man’s outer figure. What is beauty but skin deep?

The dense layering of ideas is not entirely absent from “fair livery,” especially when drawn near “accounted.” A man’s clothing was listed in any inventory, especially one made after death. (“Account” meant “audit” from the early sixteenth century—note “What acceptable audit canst thou leave?” [sonnet 4]). You might say, if the revision was Shakespeare’s, that in the draft he courted the eye in “fair,” in revision shifting the gaze to “gazed on.” “Thy youth’s fair livery so accounted now” would imply, not just reckoned (“told,” in the bank teller’s sense), but explained or justified—“so accounted now” might mean clothes often remarked on, judged beautiful, subject of tales told by telltales; but it looks toward the reckoning age shall make. Through the metaphor of keeping books, “so accounted now” prepares “of no worth held”—its reversal in the following line—while in Q “so gazed on now” and “of small worth held” have smaller claim on each other. When he softened the accounting, Shakespeare was almost required to give more weight to the livery.

A “tottered” reed (Q) is tattered or tottering. Weeds were of course clothing, a usage that survives only in “widow’s weeds” (survivals are often found in hardened phrases). The use of “rotten” (W) begins in decomposition—beneath the idea of rotten clothing lies rotten flesh (“The sweet war-man is dead and rotten,” *Love’s Labour’s Lost*). The poet associated the idea often enough, using “dead and rotten” three times, “rotten death” once. Death is always at the edges of the sonnet but never grasped. The “hollow sunken” eyes, the truth “all-eaten”—these are marks of corpses as well as old age.

The idea of rotten haberdashery was not new (silk is particularly prone to dry rot). A sermon of 1388, possibly by Wycliffe, argues that “more clothes be rotten with the rich

than with the poor.” The idea reeks of decay. A weed whether tottered or tattered, rather than rotten, might seem merely to trade like for like—but perhaps in revision Shakespeare was determined not to let death so haunt the sonnet. “Forty winters” keeps the luxury of hope—if the youth died young, his only memorial would be his child.

Shakespeare exploited here the ambiguity of “weed.” Some flowers in gardens are weeds in the wild; or, put another way, a weed is only an unappreciated flower. Q’s “tottered” is usually corrected to “tattered.” Tattered clothing is familiar, but to allow the alternate spelling brings the senses into tension. (Just because the clothes are ragged doesn’t mean the youth’s still wearing them.) Kerrigan has the mixed richness right: the submerged sense of an unwanted plant is “drawn out by *beauty’s field* (with its echo of *beauty’s rose* in Sonnet 1, as though that flower became, after *forty winters*, an aged and torn hedgerow pest).” The original spelling “implies not just ragged disorder but the slumped unsteadiness of a plant past its prime.” That would be a flower perhaps rotting on the stalk. There is also, from the original sense of “totter” as swinging to and fro, a specific use in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—to be hung on the gallows. The spectral idea drifts back toward the underlying presence of death. We have here, not Shakespeare correcting, but Shakespeare rethinking. The early version is coarser and dramatic, the later subtler; but it has lost little and gained more in translation.

The second quatrain is a mean bit of wit. When the youth, now grown old, is asked where his beauty lies, because he’s childless he can say only, “In my deep-sunken eyes” (Q). Kerrigan is surely right that “all the treasure of thy lusty days” quietly invokes the parable in Matthew 25, where a lord who must travel “into a far country” entrusts his wealth to his three servants, wealth in the form of talents (each about one hundred and thirty pounds of gold). The senior servants both invest the money and double it; but the lowliest, given a single talent, buries it in the earth to keep it safe. He is cast “into outer darkness” on the lord’s return. The Fair Youth, if he has no

children, will eventually bury his beauty in the grave. The “deep sunken eyes” also seem buried—in the face.

“Thy beauty’s use” must cast the pearls of beauty before the next generation (some early notion of genetics did not escape the Elizabethans). The very idea of “treasure” is something stored up—hence, “treasure hunting” and “treasure trove.” Duncan-Jones sees “treasure” and thinks “semen,” but her ear is too keenly tuned to sexual innuendo. She has gotten the idea from Eric Partridge’s *Shakespeare’s Bawdy*, but Partridge is not entirely trustworthy. His example, from *Othello* (Of straying wives: “Say that they . . . pour our treasures into foreign laps”), is unconvincing.

The manuscript variant, “all the luster of thy youthful days,” seems to have influenced Shakespeare’s choice of Q’s “lusty,” containing much the revision does not—“luster,” as the *OED* has it, means “shining by reflected light; sheen, refulgence; gloss.” The early uses seem associated with the radiance of gems (which might have suggested “treasure” in revision), thence eyes—in the plays, the word compliments lips or eyes. Taylor notes that, when Gloucester is blinded in *Lear*, Cornwall asks, “Where is thy luster now?” Perhaps the use in the manuscript suggests that the quality could refer to young skin, moist with newness, while the aged are lucky still to have luster in the faint glisten of their eyes.

The example is typical of Shakespeare’s impaction, meanings not collaborating so much as crushed together, lain down leaf by leaf like coal. Again, the earlier version of the line seems more vivid. “Treasure” is vaguer, though tied to deeper meanings in the new-made sonnet—the use of one’s inheritance, beauty now bound more firmly to things (talents, say) that must be accounted for, not just in the sense of tales told but of sums brought to judgment. One generation’s treasure must be tallied before it can be inherited by the next—and one way of accounting is to admit such things exist to be passed on. Beauty would be a kind of treasure.

In this fantasy of interrogation, the manuscript allows the youth to speak directly twice, the Quarto only once, the first exchange re-

ported as indirect discourse. The shift is not large, the loss of immediacy considerable compared to the manuscript, where the exchange has been jotted down like testimony in a legal deposition. The force of argument here is telling—the friend has turned inquisitor, or dramatized the inquisition the youth must one day undergo.

Probably the words in manuscript should be read not as a compound, “hollow-sunken,” but as coordinate adjectives, “hollow, sunken eyes.” “Sunken” suggests depth, the way the eyes of the elderly recede into the skull, but “hollow” draws in emptiness, blankness—perhaps not actual blindness, since that would be too ruefully comic. (The idea that eyes grow hollow with age was a commonplace.) It’s no doubt accidental that “hollow” follows “luster” so neatly; but, had Shakespeare known the word’s old meaning as “cave,” “hollow” might have suggested itself, at least subconsciously. “Hollow” is resonant and terrifying, with death at the edges, “deep” merely descriptive—the revision has lost some of the bitter edge of the manuscript.

It’s possible that “sunken” suggested “treasure” in Q, a reference to well-known tales of sunken galleons. Shakespeare wrote in *Henry V*, “As rich . . . / As is the ooze and bottom of the sea/ With sunken wrack and sunless treasury,” and, in *Lucrece*, “Who fears sinking where such treasure lies?” so he had the association in mind, at least when he revised the sonnet. Perhaps he was guilty of a little self-plagiarism.

An “all-eaten truth” (W) is presumably a truth devoured, eaten up like wool by moth larvae, truth once beautiful, now just a rag (perhaps carrying forward the metaphor of rotten clothes)—that, or merely a truth all must eat eventually, however galling. The line renews the “glutton” image in sonnet 1. Everyone loses his beauty, and for the youth in age to say there’s still a bit of the old luster in his eyes is “worthless” (the undercurrent of money and accounts surfaces again)—that is, unprofitable, of no value. The shift from manuscript to Q—let me continue to call these changes revisions, for ease—is often subtle even when radical. Truth is judged by

manners or mores outside oneself, but shame something felt within. Instead of suggesting that the Fair Youth will come to know a truth all must know, a truth worse for wear, Q holds out the unlovely portrait of the youth in age, ashamed at not having taken advantage of early gifts. As a bit of psychology it's masterful, if we take the sonnet as having real motive.

"Worthless praise" (W) is clear enough—Shakespeare had already used the phrase in *Titus Andronicus*. Those who think this not an early version are forced to believe that some reader of the sonnets who possessed a nearly eidetic memory for the plays decided to improve sonnet 2 by translating "thrifless praise" into something more comprehensible. The manuscript line is not deaf, however, to other uses of "worthless"—"destitute of moral character, contemptible" (when used of people) and "unworthy." These trouble the simple meaning, especially when linked so firmly to the metaphorical strain of money, gemlike things, accounts. It's not a great distance from calling someone "of no account" (as John Gower had) to calling praise worthless, when the person bestowing it on himself is bankrupt of sensibility. Perhaps Shakespeare didn't calculate what happens when you bring the subject of sex close to that of payment—or perhaps he did.

Q's "Thrifless praise" would be praise, as the *OED* has it, "not thriving or prosperous; unsuccessful; unfortunate"; maybe better, "unprofitable, worthless, useless" (there are "thrifless sighs" in *Twelfth Night*) or "wasteful, improvident, spendthrift." Already in *Richard II* Shakespeare had compounded ideas of shame and money related to fathers and sons ("He shall spend mine honor with his shame/ As thrifless sons their scraping fathers' gold"). The unworthy son in the play becomes the unworthy son in the sonnet, since failure to pass on your own beauty is a slap against your parents. "Thrifless" in various forms drifts through these opening sonnets—"unthrifty loveliness" (sonnet 4), "an unthrift" (9), "none but unthrifts" (13). They secure the sense of selfish prodigality.

"Shame" in Q shifts the line from a sad acknowledgment of truth to disgrace. This sort

of deepening is typical of Shakespeare's second thoughts. As in the parable of the talents, the Fair Youth is concealing that vanishing beauty in his own aging flesh, eventually to be buried in wrinkles—beauty's furrowed fields ("wrinkles" are picked up again in sonnet 3)—rather than let the bounty renew itself and blossom once more. "To sow wild oats," already a well-known phrase in the 1570s ("That willful and unruly age, which . . . [as we say] hath not sowed all their wild Oats"), seems early to have suggested sexual profligacy. That would be cold comfort to anyone wanting the Fair Youth to marry, but it testifies to the nearness of bearing crops and bearing children. Wild oats are anyone's crop—only marriage lets you claim the harvest. The Earl of Pembroke, one of the main candidates for the Fair Youth, knew this when he refused to marry the pregnant Mary Fitton, one of Queen Elizabeth's maids of honor.

On his return from the far country, the lord in Matthew "reckoneth" with his servants, scolding the one who hid the single talent—"Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury." If you don't use beauty—as you'd use money, employing it to make more—you won't increase it and deserve no praise. "Beauty's use" (W,Q) must be beauty's usury (both derive from the Latin *usus*), because beauty has only declining value. The Fair Youth is called a "profitless usurer" in sonnet 4; but in sonnet 6 the poet argues, "That use is not forbidden usury," that is, using beauty to make beauty. Sex also lurks there—"use" was synonymous with copulation (*OED*).

The manuscript's *worthless* praise prepares this notion more keenly—the other meaning of *thrifless*, i.e., want of thrift, which sits ill at ease with Matthew 25, implies overspending rather than failure of investment. "Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness," says the lord. We use "talent" now for a gift from the Lord, which we must use, lest we make Him angry—Shakespeare has not dragged theology into the waste of beauty; but the idea lies beneath the surface, simply assumed, as duty to God often was.

“O how much better were” (W) has the directness of a first draft; but Q is an improvement, repeating “praise” emphatically from the previous line. In tone this is reasoned, but either line would allow an unreasoned or frustrated reading like “Isn’t it blindingly obvious that . . . ?” At this point the speaker has exhausted all his forceful rhetoric—the likeness of the Fair Youth ravaged by age, almost begging him to compare his older friends to portraits or miniatures made in youth; the shame of being asked why he’s now so ugly, when he must answer pathetically that what little beauty remains lies in his eyes. Surely no one would be so impolite—Shakespeare is only suggesting what people will be thinking. This might be a moment when the speaker has had enough. What youth ever listened to rational argument? The turn of the sonnet offers the way out, but the speaker could be forgiven for allowing himself a hint of desperation: “Can’t you see, looking around, the best use of beauty is letting a child inherit it?”

We should not discount the possibility that the argument is mendacious. Dover Wilson in 1966 suggested that sonnets 1–17 might have been commissioned by lord or lady for a wayward son. Had Shakespeare been approached to write these sonnets, the Fair Youth’s parents would not have worried about the waste of beauty, just what would happen to the estates if he died without issue. Though any parent might want to be a grandparent, one with estates has deeper worries. Inheritance is a question scarcely less fraught now. The Fair Youth might be found in an only child or eldest son—Southampton was one, Pembroke the other.

The Q reading seems more wheedling than the manuscript, more artistically deployed, argument without the same tremor of feeling. It’s the choice of an artist who no longer feels the same passion. The manuscript sonnet could of course have been touched up in the 1620s or 1630s by someone steeped thoroughly in the sonnets—the manuscript line is sober, more homely, perhaps inferior—but the difference in intensity, the falling away of emotion into rhetoric, seems more likely the product of revision when passions have cooled.

The possibility that some years elapsed between writing the original and revising it for publication might also explain the shift from the familiar “this pretty child” to the more ornamental “this fair child,” from the plain “say” to the more rhetorical “answer.” “Pretty” originally meant “cunning,” then “clever, skilful” (*OED*), which would be far from the meaning, but not quite so far is “artful, well-conceived,” which might even be a buried pun. From the fifteenth century, however, the word also meant what we mostly mean now, “good-looking, esp. in a delicate or diminutive way,” usually used of women or children. “Pretty” suggests intimacy, not with the child, who is only imagined, but with the Fair Youth. Perhaps it was only the poet’s desire to use “fair” here that led him to change “fair livery” to “proud livery” in line 3—it’s one thing to reuse a word for emphasis, another to betray a niggardly vocabulary.

The lines given to the Fair Youth continue, so we should imagine him prospectively saying, in the manuscript, “This pretty child of mine/ Saves my account and makes my old excuse.” This too would be a richer and more spirited presentation of what might happen—though the subjunctive is used in both versions, in the manuscript the youth grown old tells us what this future child actually does (“Saves my account”), Q what the child shall do. Perhaps this difference is much of a muchness; but the manuscript seems more personal, more a concerned friend making an argument than Cicero pursuing his case. The first has the controlled urgency of a man with a private stake, the second the demeanor of a man before a public audience.

Long ago the scholar T. W. Baldwin heard echoes in these opening sonnets of a letter by Erasmus printed in Thomas Wilson’s *The Art of Rhetoric* (1553), a standard grammar-school text Shakespeare seems to have known. Particularly telling are the lines, “You shall have a pretty little boy, running up and down your house. . . . You shall seem to be new born. . . . What man can be grieved that he is old, when he seeth his own countenance . . . to appear lively in his son?” “Pretty” and “to be new born” in the manuscript lie closer than Q to the original,

as Taylor pointed out. This is perhaps the most striking argument that the manuscript is Shakespeare's draft. Kerrigan notes the resemblance of sonnet 4 to another line in the letter ("What punishment is he worthy to suffer that refuseth to plough that land which being tilled yieldeth children?"), but this may also lie beneath the ploughed ground here.

Both "account" and "count" were synonyms for financial reckoning, so the shift must have been for meter or for the words' different nuances. Q's "Shall sum my count" is fairly obvious. When the Fair Youth must provide the reckoning of his days, his fair child balances the books, wiping out any deficit—the gradual debt, for example, incurred as beauty is depleted over time. In sonnet 1 the "glutton" youth was accused of eating the "world's due," namely offspring, like a Cronus. The loss of children would be another liability of his selfishness.

"Sum" might mean to total a column of figures or to "sum up," to provide a narrative summary—here, of a life: this usage is attested by the *OED* only in 1621 but was probably in the air years before. "Account" and "count" could both mean the story of a life. Surely this reading is at least as important—the money and accounting metaphors are mere figures, as it were. What a man often leaves behind as his accidental bequest is not the tally of his sums and sins, his getting and spending, but the tale of his days.

As for the manuscript, Christian theology defined "account" (W) as the "final reckoning at the judgement seat of God" (*OED*). Hence, "to go to one's account." "Saves" (W), too, is theological: "to redeem from sin, bring salvation to," that is, to save from Hell. The words smuggle in religion, but the revision has pushed it out, leaving the meaning—perhaps regrettably—limited to accountancy and tale-telling. (Possibly the revision gives insight into Shakespeare's developing feelings about Christianity.) The manuscript retains the Shakespearean habit of letting meaning grow weedlike—the version in Q shows a more considered but more limited approach, which suggests not that Shakespeare had lost his touch, but that he was calculating his effects.

"Make[s] my old excuse" is difficult. The line may be read as "justify, when I am old, the consumption of the beauty expended during my life" (Stephen Booth), or less likely as the "excuse I make when I am old" (Colin Burrow). Booth admits the problem forthrightly, suggesting that we take "old" as an ellipsis for "when I am old"; the context demands that the phrase be understood by synesis, i.e. as meaning what it must mean rather than what its syntax would otherwise indicate ("make my usual excuse"). Though this is not the only place where Shakespeare's language confounds the reader, the phrase was altered in a number of manuscripts to ease the sense—indeed, it's the phrase most varied. That the W reading survived in Q (except for "makes" becoming "make") suggests that Shakespeare was happy with the wording. Accusations of simplification in the manuscript founder here.

The shift from "Making" (W) to "Proving" (Q) in the last line of the quatrain secures the legal metaphor in "succession" (linked to the metaphor of the accounting necessary to settle an estate). If it's a second thought, it's chosen to supplant religion. To "prove" at this period meant, not just "to demonstrate the truth of by evidence or argument," but "to establish the genuineness and validity of" (*OED*)—we still prove a will. "Succession" in both versions works well enough for the normal replacement of parent by child, but in Q beauty provides the legal proof for the boy to inherit his father's estate. This stronger sense is the "occupation or possession of an estate, a throne, or the like" or the "act or fact of succeeding according to custom or law to the rights and liabilities of a predecessor." "Making" (W) is more constricted—there succession has no obstacles to overcome. The general thought in Q is clear: the boy is both "proving his beauty" (demonstrating it by his face, more metaphorically through some legal procedure in which resemblance—genetics, again—clinches the argument) and "proving his beauty by succession thine" (showing his beauty is the rightful successor to his own).

The couplet in many Shakespearean sonnets is almost superfluous—and the same couplet,

probably repeated through mishap, works perfectly well in sonnets 36 and 96. Here the couplet makes a difference. It's cast in conditional language, so the benefits cannot accrue if the Fair Youth fails to take the advice. Should he marry, the pretty child of the manuscript will make him "new born." It's hard to avoid the pun on "newborn" here. The first use in the *OED* is of a child (early fourteenth century), the second of Christ, but already by the date of the sonnets Sidney had used it for sighs and Spenser in the sense of being regenerated, probably the primary meaning here, though still leaning toward the original, literal sense. Perhaps that's the sense Shakespeare wished to avoid in Q ("new made" is a feeble phrase), because though it's a radical leap—the father is the child of the child—it does confuse matters. Still, the sense of Christian resurrection, elsewhere alluded to, is plain, and plainly banished in Q.

The poem ends probably in an allusion to the story of David in 1 Kings when he had become "old and stricken in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he gat no heat." His servants brought him the young damsel Abishag. The Fair Youth needs a wife, then a son. Shakespeare's point might be that, with a beautiful child to inherit all else you possess, the feeling will so warm you no Abishag will be necessary.

The sonnets bear the marks of poems written obsessively, probably in bouts—singly, by pairs, perhaps little runs, but not all at once with the focus of arrangement. When he came to collect them (Duncan-Jones suggests he was impelled by the closure of the theaters in 1603–4 and 1608–9), many may have been a decade or more old, written during the sonnet craze of the nineties. Perhaps he had written some after, as whim or feeling dictated. How thoroughly he revised we cannot say; but the evidence of the plays, the evidence of the stray pages in *Sir Thomas More*, argues that he couldn't keep his hands off a text when it lay before him. If he did revise, the original might have looked like the manuscript of sonnet 2. Taylor has a convincing list of Shakespearean echoes in the manuscript, es-

pecially from plays of the 1590s, particularly those before 1596–7.

A poet may make a poem worse in revision, may soften effects that give it the wrong conviction and finish when required for a chain of sonnets. Shakespeare likely had written the poems from immediate impulse, as his friendship with the Fair Youth developed, stumbled, had consequences. There was no need to polish them, because they were private. He passed a few to friends—which tells us little more than that he had friends.

As Duncan-Jones has it, "Collectors of poems in this period frequently introduced readings which could in some sense be called improvements, and may have taken a pride in doing so." We must look not backward from Q, but forward from the manuscript. The differences are perhaps not degradation from published text but improvements from manuscript with the stamp of Shakespeare's mature mind. The phrasing in Q has been cooled down (*pretty* to *fair*) or redirected (*truth* to *shame*), generally made more complicated. Such changes seem, not the work of an eager stranger, but second thoughts of a man of forty-five reviewing his raw, youthful, emotional sonnets for print, adjusting them to make them more of a piece. The manuscript is in places more aggressive, rougher, more intense, while Q is artful and calculated, composed with greater subtlety.

We're unlikely ever to know who Shakespeare was, he was so many. Even were a chest of his papers to surface tomorrow in some lumber room in Warwickshire, the biographies would lie only a little closer to the poet whose shape shifts with every reading. We know more about Shakespeare than about many another Elizabethan playwright—Kyd, say, or Webster. Yet Shakespeare's language, darting like a water strider now here, now there, ignoring the dark currents it rides on, while courting the toothy monsters below, could only have been written by a man difficult to grasp. A biography of a thousand pages, every fact tacked down like a piece of upholstery, could not tell us enough about Shakespeare; but every poem, packed like an overstuffed cloak-bag, tells us too much.

# Shakespeare's Good Books

by Paul Dean

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The parish registers of Stratford-upon-Avon record the baptism, on April 26, 1564, of “Guilielmus filius Johannes Shaksper,” and the burial, on April 25, 1616, of “Will Shaksper, gent.” Despite the Latin, both entries were made by Protestant clergy, and the ceremonies were conducted according to the rites prescribed in the prayer book published in 1559, which remained in use until 1645 when it was banned by Cromwell’s parliament. The registration of Shakespeare’s marriage to Anne Hathaway in 1582 is lost, since that took place not in Stratford—perhaps out of a wish to avoid public comment, the bride being already pregnant—but probably at the nearby village of Temple Grafton, whose records for the period have not survived and whose elderly vicar, John Frith, was an unreformed Catholic priest described in a contemporary report as “unsound in religion.”

At Shakespeare’s funeral, there would have been read the great lesson from 1 Corinthians 15: “For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” Before long, Shakespeare had “put on immortality” in another sense. There he still lies, his tomb visited by untold numbers, in the Anglican church where he had worshipped. Yet the spirit of John Frith hovered over his reputation; according to Richard Davies, Archdeacon of Lichfield, “He died a papist.” This is a late piece of hearsay (Davies died in 1708), but the rumor has persisted. The question of Shakespeare’s religion, long dormant, was revived by E. A. J. Honigmann’s *Shakespeare: The “Lost Years”* (1985, second ed. 1998). Honigmann

proposed that the gap in our knowledge of Shakespeare’s life between 1585 and 1592 could be filled by accepting that he acted as a tutor in the service of a Catholic landowner in Lancashire, and *a fortiori* he must have been a Catholic at that point—although Honigmann believed, as his detractors often forget, that Shakespeare later conformed to the established church. A spate of books followed from other scholars, some highly partisan. It is possible that there was a recusant strain in the family; it can be shown that Shakespeare had Catholic acquaintances, and that his plays exhibit close, often sympathetic, knowledge of pre-Reformation religious practices, but his own views cannot be determined one way or another. The introductory preliminary statements of belief in his will are mere copybook formulas. David Scott Kastan, in *A Will to Believe*, having given a balanced review of the debate as it unfolded in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is unwilling to credit Shakespeare with more than “an inclusive and theologically minimalist Christianity that resisted religious rigor and valued social accord.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet even the most minimal Christianity rests upon biblical and liturgical foundations, and it is remarkable that there have been so few successors to Richmond Noble’s pioneering book, *Shakespeare’s Biblical Knowledge and Use of the Book of Common Prayer* (1935), the weightiest being Naseeb Shaheen’s *Biblical References in*

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1 *A Will to Believe*, by David Scott Kastan; Oxford University Press, 155 pages, \$40.

*Shakespeare's Plays* (1999). The "Book of Common Prayer" in question is not that of 1662 which was in widespread use until the 1970s, but earlier versions. Daniel Swift, in *Shakespeare's Common Prayers*, observes that the eight substantial volumes of Geoffrey Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* contain no extracts from the Bible or the prayer book; these were assumed to be somehow in the background without providing specific debts.<sup>2</sup> Steven Marx's *Shakespeare and the Bible* (2000), which sounds as though it might be helpful, is in fact a wasted opportunity, and Hannibal Hamlin, whose *The Bible in Shakespeare* constitutes a major scholarly synthesis, is excessively charitable in describing Marx as "less concerned with Shakespeare's own allusive practice than with fashioning his own creative narratives."<sup>3</sup>

As Swift notes, the 1559 Prayer Book was itself "a book in dramatic flux . . . premised upon agreement, but . . . aware of the presence of disagreement." He uses the invaluable composite edition by Brian Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (2011), whose introduction traces the fashioning of the vernacular rite from the medieval Latin Mass and its attendant monastic offices. Diocesan variations were accepted, most famously at Salisbury (the "Sarum Rite"), and the four religious orders all had distinctive devotional practices. Archbishop Cranmer's successive attempts at an English liturgy were piecemeal, keeping an apprehensive eye on the latest whims of Henry VIII. The first prayer book of Edward VI's brief reign, issued in 1549 and containing, in Swift's words, "Catholic language and Protestant theology," provoked riots which were quelled by government troops. Its more hardline Protestant successor of 1552 was barely in place before Mary's accession the following year restored the Roman rite. Five years later, Elizabeth's accession brought further changes. The 1559 book was a slightly modified version of 1552, but it remained such a patchwork of different theological emphases that Swift

frankly dubs it "a contradictory mess." He reasonably protests against the assumption that "the prayer book" is a single, simple text, which has led modern scholars to neglect it, or to quote it without attending to the changes it underwent during its printing history.

The law compelled Shakespeare to be ingenious and allusive, even if he had not been so by nature. The representation of liturgical services onstage was forbidden; indeed, the reformers routinely denounced the Mass as a species of play-acting. Such condemnations looked back to the medieval cycle plays with their medley of scriptural, patristic, legendary, and folkloric traditions, their range of tones and moods welcoming everything from the exalted to the scatological and farcical. It was these plays that Shakespeare experienced as a live theatrical tradition when he saw them at Coventry as a teenager; his use of the Bible and the prayer book is colored by this more eclectic heritage. The plays are equally distorted by those who seek a Protestant or Catholic bias, for there were many varieties of each, and drama thrives on dialectical debate. "Whether the Reformation was motivated from above or below," Kastan comments, "it was, in either case, incomplete." Arguably it was complete only with the expulsion of the Catholic James II in 1688 and his replacement, at the invitation of Parliament, by the Dutch Protestants William and Mary.

Daniel Swift contends appealingly for an approach to source study which "preserves playfulness" ("allusion" ultimately derives from Latin *ludere*, "to play") and is "messier and more engaged" than traditional searches for exact verbal parallels between printed works. Hamlin, too, subjects the idea of allusion to close scrutiny in a chapter of nearly fifty pages; an author intends to evoke a previous work in readers' minds, which distinguishes allusion from the practice of adventitious critical collocations known as "intertextuality," although Hamlin does include reference to works which are not direct Shakespearean sources. The Bible, whose individual books allude polyphonically to each other, must surely be the most interpreted of all texts, yet we are well reminded that there is no such thing as "the" Bible, any more than

2 *Shakespeare's Common Prayers: The Book of Common Prayer and the Elizabethan Age*, by Daniel Swift; Oxford University Press, 289 pages, \$27.95.

3 *The Bible in Shakespeare*, by Hannibal Hamlin; Oxford University Press, 378 pages, \$99.

there is “the prayer book”: one has to ask *which* Bible. To cite Kastan again: “Shakespeare at times quotes from a Bishops’ translation [1568, revised 1572], remembers psalms as they were translated in the Great Bible [1539], follows the Geneva wording [1560], and on a few occasions seems to be thinking of the Counter-Reformation Rheims version [1582, 1609].” Of these, the Geneva version is the most frequently drawn upon, not only for its text but also for its marginal annotations, which suggests that Shakespeare owned a copy. Some scholars have argued that his use of Geneva indicates Calvinist sympathies, but it was merely the most widely available, and cheapest, text, also used by eminent Anglican divines. The Bishops’ Bible was the version from which the lessons were usually read in church. (The Authorized or King James Version, which again held sway as the lectionary for church services until the perpetration of the New English Bible in the 1970s, is an irrelevance here, since it did not appear until 1611, when Shakespeare’s writing career was virtually over.)

Shakespeare’s preferences are clear. He frequently returns to the opening three chapters of Genesis—whose narratives provided material for his work in every genre—to Exodus, Samuel, Job, the Psalms and wisdom literature, and of course to the Gospels, but he also knows his way around the Pauline epistles. His is the familiarity that comes from private reading of the Bible, not merely from hearing the lessons in church. Hamlin adds evidence that he was familiar with the metrical psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins (1562) designed for congregational singing. In his schooldays he would have had to translate biblical passages into Latin, and the biblical quotations included in the Book of Common Prayer create a further degree of cross-fertilization. Sometimes, biblical locations will be significant, as they are in the setting of *The Comedy of Errors* at Ephesus, whose reputation in the Acts of the Apostles as a center for magicians and tricksters has a clear bearing on the action and themes of the play, or in *Pericles* where the geography closely follows that of Paul’s missionary journeys.

Elizabeth I’s religious temper was famously enigmatic; candles burned on the altar in

her private chapel, to the scandal of many, and she kept her most Puritan Archbishop of Canterbury, Edmund Grindal, under virtual house-arrest, yet she was no friend to Roman Catholics. James I’s Protestantism was more clearly defined, and *Macbeth*, which flattered his interests, is a focus for both Swift and Hamlin. There was at one time a vogue for somewhat over-simple Christian readings of the play, which still surface occasionally: Kastan cites one which interprets it as a Reformation allegory with Macbeth as Henry VIII! Hamlin’s discussion of *Macbeth* exemplifies the subtlety of its scriptural allusions—many of which, as he admits, point different ways. To some extent, Macbeth is like Adam, instigated to disobedience and rebellion by his wife; he is also like Judas, to whom Jesus says, “That thou doest, do quickly” (John 13.27, which may underlie “If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well/ It were done quickly”); Lady Macbeth’s washing of her hands recalls Pilate’s; the darkness over the land after Duncan’s murder, the image of Duncan’s body as “the Lord’s anointed temple,” and the summons to the sleepers in the castle to wake “as from your graves” evoke details of the Crucifixion narrative; Lady Macbeth’s odd description of the alarm bell as a “hideous trumpet” glances at the Last Trump and forms part of a pattern of apocalyptic references which Hamlin discerns in the play. The long-recognized references to the Gunpowder Plot trial in the Porter scene and the stress on “equivocation” add to the suggestion of regicide as a religious as well as a political crime. Against the background of the Book of Revelation Macbeth becomes a kind of Antichrist, as Guy Fawkes and his associates were said to be. Yet, while such details (and there are many more) give Macbeth’s wickedness “an almost cosmic dimension,” Hamlin maintains that “the play resists the simple moral binaries” beloved of those who see it as a Christian allegory or morality drama. Duncan is good but weak; Macduff may be a providential instrument in his killing of Macbeth but, as he himself recognizes, is morally responsible for the deaths of his family by his flight to England; Malcolm promises restoration but, as we already know, the royal line descended to King James not from

him but from Banquo. Most obviously of all, a schematic Christian reading cannot account for the degree of sympathy for Macbeth which Shakespeare elicits from us. "Despite its setting in a Christian Scotland," Hamlin concludes, "*Macbeth* seems hardly more Christian a play than *King Lear*"—a play with a pre-Christian setting that he reads in the light of the sufferings of Job as Calvin and other commentators interpreted them. (Hamlin shows that Shakespeare read Calvin's *Sermons on Job* in translation.)

To point out such affiliations is to enrich our sense of the play's complexity, in the allusive fashion recommended by Daniel Swift. Swift's own approach to *Macbeth*, however, is differently inflected and more narrowly focused. He restricts himself, in his study as a whole, to the prayer book services of matrimony, Communion, and burial of the dead. He prudently warns us that he is not presenting "an Anglican Shakespeare"; rather, one who was of his time, "an age awash with liturgy; he put it on stage." That last phrase gives us pause, for Shakespeare's use of liturgy, like his use of the Bible, is nowhere so direct or unmediated. His persistent interest in the idea of sacrificial substitution seems to bear a closer relation to the eucharistic rite than Swift recognizes, but the clues are cunningly dispersed. We can agree that the disruption of Macbeth's coronation banquet by Banquo's ghost—one of several such broken rituals in the canon—makes of the feast a sort of anti-Communion, a profaned sacrament fragmenting rather than unifying the corporate body. Swift notes an interesting insistence on the word "business" in the play, which chimes in with the prayer book exhortation to would-be communicants not to make the excuse that they have "worldly business" to attend to, and he mentions the summon of Shakespeare's daughter Susannah before the ecclesiastical court for not having attended Easter Communion in 1606, the year *Macbeth* was written.

These are tantalizing conjunctions, but how deeply do they affect our understanding of the play? It seems reductive of Swift to call it "a kind of parasite" on the liturgy. He further connects the presence of the ghost, invisible to all except Macbeth, with ambiguities in the communion rite about the presence of Christ in the conse-

crated bread and wine, and Macbeth's inability to say "Amen" to the grooms' prayers with a passage in a sermon by Bishop Jewel of Salisbury which attacks the Latin Mass as a foreign rite which the people did not understand, "so that no man could say Amen to their prayer." Again, he argues that the "painted devils" of which Lady Macbeth speaks recall church decorations destroyed by iconoclasts; Macduff, a man "not born of woman," calls up the sentence from the burial service, "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live," a quotation from Job, which thus becomes once again a key text for Shakespeare; the water which will not wash the blood from Macbeth's or his wife's hands is contrasted with the water of baptism that will wash the infant in the blood of the Lamb. But how much is being asserted here, and about what? "What is thy name?" Young Siward asks Macbeth, and receives the answer, "My name's Macbeth." To hear in this, as Swift does, "an echo of the catechizing priest" in the preparation for the service of confirmation is to ignore dramatic context to an almost heroic extent. In contrast, the allusions to the Passion narrative in *Julius Caesar*, documented by Hamlin, are never allowed to impair the solidity with which the classical world is recreated.

Shakespeare's imagining of pre-Reformation England in his history plays is of major interest, but they do not come within Swift's purview because he cannot relate them to his three chosen prayer book services. Kastan, too, has surprisingly little to say about them except for *King John* and *Henry VIII*, the former hostile to papal pretension but not a Protestant white-wash, the latter avoiding open discussion of theological issues but sympathetic to Katherine and Wolsey. The renaming of Sir John Oldcastle, in *Henry IV Part 1*, as Sir John Falstaff, to avoid causing offense to the descendants of the original Oldcastle, burned as a Lollard in Henry V's reign and regarded as a proto-martyr by later Protestants, has been widely discussed. Shakespeare does seem to have been making a sectarian point here for once, lampooning the habitual citations of scripture by the godly in Falstaff's subversive misuse of biblical texts. (Ben Jonson's caricature Puritans are blatant examples of the same thing.) Hamlin has a

rich chapter on Falstaff as “master of biblical allusion,” consciously fashioning scripture to his own ends—so that, for instance, Jesus’s exhortation to his disciples to “Watch and pray” becomes “Watch tonight, pray tomorrow.” The *Henry IV* plays are variations on the parable of the Prodigal Son, a favorite passage of Falstaff’s, along with the parable of Dives and Lazarus (which is also summoned up, to haunting effect, in Mrs. Quickly’s description of Falstaff’s death in *Henry V*). “Reformation” has a personal rather than an ecclesiastical or doctrinal application to Hal’s serious intention to change his ways and Falstaff’s tongue-in-cheek flirtations with the idea. Falstaff’s use of the Bible, Hamlin observes, is like Shakespeare’s; teasing, often oblique, shifting in tone from orthodoxy to parody.

The only play by Shakespeare with a biblical allusion in its title, *Measure for Measure*, has long been found problematic. Hamlin merely glances at it in his survey of Christian readings of the plays. Kastan notes its complete excision from a copy of the Second Folio (1632) now in the Folger Library but formerly in the Jesuit seminary at Valladolid. Several of the plays were expurgated by “Guillermo Sanchez,” alias Fr. William Sankey, an English member of the community. When he came to *Measure for Measure*, however, he literally cut the whole text—with a razor. Kastan is surely right in thinking that the Duke’s activities in his disguise as a friar gave cause for scandal, and he drily observes that Sankey’s reaction gives little support to those who would like to see Catholic sympathies in the play, but nor is it a Protestant polemic: its stress falls on the need to redress “our compromised commitments, not to the doctrines of any Church but to one another.” Similarly, for Swift, the play works against the ideal of mutual fidelity enshrined in the marriage service (Shakespeare’s own experience, he speculates, colors his habitual dramatic presentation of marriage as “a deeply tense state”). Here, as in *Much Ado About Nothing*, the narrative drive of the liturgy towards consummation is suspended; and here, as in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, the consummation is irregularly achieved by the substitution of sexual partners, the so-called “bed trick.” The separation of “sex from

love and rite from promise,” the contradiction between liturgical orthodoxy and popular custom, clouds the comedy of these plays.

Where do these books leave our appreciation of Shakespeare and religion, in this anniversary year? The mid-twentieth-century obsession with claiming him for one side or the other in the Reformation disputes has waned, partly because scholars have come to see what a piecemeal and ambiguous process “the Reformation” was. Over-neat separations of the “medieval” from the “early modern,” which enabled him to be seen as an arch-skeptic paving the way for the Enlightenment, have been abandoned by historians and critics alike. He is no longer hailed as a proto-Marxist, as was fashionable in the 1970s and 1980s, since the allure of radical chic has faded. The resulting picture is teasingly untidy, but our awareness of what Shakespeare owed to the founding texts of Anglicanism is enhanced. There are limitations to acknowledge: Kastan finds *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* very much of their time in their relative lack of sympathy with other faiths. His book in general provides a scrupulous and dispassionate survey of the issues at stake, and rightly emphasizes that religion for Shakespeare and his contemporaries was “the essential medium in which the world was experienced and described” rather than, what it is now assumed to be, merely a “category of understanding.” Swift establishes the importance of prayer book rites and formulas as part of the cultural hinterland of the plays, even if some of his claims for indebtedness are implausible. It is Hamlin who makes the most substantial contribution, showing how Shakespeare’s memory and imagination were steeped in biblical narrative, character-types, and idiom. Wilbur Sanders, in *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* (1968), relevantly suggested that “if Shakespeare is Christian at all, he is Christian at a much deeper level than that of theological conformity” and that he “releases for us, more vividly than any theologian could have done, the perennial relevance of Elizabethan Christianity.” Shakespeare is a product of the religious culture in which he lived and died, a culture which his plays continue to communicate even to our post-Babel world.

# Understanding Shakespeare

by Brett Gamboa

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*Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!*

—Macbeth, II.iii.61

Last September, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) announced an ambitious project called “Play On! 36 Playwrights Translate Shakespeare.” Predictably, the news that one of America’s leading repertory companies planned to “translate” Shakespeare’s English into a contemporary idiom set off a firestorm, and battle lines were quickly drawn between those who lauded the effort to make Shakespeare more accessible to more people, and those dismayed by the prospect of dumbing him down, and by the project’s implicit assumption that Shakespeare’s language could now be considered a foreign tongue.

A pair of Columbia professors, John McWhorter and James Shapiro, most prominently voiced the competing views, though several scholars—including Ralph Alan Cohen and Daniel Pollock-Pelzner—also responded thoughtfully to the OSF project. McWhorter has long insisted that Shakespeare’s plays are appreciable only by an elite few among contemporary audiences. In his piece for *The Wall Street Journal*, he imagines how “Shakespeare would be depressed to sit and watch us understanding one-tenth of *King Lear* and going to his plays often as a kind of duty,” urging rather that we sacrifice some of his details and verbal richness for the sake of better understanding what Shakespeare meant. For Shapiro, this would present an impossible bargain, since “the only thing Shakespearean about his plays

is the language.” In his piece for *The New York Times*, Shapiro points out that the burden for making sense of Shakespeare’s language falls largely to actors, many of whom are not sufficiently in command of his syntax or meaning to convey it through their intonation and cadence. So if actors and directors did their jobs better, Shakespeare’s language would be more available to audiences of all backgrounds. Shapiro cites the example of a ninety-minute performance of *Much Ado About Nothing* at Rikers Island, where the inmates’ obvious engagement suggested that they “didn’t have to follow the play line for line, because the actors, and their director, knew what the words meant” and had “found in Shakespeare’s language the clues to the personalities of the characters.”

I rehearse parts of these arguments here not only because they represent extreme views on the OSF translation project, but also because, in doing so, they reflect surprisingly similar and widely held biases in favor of the role clarity plays in the experience of Shakespeare’s dramas and of the value of deeper themes or meanings that some feel can be delivered independently from the “line for line” experience of Shakespeare’s verse. For McWhorter, these assumptions are plain: the archaic language and syntax of the plays prevent audiences from figuring out what Shakespeare really means; in other words, they can’t make out the trees clearly enough to find the forest. For Shapiro, the relationship between clarity and content is more nuanced, since the “intoxicating richness” of

Shakespeare's language—brought about by densely layered phonic and metrical patterns and its “use of resonance and ambiguity”—is what makes Shakespeare worthy of our attention. Nevertheless, he suggests that the primary virtue of Shakespeare's verbal artistry is its potential to help facilitate clarity, since it provides hints for actors working to create meaning. Shapiro concedes that, no matter how skilled and prepared the actors are, ordinary people may not understand some of Shakespeare's lines, but he assumes that well-prepared actors will endow audiences with a sense of clarity about the personalities of the characters and the central ideas of the play.

It is worth noting that by focusing on the audience of prisoners “deeply engrossed” by *Much Ado*, Shapiro does not consider how many lines were cut from the “ninety-minute production,” or the likelihood that perhaps the third or more of the play's lines to which McWhorter may have most urgently objected were not part of the production. Cutting plays is conventional and is not exactly an act of translation, but it does provide a similar chance to solve problems of confusion, obscurity, or repetition. Shapiro also reveals a taste for simplicity and clarity not wholly unlike McWhorter's own when pointing out that while the actors were not successful in making the inmates understand all of Shakespeare's lines, they helped obviate that need by finding “clues to the ‘personalities’ of the characters.” Of course, actors must make interpretive choices about their characters, and seizing on “clues” that help determine stage personae seems a logical way for actors to approach Shakespeare performance, just as cutting the most confusing, lackluster, repetitive, or contradictory lines (or scenes or characters) of a play seems a reasonable way to facilitate comprehension and streamline the audience's experience. Still, my point is that both moves to simplify Shakespeare are related: actors who take Shakespeare's characters—full of ambiguities and contradictions—and blend them into simpler and more legible personae and directors who strip playtexts of their difficult passages are working to the same ends as Shakespeare's “translators,” all striving to

make the plays more comprehensible to more people, and all willing to sacrifice some complexity and verbal richness in the pursuit.

As Shapiro points out, the search for greater clarity in Shakespeare began in his own time. Theater practitioners have always worried that audiences would not understand him. Like directors today, actors and managers in the past worried that, regardless of their evident dramatic and theatrical attractions, Shakespeare's plots, language, and characters were too complex, too obscure, too contradictory, and too digressive. Essentially, McWhorter's argument has always been current—whereas readers have time to reflect and editors to which they can turn for explanations, audiences encountering Shakespeare unmediated will inevitably lose their way, and, with it, the meaning and pleasure of the plays. And directors have always sought to facilitate clarity by simplifying the texts, cutting or substituting for archaisms, unifying characters, resolving ambiguous relationships, and adapting plots so that their generic outcomes might better fit their premises. Though English and American directors have not typically produced translated texts, they've valued—perhaps overvalued—the goals of the translators. But just because McWhorter's argument has precedence doesn't make it any more persuasive. Any effort of translation is doomed from inception; it's not that in translation one loses the “gist” of Shakespeare. It's that one loses Shakespeare himself.

I admit to splitting hairs with Shapiro, whose argument I admire and whose appreciation of the power of actors to convey meaning—and of audiences to apprehend it—I find very persuasive. Like him, I marvel at the capacity of playgoers to absorb complicated passages, and I blame actors when audiences leave the theater confused or unhappy. Those who have seen good productions of rarely produced Shakespeare plays have likely been awestruck at the liteness of their own minds, as if the feat of auditing were enough to justify Hamlet's appreciation of man in the Act II soliloquy: “In apprehension how like a god.” The hair worth splitting, though, because it gets at

the heart of the problem for those “translating Shakespeare,” is whether clarity—of language, character, or plot—is the self-evident good we often take it to be. Is our clarity preferable to Shakespeare’s confusion? Is it possible to have too much of a good thing?

I think it is possible, at least where Shakespeare is concerned. Efforts to translate Shakespeare’s plays are not a sudden turn away from Shakespeare’s texts so much as a natural evolution of various other and equally dubious attempts to make sense of them. The trouble with making sense of fundamentally incomprehensible aspects of the plays is that it risks making those plays less than they are. It fixes what isn’t broken, delivering a set of generalized themes or meanings at the expense of confusion, instabilities, and reversals—the stuff on which drama is made. Human beings cannot choose but make all the sense they can of the language streaming at them from the stage, but our ongoing and always uncertain attempts to reconcile the contradictions, ellipses, and ambivalences of Shakespeare’s language and characters, and to extract unified sense from syntax that doesn’t deliver it can help create a dramatic experience of our own, sometimes one that puts audiences in a position eerily like that of the tragic protagonists before them. Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, and King Lear struggle to make sense of a world around them, and they do so in plays that are both celebrated and feared because they simulate that same struggle to understand in their audiences—but only if we allow them do so.

Consider, for instance, *Macbeth*, whose opening scene appears to exist for the principal reason of establishing that words in the play will not reliably distinguish one idea from another. The first witch asks, “When shall we three meet again?/ In thunder, lightning, or in rain?” The alternatives she provides, of course, are not alternatives at all—thunder, lightning, and rain are coincident phenomena that the syntax suggests can and must occur independently. The effect is repeated when the second witch offers that the meeting might take place “When the battle’s lost and won.” Though we can readily interpret the line to

suggest merely that each battle has a winner and a loser, the expression strikes live audiences more as paradox—a simultaneous assertion of mutually exclusive possibilities. Each example prepares and yet stops short of the equation made by the witches at the close of the scene, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair,/ Hover through the fog and filthy air,” the first line suggesting not only that antonyms are to be regarded as synonymous, but also that there is some needful distinction in stating both that “fair is foul” and that “foul is fair,” as though the first conflation of the terms did not include everything signified by the latter.

Only twelve lines into Shakespeare’s play, an audience is threatened by the kind of disorientation that will characterize both the play and its protagonist. Macbeth embodies the kinds of paradoxes that mark the first scene, being both fair and foul: first promoted for loyalty and later killed for treachery; now celebrated for bravery and then mocked for cowardice; “too full of the milk of human kindness” and yet a brutal tyrant. And like us, Macbeth struggles to make sense of the witches, the “juggling fiends . . . who palter with us in a double sense,” and who, Banquo observes, “should be women,/ And yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so.” As both articulators and embodiments of paradox, the witches create similar doubts in us—are they women or men, earthly or supernatural, seers of future events or agents capable of bringing about the changes they foresee? The play, of course, answers yes to each question, suggesting either that the witches’ ontological status is undetermined, or, more likely, that the play wants to have things both ways, to palter with us in a double sense.

Lady Macbeth, too, conflates polarities: famously seeking out spirits to unsex her while radiating sexual energy; savagely mocking Macbeth for sentimentality shortly before aborting her own attempt on Duncan because of his resemblance to her father; repeatedly upbraiding Macbeth for his lack of courage only to suffer a mental collapse after the murders at Fife. As many have noted, the play first casts her as a heartless manipulator and her husband as an unwilling victim, only to

reverse the roles by making him the cruel perpetrator and moving her into the sentimental and more feminine role he vacates. Just as the witches appear both male and female, so do the Macbeths, and much like the witches' prophecies seem to guarantee Macbeth's safety before emerging as the bait that helps bring about his end, the roles that the central couple inhabit are also predictive, not so much of their own ends but of each others'.

The result is confusion and disorientation. Not simple or needless confusion, but rather a kind that is aesthetically productive, particularly for an audience that is no more successful in understanding where to place blame for Duncan's murder than Macbeth is in interpreting the prophecies of the witches. We can experience some of that confusion in a translation or an expurgated text, but we should remember that a translator or aggressive script supervisor may rid us of things essential to a play focused on having things both ways. And translators may be prone to doing the greatest harm when they encounter and attempt to clarify the paradoxical language that creates an atmosphere that both resonates against and naturalizes the presence of the complex characters and situations at the plays' surface. I've mentioned some of the paradoxes of the first scene, but it's worth considering a few others, such as Macbeth's report that the witches "made themselves air, into which they vanished." The phrase is gorgeous and yet obvious nonsense. Making themselves into "air" obviates the need or possibility of vanishing into that same air which they have already become. The phrase is essentially redundant, but better for being so, because we who entertain a real impossibility do it by means of a logical one.

Phrases like this one abound in *Macbeth*. One of the more famous examples occurs when Macbeth reacts to the prophecy that he will become king, "Come what come may./ Time and the hour runs through the roughest day." The phrase has become a commonplace, meaning something like "whatever may come," where the energy lies in the casual inversion and the fleeting imperative sense triggered by "come." Shakespeare's original

phrase, "come what come may," poses a further barrier to the sense we take from it by creating an incidental *abac* pattern that competes with the scant syntactical arrangement. In this case, the mind gathers the meaning, though not without a sense of its own agility at negotiating more than one concurrent pattern. Translators may not emend "come what come may" because of its currency. But it's equally probable that its currency derives from its complexity and inherent resistance to comprehension.

The electricity carried by a phrase like "come what come may" is more clearly on display in I.iv, where Duncan praises Macbeth as a "peerless kinsman." Duncan's compliment poses little difficulty to audiences, though it is conveyed by words that assure us both that Macbeth is exceptional and that he is quite like everyone else, his status as a kinsman urgently asserting his likeness to other thanes, thus undercutting the incomparability which is being actively established. The effect occurs repeatedly in *Macbeth*, energizing the whole by delivering verse lines as internally inconsistent as the principal characters. Macbeth delivers what may be the play's most elegant example while plotting Banquo's murder:

And with him—

To leave no rubs nor botches in the work  
Fleance, his son that keeps him company,  
Whose absence is no less material to me  
Than is his father's, must embrace the fate  
Of that dark hour.

Again, audiences will have little trouble understanding "material" in context, though it is the likeliest candidate for editorial scrutiny. But losing "material" would mean the loss of what is best in *Macbeth*. In the most obvious sense, Macbeth merely suggests that Fleance's death is also important to him, but his language forces audiences to understand that meaning by means of a phrase that equates Fleance's absence with a kind of presence—it is a substantive expression of lack. Shakespeare is punning, of course. But this isn't the kind of pun that waves its arms in the air attracting attention. It's rather one that introduces

incidental confusion so that audiences can feel empowered by their prowess in surmounting it, and in spontaneously wreaking harmonic sense from contrarities in ways that the protagonist himself is aiming to do.

Translation, then, or too much cutting of the plays, can still preserve plenty of similar examples—it is impossible, really, to rid the plays of them—but it will inevitably make the whole less coherent. The extreme paradox of Shakespeare’s canon is that the plays achieve their coherence by dizzying patterns of phonic and ideational coherence, but also by their insistent attempts to disorient and destabilize audiences. Space won’t permit many examples, but consider a brief example from just one other play—*King Lear*. *Lear* begins with Gloucester in conversation with the Earl of Kent, Gloucester peppering the dialogue with jokes made in poor taste about the fun he had engendering his bastard son, Edmund, while Edmund looks on and patiently endures the humiliation. When Lear and his daughters arrive, two are effusive in their love for Lear and one is priggish and aloof. Of course, the caddish Gloucester and the priggish daughter, Cordelia, turn out to be two of the most wronged and sympathetic figures in Western literature, and the admirably restrained Edmund—any other play’s Hamlet or Posthumus—is revealed to be a pure villain. Still, an audience can never wholly divorce itself from its initial impressions, which attach and morph as the characters change. This is a mainspring of Shakespeare’s art. It’s why his characters are both so endearing and so frustrating, often simultaneously. It’s why Portia is handsome, clever, rich, and anti-Semitic, and why Shylock is both a demon and a far better exemplar of love and loyalty than can be found in *The Merchant of Venice*’s portrait of Christendom.

The inconsistencies and contradictions that help grant the characters their attractions are mirrored by similar inconsistencies and con-

traditions in the language, and their removal would deprive audiences of something essential to the plays. The OSF plan for translation calls upon the playwrights they commissioned first, “to do no harm,” and second, to “put the same kind of pressure on the language as Shakespeare put on his.” But translators (and directors) may do considerable harm when doing what seems the most reasonable thing—introducing clarity where Shakespeare left things uncertain. To the credit of the OSF, they have assigned dramaturges to collaborate with the playwrights and ensure that the signal features of Shakespeare’s texts persist in the translations. But the chances of that happening are very small given the interest in clarifying Shakespeare’s texts. For my part, I think the project may actually be valuable in facilitating an intimate engagement between a talented and diverse group of playwrights and Shakespeare’s texts. OSF has already proven visionary by bringing its insights into Shakespeare’s dramaturgy to bear on new plays concerned with American history and politics, and these playwrights doing the translations may learn much that will result in better contemporary plays. But while it is theoretically possible for them to improve on Shakespeare’s plays, they would need to do so by making the translations as disorienting and confusing as the originals, which is unlikely to be a goal they set up for themselves. As a result, my worry is that the result will be very legible, enough so to interest and excite people who “don’t understand Shakespeare,” but the resulting Shakespeare will be slackened, precisely because it can be so easily understood. I’d rather we confess that it’s all we can do to keep up, that the plays make us uncomfortable and nervous, as though our understanding is not always their concern—so that we feel much like some of the eponymous characters—and then dare theater companies and directors to be braver, to produce the plays without diluting them or fitting them to the apprehension of mere mortals.

# “Transposingly in love”: Hecht & Shakespeare

by David Yezzi

Some writers win our respect, others our admiration, and a very few inspire something like love—is there a nearer word for the intensity of feeling, elevation, and devotion occasioned by the best writing? Poets enter into fond liaisons with their literary precursors, either promiscuously or chastely. Anthony Hecht (1923–2004) noted his affection for a range of poets—Donne, Herbert, and Hardy often chief among them—but none, I think, had a more profound affect on him, both personally and poetically, than Shakespeare. Not even the Bible—which Hecht read obsessively and which figures directly in many of his poems, particularly the late poems of *The Darkness and the Light*—quite rivals the Bard as a continual source for subjects and allusions, from Hecht’s juvenilia to his final poems.

In addition to the poems that are steeped in Shakespeare in large part—“Peripeteia” (*The Tempest*), “A Love for Four Voices” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), and “The Venetian Vespers” (*The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*), there are countless Shakespearean epigraphs, quotations, allusions, and echoes throughout Hecht’s work, in both his lyric poems as well as, naturally, his blank-verse dramatic monologues. Hecht himself wrote to his friend Ashley Brown of the undercurrent of *King Lear* running through his Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *The Hard Hours* (1967). Ten years further on, nearly half of the poems in his third book, *Millions of Strange Shadows* (the title

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This essay is excerpted from a talk given in the poetry symposium of “Writing the Rockies” at Western State Colorado University on July 25, 2012.

comes from sonnet 53), carry either a direct reference to Shakespeare or a distinct echo. So close to the bone, so intimately felt are Hecht’s uses of the sonnets and plays, that they can only be understood as acts of (what T. S. Eliot called) sensibility: an idiosyncratic, internalized expression of the many aesthetic pleasures and revelations that Hecht discerned in Shakespeare’s language of elation and despair. As Hecht, toward the end of his life, wrote to the poet David Mason, “As for Shakespeare, he was able to do anything, and he repays infinite study.”

By Hecht’s own admission, he came reluctantly to Shakespeare. A secular Jew raised on New York’s Upper East Side, Hecht remembered how reading *The Merchant of Venice* in grade school brought home to him the anti-Semitism around him:

It was mortifying, and in complicated ways. I was being asked to admire the work of the greatest master of the English language, and one universally revered, who was slandering all those of my race and religion. . . . I can also remember the unseemly pleasure of my teacher in relishing all the slanders against the Jews in general and Shylock in particular. It was a wounding experience and the beginning of a kind of education for which I received no grades. And it has continued for the rest of my life.

In his first volume of collected prose, *Obbligati: Essays in Criticism* (1986), Hecht wields formidable scholarship and a flinty rhetorical power to grapple at length with the depiction of Judaism in *The Merchant of Venice*. It is his longest and

most complex essay on Shakespearean drama (surpassed in length only by his twinned essays on the *Sonnets*). Hecht's major essays on the plays consider in varying degrees how prejudices held by the characters (as well as by Shakespeare's audience) color the portrayals of three outsiders: Shylock, Othello, and, in a different sense, Caliban.

If Hecht's first experience of Shakespeare at school was disastrous, then his subsequent exposure to the plays in college wasn't exactly transformative: he enrolled in "a Shakespeare course that, unhappily, bored me stiff." And yet, over the years Hecht found himself "increasingly devoted to Shakespeare." He also became increasingly interested in acting. As a boy at Camp Kennebec, in Maine, he appeared in a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*. On the strength of his performance there, he was elevated, along with a few of his cast-mates, to the camp's drama club. (He also wrote the camp song.)

The eighteen-year-old Tony (as he was always known) possessed the wiry good looks and elegance of a leading man and the forelock and sad eyes of a matinee idol. In the fall of 1939, he donned the embroidered frock coat and hose of a saber-wielding seventeenth-century nobleman in Rostand's comedy of manners *The Romançers*. His crowning achievement in the school's Drama Club, of which he was a leading member (in the same year he served as president of the music club), came that spring in the role of Jack in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. A young Julien Beck carried off the scene-stealing drag portrayal of Lady Bracknell. (Beck later famously co-founded the experimental Living Theater with his wife, Judith Molina.) Hecht was voted best actor by his senior class.

The budding thespian included a photo of himself, possibly as a dandified Jack, on his senior yearbook page. Posing in natty attire with a monocle affixed in his left eye, he captures the comic panache of Wilde's sandwich-savoring aristocrat. As the chronicler of the Drama Club noted, Hecht "handled both the love scenes and the glib, sarcastic lines of the author with a sure touch." In acting, as in the other arts, particularly piano (which he played by ear), Hecht proved something of an autodidact.

So taken was Hecht with performing that, by the fall of 1940, he considered majoring in acting as a freshman at Bard, then the experimental wing of Columbia University. Hecht was an uneven student, though he could, through concerted application, raise his grades when he chose. But in his fine-arts courses he excelled, receiving regular praise from his professors for his acting and verse writing. (It was at Bard that he first knew that he wanted to be a poet.) Hecht's theatrical interests led him to include in his schedule of classes courses in the Theory and Practice of Play Production, Acting, and Stage Direction, as well as summer classes in Acting and the Development of French Drama. (He also excelled in math and geometry.)

While his teachers sensed his considerable talents (save one at Horace Mann who discouraged him from even pursuing a college career), Hecht's studies suffered at times from a lassitude occasioned by severe depression. "It must be added," wrote his advisor Dr. Gray in his evaluation, "that he has played large roles in two plays during the term. . . . He profits a great deal from his acting," though it wreaked havoc with his time management.

At Bard, Hecht's roles included Antigonus in *A Winter's Tale*, Neville Chamberlain, and one of the leads in Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Aria da Capo*. As Hecht's one-time student Chevy Chase told me, when Hecht returned to Bard as a professor, he played a supporting role in *Love's Labour's Lost*, with Chase and Blythe Danner. That Hecht came to Shakespeare by way of the stage as much as the page speaks volumes about the dramatic nature of his own poems and about his ear for blank verse.

Hecht's acting experience lent his reading voice as a poet, as well as his own speaking voice, a particular precision and expressiveness. The poet Monroe K. Spears, a longtime editor of *The Sewanee Review* and the author of a book on Auden, singled out Hecht's public readings for praise. In a birthday tribute written in November 1997, Spears took as his subject Hecht "as a public reader of poetry, especially his own." "My thesis will be that he is among the greatest readers of our time—and, as far as one can tell, of any time." Spears went on to characterize Hecht's great ability to play

the cascading syncopations of natural speech rhythms across the meter: “Tony has the vocal and musical equipment necessary to enunciate clearly while expressing all the complex interplays between meter and prose meaning. . . . [H]e uses all the resources of art—music, rhetoric, allusion—to deal with the most serious and fundamental questions. His is a poetry with all the stops out, rich and magnificent.” Hecht’s forceful yet understated performance style finds a natural context in drama, and drama, as the critic Geoffrey Lindsay has noted, was a cornerstone of Hecht’s poetic art.

The poise and pitch of a Shakespearean actor marked Hecht’s speaking voice, as well. His sonorous (some would say plummy) accent, preserved on numerous recordings, was not the accent one typically associates with New York City, or, rather, New York City today. (Hecht was occasionally mistaken for British.) The kind of elevated, “mid-Atlantic” pronunciation—somewhere between Manhattan and the refined tones of the British Broadcasting Corporation—was more common before the Second World War. Hecht’s accent bespoke a certain WASP-iness; imagine the patrician drawl of, say, the *Paris Review* editor George Plimpton or, to a lesser degree, the poet Richard Wilbur, a long-time friend of Hecht’s.

Partly it was schooling. Certainly the private schools that Hecht attended would have had masters who spoke that way. That his brother, the poet Roger Hecht, did not speak like that suggests that it was learned outside the home. Hecht had a teacher at (the largely Jewish, assimilationist) Horace Mann School named Al Baruth, who taught speech and rhetoric—projection, enunciation, pacing—by having students read aloud from the works of Shakespeare. A frequent theatergoer, Hecht would have heard this accent on Broadway, as well as at the movie houses. It is also the accent Hecht probably heard listening to recordings of his favorite Shakespeareans on his Victrola at Bard.

The war put paid to Hecht’s college days, which he called the happiest time in his life. He served as a Private First Class in the U.S. Army, first in Europe and, then, in Japan. Shakespeare’s plays performed a salvific role for the young infantry-

man, buoying his spirits and giving expression to his anguish. As Hecht later recounted in an address at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington:

I had to leave college mid-career to join the army, and one of the few talismans I brought with me from civilian life to protect my spirit and sanity from the mindlessness of military training and overseas combat was a little paperback volume of Shakespeare plays.

In Germany, he carried with him a copy of *Five Shakespeare Tragedies* as well as *The Pocket Book of the Sonnets*, portions of which he committed to memory and from which he would frequently quote in letters home. The two years leading up to his combat service robbed Hecht of his mental vitality; combat itself took a much larger psychic toll. As Hecht saw clearly:

No part of military life, neither training nor combat, is conducive to the reading or study of Shakespeare, and only a few weeks of close-order drill and bayonet training left me looking at the pages of those plays is [*sic*] if they expressed all the excitement, poignance and drama of the Manhattan Telephone Directory. I felt terrifyingly drugged, lobotomized, incapable of thought or understanding and this is no doubt just what the army intended.

Soon after arriving at one camp, he wrote, “I feel that I shall once again fall into that mental slump, which is so necessary to being a good soldier. After one week here, my thoughts have already become less coherent. This is liable to be the most depressing feature of army life.” From Ft. Leonard Wood, in April 1944, he wrote to his parents on United States Army stationery, “I have been reading ‘King Lear’ a fine play by William Shakespeare—I’m sure you’ve heard of him. He used to write sonnets for high-school anthologies.” On another occasion, he dashed off a quick postcard with a few lines from which he had taken solace: “Sweet are the uses of adversity;/ Which, like the toad, ugly + venomous,/ Wears yet a precious jewel in his head? There is a marked paucity of jewels in my toad—but I continue to search.”

*Hamlet* became a frequent source of quotation for mirroring his moods in his increasingly antic, allusive letters. A planned move in August 1944, from a camp in Santa Monica to Camp Callahan in San Diego, occasioned a Hamlet-like uncertainty, written on American Red Cross stationery: “And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,/ With windlasses, and with assays of bias/ By indirections find directions out.” This jocular note to his brother, Roger, adds to dollops of the melancholy Dane a dash of the ambitious Thane: “How’s the old petty pace coming along? From day to day?” *Hamlet* helped Hecht to talk about his own difficulties though indirection, as in this letter from October 1944 in which he confessed to a “fit of abysmal despair”: “I have that within me which passeth show/ These but the trappings + the suits of woe.”

“I suspect I am a ‘depressive’ type,” he told Philip Hoy in a 1998 interview, “without even the consolation of enjoying intervals of manic highs. This is not a condition in which I pride myself, or for which I think myself entitled to pity. I have seen enough suffering in the world—in my own family, as well as during the war—to know that others have lived far worse lives than mine.” A breakdown in 1959, when divorce occasioned his separation from his young sons, landed him three months in the hospital, where he was treated with Thorazine. Such extended bouts made him fear for his sanity. As he later wrote to Ashley Brown, “To return, for a moment to a strand that binds *Lear* to my work, they both touch on, not so much madness as the *fear* of madness.”

After the war, Shakespeare became a touchstone of his psychic health:

I emerged from the war sound, and, if not sane, at least not stark raving mad, to no one’s astonishment more than my own. And the best index I think I had of the recovery of my balance, my humanity, and my most valuable faculties, was the gradual recovery of the pleasure of reading Shakespeare. That pleasure has continued and grown richer ever since. I like to believe it has had a subtle and strengthening influence on my own poetry.

Strengthening, to be sure, though not always subtle. This is not to say that the presence of

Shakespeare in Hecht’s poetry is ham-handed or cloying; it takes hold through numerous echoes in Hecht, in the very movement of his verse, particularly his blank verse, and in the dramatic nature of his monologues and personae. (Wyatt Prunty suggests rightly that Hecht “echoes Shakespeare as an extension of a vision he already firmly possesses.”) “But in any case,” Hecht adds, “I am by now a stubborn, middle-aged university professor who rejoices in teaching Shakespeare and who mercilessly brainwashes students into believing he is a great writer.”

Following his discharge from the Army, Hecht took advantage of the G.I. Bill to study for a year, as a “special” (i.e., non-matriculating) student of John Crowe Ransom, at Kenyon College. When a member of the English department fell ill, Hecht took over his freshman literature course. Hecht taught Shakespeare for the first time—*Hamlet* and *Henry IV*—to a group of students only slightly younger than himself. Thus began a lifelong career as a Shakespeare professor: he later taught at Bard, Smith College, The University of Rochester, and Georgetown University (from 1985 until his retirement in 1993), in addition to brief stints at Iowa, NYU, Harvard, and Yale.

Of his early days teaching Shakespeare at Bard, Hecht wrote in a letter to Hayát Matthews:

I often taught *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *I & II Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Lear* and *The Tempest*, but never, though I have read it ever since adolescence, and read countless commentaries on it, *Hamlet*—which still seems to me the most puzzling, amazing, unsettling and defiantly enigmatic play in the whole corpus. There was a time when I knew more of *Hamlet* by heart than any of the other plays. (That later was followed by *Lear* and *The Tempest*.)

These became the central plays for Hecht, the ones that figure most importantly in his poems.

Hecht’s jewel-like nonce stanzas, which crowd his debut collection, *A Summoning of Stones* (1954) and return in many of his finest poems, clearly owe a debt to Herbert and Donne. In later life, Hecht would come to see *Stones* as

advanced apprentice work, and, indeed, if that were the only book Hecht wrote, he would be remembered as a skillful, though minor, mid-century versifier. But thirteen years later, Hecht emerged as a major American poet with his second collection, *The Hard Hours*. As Lindsay observes, in this Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, Hecht's newfound poetic strategy exhibits a deep indebtedness to drama. So what happened in the interim between volumes? Lindsay doesn't quite come out and say it, but it is clear that what happened to Hecht's style had much to do with his use of Shakespeare.

This brief catalog illustrates the different ways in which Hecht drew on Shakespeare for his work. Sometimes his Shakespearean epigraphs were late additions, appended to a poem after the fact to help provide a context. Sometimes the presence of Shakespeare exists only as a remote echo. "It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It." ironizes the reference to the ranting tetrarch in Hamlet's speech to the players and reawakens (as Norman German has suggested) the sense of Herod's slaughter of the innocents. A poem of lust, "The Origin of Centaurs," takes an epigraph from *Lear*: "But to the girdle do the gods inherit,/ Beneath is all the fiend's." Hecht expects us to hear the lines in context, as part of the rambling ruminations (set as prose in the Quarto of 1608) of the mad king just after he exhorts, "Let copulation thrive."

While many other Shakespearean echoes may be discerned at different points in *The Hard Hours*, *Lear* undergirds the collection throughout. "I would guess that, along with *The Tempest* (which, like [Oedipus at] *Kolonos*, is a great play of reconciliation) *Lear* is the play I 'know' best and most carefully; the one I have taught most." Hecht wrote to Ashley Brown:

[T]he tragic vision of *Lear* is actually present in *The Hard Hours*, in the final part of *Rites and Ceremonies*. The lines, in quotation marks,

'None does offend,  
None, I say,  
None?'

is *Lear* IV, vii, 172. [*sic*]

*Lear* also, he tells Brown, lurks in the interstices of "Behold the Lilies of the Field," "Birdwatchers of America," "And Can Ye Sing Baluloo When the Bairn Greets?" and, he adds suggestively, "perhaps elsewhere." To these poems, one could add others, such as the masked self-portrait of "Third Avenue in Sunlight," with its anxieties about madness (as *Lear* says, "I fear I am not in my right mind"), and, importantly, "More Light! More Light!"

Hecht points out to Brown some "genuine *Lear* eye-imagery" in the song-like "And Can Ye Sing Baluloo When the Bairn Greets?": "These eyes, that many have praised as gay,/ Are the stale jellies of lust in which Adam sinned." Of course, we hear Cornwall's lines "Out, vile jelly!/ Where is thy luster now?" uttered as Gloucester's second eye is removed by the fiery duke. Further eye imagery appears slightly earlier in the collection at the close of "Bird Watchers of America":

For instance, the woman next door, whom we  
hear at night,  
Claims that when she was small  
She found a man stone dead near the cedar trees  
After first snowfall.  
The air was clear. He seemed in ultimate peace  
Except that he had no eyes. Rigid and bright  
Upon the forehead, furred  
With a light frost, crouched an outrageous bird.

Hecht's eye-imagery finds a third expression in the blind gaze at the conclusion of "More Light! More Light!" which more than any other poem in the book adopts the unrelenting negations of *Lear*. The poem includes "Nor was he forsaken of courage . . . Not light . . . Nor light . . . No light, no light," and ends:

No prayers or incense rose up in those hours  
Which grew to be years, and every day came mute  
Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,  
And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.

(Another Shakespearean note in the poem comes in a voice reminiscent of the Chorus in *Henry V*: "We move now to outside a German wood.") Later in the same letter to Brown, Hecht mentions the contribution he made to the book *Preferences: 51 Poets Choose Poems from*

*Their Own Work and from the Past*, in which the editor Richard Howard supplied brief commentaries on the pairings. Hecht was the only poet of the two score and eleven to select from among Shakespeare's dramatic works, as an accompaniment to his own poem "The Vow." The scene he selected, from the end of Act IV, touches on the horror of impending madness that Hecht refers to elsewhere in his letter to Brown.

If anything, the use of Shakespeare only increases in Hecht's next two collections, *Millions of Strange Shadows* (1977) and *The Venetian Vespers* (1979). The examples are too numerous to mention here. Also well worth extended consideration is the Shakespearean (and Wordsworthian and Frostian?) nature of Hecht's blank verse monologues. For more on these and much else, see Jonathan F. S. Post's new study *A Thickness of Particulars: The Poetry of Anthony Hecht*, which contains an excellent chapter on Shakespeare and Hecht.

In his interview with Bruce Cole, from shortly before his death, Hecht spoke of Shakespeare as a revelation: "When I read a great deal of Shakespeare, I was able to see that in *Moby-Dick* Melville was strongly influenced by all kinds of Shakespearean idioms, by cadences, by actual images that he borrowed from the tragedies. One can't really read *Moby-Dick* without fully savoring the Shakespearean background, the language in it." The same could be said of Hecht's poems; without reading a great deal of Shakespeare the music and emotional framework may be missed. Hecht associates a number of important life events with corollaries in Shakespeare, most strikingly his marriage to his second wife, Helen, whom he likens to Miranda in "Peripeteia." It was of her that he "received a second life."

Anthony Hecht's burial in the cemetery at Bard College in April of 2005 took place among family and a few friends, a simple affair, though marked by a certain ceremony. Two of Shakespeare's sonnets, numbers 74 and 79, were read. A quotation from *The Tempest* adorns the stone: "Look down, you gods,/ And on this couple drop a blessed crown." The setting is poignantly appropriate: as a freshman at Bard, Hecht first seriously engaged with poetry, and it was there that he fell, as an actor

and a reader, "transposingly in love" ("Peripeteia") with Shakespeare. One report from a Bard professor in 1942 seems comically understated when he claims that there could be "no doubt of [Hecht's] talent—either for poetry or for the stage." It is a bit of dramatic irony, which Hecht would have been too modest to relish.

In the final years of his life, Hecht returned to Bogliasco in Italy, for fellowships that allowed him to work in the glorious surround of the Centro Studi Ligure. There, in view of the Mediterranean, he wrote his last poems, some of which, not surprisingly, include a familiar Shakespearean lilt. His poem "Motes" carries an epigraph from *Hamlet* ("A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye"). Hecht imagines, as he does elsewhere, life as a play, the men and women merely players:

whatever lies in store,  
They were type-cast in some play  
With a far from comic plot—  
Grief, selfishness, and war  
Crowding its dog-eared pages.

The poem appeared in *The New Yorker* a few days after his death, and subsequently in *The Best American Poetry 2005*, edited by Paul Muldoon. Another posthumously published poem, "Declensions," came out two months later, in *The New York Review of Books*. Its epigraph takes a line from sonnet 19 ("And every fair from fair sometime declines"). At the close of the poem, Hecht prays for the preservation of his sanity (a recurring theme), even as he makes his peace with death, and his thoughts turn to his wife, Helen, and youngest son, Evan:

May God preserve my wits,  
Science do what it may  
With scissors and thread and paste  
To maintain the remaining bits  
And faculties of today  
That have not yet gone to waste.

Eyesight and hearing fade:  
Yet I do not greatly care  
If the grim, scythe-wielding thief  
Pursue his larcenous trade,  
Though anguished by the grief  
Two that I love must bear.

# “Shakespeare studies”

*by George Green*

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## Teaching Hamlet with DVDs & downloads

I keep them off the Gibson and the Branagh  
by ruthlessly critiquing certain scenes.  
Olivier won an Oscar and they yawn,  
hating the way he minces in his tights  
and codpiece. Nicol Williamson? It's like  
I know his Hamlet. He bartends at the Ives

and reads Sestinas at an open mic.  
The Burton? He “asses about,” “vulgar and mannered.”  
So says John Gielgud who directed him!  
And Jacobi's too fluttery and unbuttoned.  
Maybe it really is impossible,  
as Hazlitt said it was, even for Kemble.

The Gielgud's on CD (magnificent);  
I'll teach soliloquy as aria.  
“At least Mel Gibson's Hamlet has cojones,”  
opines a scholar. Yes, but Mel is short  
on princeliness and lacks the “haunted” aspect.  
I show the ghost again (Olivier)

and emphasize the preternatural.  
The ghost is real. It's not brain chemistry,  
and, though he dawdles, Hamlet must obey.  
The King's provoked, Ophelia drowns herself,  
royal cadavers pile up on the stage.  
Goodnight sweet prince, your dynasty's kaput;

that's what you get for gabbing with a ghost.  
Horatio, even, tries to kill himself.  
I read "King Claudius" by Prince Cavafy  
and all worked up I talk about the ghost  
that drove Day-Lewis off the stage mid-scene,  
and off the stage, so now it seems, forever.

## Listening to Ophelia's mad scene (recorded by Ellen Terry in 1911)

She does sound like she just got out of Bellevue,  
lost in the park and singing in her slippers.  
Or worse, a mother freezing on a lifeboat,  
crooning a lullaby to her dead child.  
You hear Ophelia's wantonness as well,

what Dr. Foreman said (1502)  
of female lunatics: "If they get loose  
they'll climb up, naked, on the roof and cry  
'come kiss me' to the standers by below."  
Well, Ellen kissed her friends prodigiously

and hugged her fellow players on the stage,  
influencing Victorians to touch  
each other more (and more), and Henry James  
deplored her onstage "tenderness" in Scribner's.  
Now travel back a century, Mr. James,

when patrons could find seating on the stage,  
and foppish troops of Romeos would crowd  
the tomb of Mrs. Cibber, mad to have  
her Juliet expire in their arms.  
And what of Woffington, who played the whole

part of Cordelia, clasped around the waist  
by some besotted fan. She dragged him on  
from scene to scene as if he played a role,  
her gaping parasitical appendage.  
A comforter perhaps, picked up in France?

## Dying like King John

(Poisoned by a monk at Swinstead Abbey)

I'd rather die like Lear, but there's a problem.  
The moral grandeur has to emanate  
from deep within. The tragic soul must churn  
like smoke that billows from a bombed cathedral.  
I'll die more like King John, a dupe upstaged  
by Constance and her little brat, Prince Darling,

who jumps out of the castle onto rocks  
and lies there blond, adorable and crumpled.  
I'm upstaged by the strutting Bastard, too,  
whose "poetry," so Mark Van Doren claims,  
"will work like yeast in every line he utters."  
It's my job to be blamed for everything,

though History's the culprit here, not me;  
it pounds us flat and grinds us into jelly.  
My barons league with France then hurry back  
in time to see me poisoned; the French relief  
is wrecked, and half my troops are washed away,  
our frantic captains doggy-paddle, gulp

the brine and drown, their tents and baggage swept  
off with the tide. Then Constance dies offstage,  
frenzied with grief, and Elinor, the queen,  
my mother, dies neglected and ignored.  
They all are thrown aside, undone, forsaken,  
"the sport of blind and insolent caprice"

(E. Burke). The Bastard blabbers on, and when  
I die on my Amfortas couch no one  
is noticing, they've turned away to heed  
the Bastard holding forth! Well, Bastard me  
no Bastards, and as for all his yeasty verse,  
a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

Letter from the Bronx

## The scars of Lorelei

by Stephen Eide

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New York has no shortage of public statuary, though perhaps not so ubiquitous as in other cities: think of Buenos Aires's various squares and Paris's *places*. But, as any occasional visitor to the city can tell you, Shakespeare and Walter Scott are in Central Park, Bolívar and José Martí just outside it, and of course Columbus sits atop his eponymous circle's column. And yet there is another notable sculpture within city limits that both tourists and habitués alike would find it difficult to name. But this forgotten monument is more than a mere commemorative *objet*. It is a metaphor for the city itself.

New York City's little-known Lorelei fountain commemorates Heinrich Heine, the most important figure in nineteenth-century German literature after Goethe. In German legend, the Lorelei was a siren whose entrancing songs sent sailors to the depths of the Rhine. Heine's lyric poem "Die Lorelei" casts the siren in the role of the poet's beloved, and the fountain and its accompanying statues honor the honor. In the center of the fountain sits a round pedestal supporting a statue of the Lorelei, looking out and slightly downward, presumably towards those ill-fated sailors. The pedestal itself features bas-reliefs of Heine, a man slaying a dragon, and a sphinx embracing a woman. At its base are three mermaids: Lyric, Melancholy, and Satire. Between the mermaids are three raised carved shell basins, from which the water flows into the main basin. The statuary group is one of New York's few public sculptures carved out of white marble, possibly quarried from the Tyrol region of modern-day Italy or Austria.

It shouldn't be surprising that New York, America's cultural capital and a city of immigrants, would commemorate Heinrich Heine. Indeed, as the architectural historian Francis Morrone once noted, the city has done a much better job honoring great foreign authors such as Shakespeare and Robert Burns than its own. (Henry James, Herman Melville, and Edith Wharton are still waiting for their just tributes.) But many would be surprised to learn that the Lorelei fountain makes its home in the South Bronx. When the work was dedicated in the late nineteenth century, the surrounding Grand Concourse neighborhood was populated by middle-class Americans of German extraction. It is now poor and black and Latino. After being vandalized more severely than any other public sculpture in the city during "the bad old days"—whose specter now haunts the city again—philanthropy and government patronage restored the work to almost its original glory in the late 1990s. The Heine monument has become a symbol of the Bronx's own rebirth.

Sculptures installed as part of the streetscape always run a greater risk of being taken for granted, and consequently abused, than museum pieces. But, in the view of Jonathan Kuhn, the director of art and antiquities for the Parks Department, New York's public collection of monuments and masterpieces has "never looked as good and been cared for as consistently" as now. New Yorkers are now living through a golden age of public sculpture in the city, though they may not realize it.

The Heine monument's marble constitution reflects the work's late-nineteenth-century European origins. Germany's 1871 political unification led to more cultural unification through the creation of public memorials to distinguished native sons. A Berlin sculptor named Ernst Herter (1846–1917) crafted the fountain at the behest of some leading citizens of Düsseldorf, Heine's hometown. The Empress Elisabeth of Austria, who ardently admired Heine, offered to pick up the bill. Düsseldorf, though, wound up rejecting the fountain. Despite the popularity of his lyric verse, set to music by Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms, Heine was not necessarily a beloved figure in Germany. He lived in Paris for most of his adult years, he was Jewish, he led a dissipated personal life, and he held liberal views on topics such as Napoleon, German nationalism, and the cravenness of the aristocracy. During his lifetime, his books were banned and even burned in Germany. At one point, according to the Heine biographer E. M. Butler, "Prussian frontier guards [were] furnished with his description and had orders to arrest him if he set foot on Prussian soil." This infamy persisted long after Heine's death.

But New York's German-American community had a more unqualifiedly broad conception of national identity and offered to take the monument off Herter's hands. They proposed placing it at the corner of Fifty-ninth Street and Fifth Avenue, just south of Central Park. But the Parks Commission's consultants on art and sculpture strongly advised against bestowing such a prominent perch upon the Lorelei fountain (which was eventually, and deservedly, occupied by Augustus Saint-Gaudens's General Sherman statue in 1903). Their objections were principally aesthetic, dismissing the fountain as "but a pretty porcelain design in a rococo style . . . lack[ing] dignity and majesty. It is a gingerbread affair." Such intemperate criticisms stemmed from a concern then prevalent among the city's cultural elite: specifically that New York desperately needed to impose order on the overly improvisational and ad-hoc approach to public art. In fact, it was the dispute over the Heine monument that prompted the government to authorize a formal Art Commis-

sion charged with regulating which artworks to accept and where to put them, a body later renamed the "Design Commission" under the erstwhile Mayor Bloomberg.

The Lorelei fountain was thus homeless again. In a convenient twist of fate, final plans were then being laid in the Bronx for "the Grand Boulevard and Concourse." The nascent community forming around this Champs-Élysées of the New World was German-American. A park was laid out at the corner of 161st Street and Mott Avenue, where the Grand Concourse was intended to begin. The Heine Monument was dedicated in 1899 at Concourse Plaza, which in the 1920s was renamed Joyce Kilmer Park after a young American poet ("only God can make a tree") who died in World War I.

Siting the Heine monument in Joyce Kilmer Park was a particularly elegant solution. Across 161st Street is the landmarked Bronx County Courthouse. Built during the early years of the Great Depression, this box-shaped building has a modest stateliness appropriate to its function that also serves to set off its pink marble sculptural program by Adolph Weinman. The Grand Concourse district itself has significant aesthetic merits and was landmarked in 2011, in part for the clutch of striking Art Deco apartment buildings, such as Emery Roth's 888 Grand Concourse, that frame Joyce Kilmer Park to the east. Just steps from Yankee Stadium, perhaps the foremost Bronx monument in sports-crazed New York, Joyce Kilmer Park and its tenant fountain occupy a central place in what functions effectively as the Bronx's gold coast.

But the fountain enhances its surroundings more than it is enhanced by them. Lorelei's presence solidifies the lower Grand Concourse as part of New York proper; in other cities one doesn't expect to find such meritorious, intelligently designed works of public art in neighborhoods so far removed from downtown. The Lorelei fountain interprets Heine's poem and captures its mix of tension ("wild-aching passions roll") and serenity ("peaceful flows the Rhine"). One might think of a siren as cruelly indifferent. But Herter chose to present an animate and engaged Lorelei, through the expressiveness of her features and the swirl of her cloak and hair, which she holds back in a gesture of attention towards

the men she has doomed. (This motion, by far the most dramatic aspect of the entire work, is seen to best effect against a cloudless sky—white marble on deep blue.) Herter says in stone that Lorelei, that is, the poet's beloved, understands the destructiveness of her charms.

Or at least, she seems to, in photographs taken before her features were to be effaced in the process of removing decades of accumulated paint and graffiti. Roughly two generations after the Lorelei fountain's installation, a maelstrom of crime and destruction overwhelmed the South Bronx, and the fountain was one of its most innocent victims. "Perhaps no statue [in the city] has been more thoroughly vandalized," wrote Joseph Lederer in his 1975 guide to outdoor sculpture in New York, *All Around the Town*.

The city shut off the water in the 1960s. The fountain and statues became covered in multiple layers of graffiti, interspersed with well-intentioned but poorly executed paint jobs intended to cover over the tagging, which only served to press both varieties of paint further into the porous marble. All three mermaids were wantonly decapitated, and had their arms and flippers smashed off. The pieces were never recovered. In light of the persistence its attackers showed in destroying it, one might have assumed the Lorelei fountain was meant to honor some southern slave trader, not a liberal Jewish poet who famously prophesied that "where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people as well."

It's true that New York has struggled throughout its history with vandalism, both in its political and nihilistic forms. The Parks Department has on its website a home movie documenting the efforts of its Monuments Restoration Crew in the late 1930s as they attended to "Communist graffiti" and other episodes of vandalism. City records show that the Heine monument has been struck several times throughout its history, including one incident that took place only six months after its dedication. New York's character is composed of two elements in permanent tension: unruliness—it was in the seventeenth century when Peter Stuyvesant referred to the city as a "disobedient community"—and highly sophisticated aesthetic standards. To keep the outdoor

sculpture collection in the condition it deserves, city government must be more vigilant about crime and disorder here, because the stakes are higher than elsewhere. At no time was the city less successful in meeting this challenge than in the 1970s. For years, Lorelei stood attended by headless mermaids and smothered in graffiti tags, potent testimony to New York's status as the "ungovernable city."

The fountain was restored during the late 1990s at a cost of \$525,000. Chief credit goes to the Bronx borough president Fernando Ferrer and the Municipal Art Society's "Adopt-a-Monument" program, which secured a decisive grant from the Anna-Maria & Stephen Kellen Foundation. It turned out to be impossible to restore the fountain completely. In addition to Lorelei's disfigured face, it's hard to miss the mermaids' "scars," where conservationists attached the newly fashioned heads and extremities. Of course, the highest praise to give to any restoration effort is that you can't tell what's not original. That can be said of several of the Heine monument's prosthetic features, such as the animal and marine life, foliage, and a human skull that make up the "Rhine" section under the carved shell basins. For protection, the monument was surrounded by lights, plantings, and an iron fence, and it was moved to the higher profile southern end of Joyce Kilmer Park, its original site. (The park had been reconfigured in the 1930s, prompting a relocation of the fountain.) The rededication took place on the monument's centennial, with officials from Germany and even Düsseldorf in attendance.

Many believe that at the core of New York's recent revival lies something of a Faustian bargain. As they see it, the re-imposition of bourgeois standards of public order, sometimes termed "quality of life," come at the cost of authenticity. New York is safer now but—according to its detractors—less charming and too much like other cities. These unfortunately myopic souls seem to be looking at things the wrong way. The saga of the Lorelei fountain, which represents a clear victory for both public safety and cultural enrichment, suggests that an orderly, if somewhat less "authentic," city is, in sum, more beautiful than an "authentic," disorderly one.

# Chambers of horror

by Kyle Smith

“Get a room, you two,” one is tempted to shout during a performance of *Blackbird*, except the two principals already *have* a suitable chamber: It’s a garbage-strewn, fluorescently lit, color-cidal employee break area in an anodyne industrial building located squarely in Anyburb, U.S.A. This clinically unattractive setting—nowhere but everywhere—is meant to harmonize with the polluted nature of the relationship between the play’s two lead characters, a woman and the man with whom she had a sexual encounter fifteen years ago when she was twelve and he was about forty. But I found the room a more appropriate analogue for the sordid impulses of playwrights who are forever clambering to exploit some fresh sexual frontier.

*Blackbird* is one of those “shattering,” “gripping” plays that can be taken seriously only with strenuous effort. The middle-aged man who had an affair with a pre-pubescent girl is not a pedophile, you see. Not him. He tells us so and, amazingly, the author of the play is at pains to agree. He posits that the girl was the author of her own statutory rape. Believing that this can be so is the chief source of the dramatic tension in the play, but a fatuous central conceit creates a null set of a play.

The 2005 piece, by the Scot David Harrower, has been bouncing languidly around New York and London for years but is only now receiving its Broadway debut (at the Belasco Theatre through June 11) in a production starring two notable screen actors, a nervy Jeff Daniels and an insistently vampish Michelle Williams.

*Blackbird* is a bit like a de-ironized rewrite of a late, gray chapter of *Lolita*—the bit in which Humbert checks in on the wan and worn Lola in her haggard matron phase—only with the sexual polarity reversed. We learn that the girl, Una, set the sexual trap that ruined two lives by flitting flirtingly around her unsuspecting neighbor after the two met at a friendly backyard barbecue.

Directed by Joe Mantello, the play opens as Una appears unannounced at the workplace of Ray, her onetime sexual partner, who has since changed his name to Peter. He is flustered, suspecting blackmail, but as the play goes on—this is one of those pieces in which the playwright thinks he’s being clever by slowly dribbling out bits of information about what happened long before the events we witness—we discover that the affair between the two was quickly discovered (after a single night spent together) and that Ray went to prison for his offense fifteen years ago. So what does Una want? Why is she here? What happens next between these two? Answering these questions in due course provides a reasonably suspenseful evening, but to describe *Blackbird* as some species of sexual thriller or mystery would be a mistake because the dramatic payoff is so meager. By evening’s end, we really haven’t advanced very far.

No, *Blackbird* is a character study, but a vacuous one. It’s easy for a man—particularly a man who isn’t ordinarily attracted to children—not to have a sexual relationship with a pre-pubescent girl. There is no amount of sexual

sorcery that makes her partly responsible or, as the play would have it, perhaps mostly responsible. For all the detail about how the girlish Una seduced her neighbor, about what a predator she was (“you couldn’t wait to start menstruating,” Ray/Peter says accusingly), it’s ludicrous to imagine that “seduction.” One can no more be bewitched into bed by a little girl than one can accidentally rob a bank.

So the swaying balance of power between the two characters is a farcical illusion: any man with half an iota of moral or even practical sense would have simply dismissed the twelve-year-old Una’s advances. Though Daniels has on occasion, and delectably, played villains, it’s his placid middle-America everyman quality that won him this role. No doubt his relatability will fool many a theatergoer and critic, but James Stewart himself couldn’t make this character seem decent, much less plausibly motivated.

*The Royale* (at the Mitzi E. Newhouse at Lincoln Center Theater through May 1) also balances on the fulcrum of an unscheduled, fraught encounter between a man and a woman in a tightly circumscribed space. As staged by the play’s director, Rachel Chavkin, this late turn of events is spellbinding, a coup de théâtre that pulls together a play that, though only eighty minutes in duration, is both slow to take shape and at times somewhat too insistent that we be moved and shocked by the obvious.

But I’ll omit the details of that climactic confrontation so as not to spoil it. Marco Ramirez’s boxing play uses the life of the world heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, the first black athlete to hold that title and also the inspiration for Howard Sackler’s 1967 Pulitzer Prize play *The Great White Hope*, as background inspiration for a psychological study of a fictional boxer, Jay (an appealing Khrist Davis). Jay so yearns to prove his mettle and de-segregate boxing that he demands a bout with the retired but still putatively formidable white champ, Bixby, and immediately accepts a proposal from the latter’s camp that the purse be divided nine to one in favor of the white man, regardless of the outcome.

That’s a strong impetus for a one-act play, but unfortunately we’re well into the evening before this event occurs. Until then, Ramirez and Chavkin expend considerable time (and more than a little ingenuity) on what turns out to be a meaningless fight between Jay and a challenger called Fish (McKinley Belcher III), who becomes the former’s sparring partner and close friend. Staging the ring action with no actual punches to speak of, Chavkin instead employs a tricky panoply of methods to suggest the fighting while the boxers relate their thoughts and two observers—white fight promoter Max (John Lavelle) and Jay’s trainer Wynton (Clarke Peters)—supply commentary. Devastating punches are indicated by energetic foot stamping, a tactic that works surprisingly well in the abstract ether of this production, but Chavkin enjoys much less success conveying her point when, periodically, the cast members try to pump up the excitement level with sudden rhythmic hand claps. This last gambit seems forced, self-conscious, and artificial, and an ideal production would eschew it. Still, when Fish is struck so hard he is left dazed and semi-conscious on his feet, the way the actor playing his rival mockingly sways while rocking the single set of ropes that stands in for the boxing ring is a superb theatrical riposte to Martin Scorsese’s agonized slow-motion tableaux vivants in *Raging Bull*.

The literal fighting is, of course, mere surface. As Jack’s stature rises, Max’s ring introductions and asides are inflected with racism that seems the more insidious because it’s so casual. When Jay presses the point that achieving true legitimacy will require fighting white men, Max responds that no white man would stoop so low. After all, would Jay fight a grizzly bear?

Racism, dramatized, has a tendency to the infantilizing—all at once we’re being taught our social ABC’s, made to eat our (mushy) carrots, and patted on the head for doing same. Even as creators and critics can’t resist the urge to teach us what we already know, then, audiences discover their time better spent otherwise, and despite a strong notice for the play earlier that week in *The New York Times*, the small theater hosting *The Royale* was studded with empty seats at the performance I

attended. Nor was *The Royale* high on my list of most-anticipated plays this March.

Yet as the play goes on it becomes transfixing. The unexpected appearance of a lady in a purple dress, Nina (Montego Glover), at last gives the play the depth and texture it needs. Nina is Jay's sister, a conduit into the past and a reminder of both Jay's most urgent drives and his worst fears. Unsettling-looking white men with guns have appeared at Jay's fights, we learn. Even if they should be barred from the match with Bixby, the fight stands to spill out into America (as it indeed did: riots ensued when Jack Johnson defeated white champ James J. Jeffries in the 1910 bout often dubbed the "Fight of the Century"). Nina speaks of a bitter street dispute between two whites and two blacks that began as an argument over which race's champion was the superior: wouldn't it be wise of Jay to throw the fight so as not to further antagonize white men? How many blacks will suffer should he achieve victory in their name?

Ramirez sets off the encounter with the sister against a disturbing monologue delivered with devastating effect by Peters (who so beautifully played Det. Lester Freamon on HBO's *The Wire*). His trainer character got started as a fighter, participating as a young man in a spasmodic ritual in which half a dozen black men flailed at one another while blindfolded, the last man standing to be crowned the victor. The prize was whatever spare change the winner could scrape up from the bloodied ground littered also with knocked-out teeth. Such fights used to be held, Wynton reflects with hard-won irony, at a place called the Royale. The play of the same name reminds us that we have America's sporting fields to thank for accelerating many entries on the race-relations timetable.

Arriving at another play that limns aspects of black experience, *Eclipsed* (at the Golden Theatre through June 19) brings trepidation in layers. A play about sexually abused Liberian women trying to maintain their dignity amid the ravages of ceaseless civil war? Perhaps a more lighthearted evening can be had over at the nearest pediatric cancer ward. Nor can

one fail to anticipate the ravages of cliché and didacticism. Moreover, *Eclipsed* proudly bills itself as the first Broadway production featuring an all-female creative leadership team (cast, director, and playwright), with the added bonus that all seven of these women are also black. It's almost as if the play is encouraging you to buy a ticket as a gesture rather than for your own entertainment or enlightenment. Commendably, though, the play itself rejects cant, box-checking, and special pleading, and I'm glad I attended. *Eclipsed* may be an imperfect work, but it's a worthy one. It brings surprising insights to bear on the plight of its characters, though its conclusion is hazy and unsatisfying.

Left-wing university students are these days obsessed with a crisis of their own imagining they call "campus rape culture." *Eclipsed* contains, or is, a necessary corrective to such hysteria: there is such a thing as a rape culture so evilly entrenched that the word "rape" need not even be spoken, as it isn't by the three principal characters of Danai Gurira's play.

Three women converse in a thick, unlettered Anglo-African patois ("He no say nice ting to you. He say it to me.") while huddling inside a bullet-pockmarked shack with a corrugated tin roof. As they discuss the appeal of an African prince's wedding (only the sharply observant will note that they are referring to the climax of the 1988 Eddie Murphy film *Coming to America*), I began to suspect the playwright had more experience with Africa than just the standard long-distance sentimental views. Such is the case. Gurira (the only woman playwright debuting on Broadway this season) was born in Iowa but moved to Zimbabwe with her parents at age five and spent the rest of her childhood there. Her play contains considerably more humor and less pity than I'd have guessed, its language is frank (Africans refer to other Africans as "monkeys"), its political antipathy is evident. It doesn't play on the audience's patronizing tendencies by reducing these women to sorrowful victims or using them as message boards for vacuous political sloganeering.

The play marks an affecting but surprising Broadway debut by Lupita Nyong'o, the Mexico-born, Kenya-raised actress who,

shortly after graduating from Yale Drama School in 2012, landed her first film role, in *12 Years a Slave*, for which she won an Academy Award. Nyong'o is hidden under a plastic tub when the lights come up, her character cowering from a never-seen military officer known only as "C.O." who, it is gradually revealed, has made sex slaves of the other two women present in the shack. They are known only as No. 1 (Saycon Sengbloh) and No. 3 (Pascale Armand). Nyong'o's nameless character, a virgin, is being hidden by the others with an eye toward preserving her virtue, but, when she inevitably joins the others in C.O.'s rape harem, the moment is treated with little surprise or revulsion by the others. Such is life in strife-torn, indeed strife-defined, Africa: the girl is fifteen. She wipes herself between the legs with a rag after the encounter. "You gon' get used to it," one of the older women reassures her. All agree that the girl has won the right to be dubbed No. 4, albeit with some concern that she has not yet earned the social status of being considered a peer of the other residents of this sex dungeon.

For the three women, residents of a rural compound ruled by a militia, being the sexual tools of a violent man in a blood-drenched land is unworthy of being remarked upon. In this context, what use would the word "rape" have? Such a man as C.O. wouldn't need to use force against the women, or even threaten them. For the women, existence is delimited, a Hobbesian state of nature. They pass the time doing each other's hair or making remarks about Janet Jackson as they come and go with bundles of sticks or jugs of water on their heads. A good day is when a new package of stolen clothing and goods arrives to complement their array of soiled, mismatched charity-store t-shirts and skirts. One such good is a torn copy of a biography of Bill Clinton which No. 4 (the only literate person present) reads to the others.

Mischievously, if not inaccurately, Gurira draws a parallel between Clinton's habits and those of an African warlord: the women marvel at the troubles that plague Clinton because of his "No. 2," Monica Lewinsky. One volunteers that she'd like to be Clinton's No. 3, it being universally acknowledged that women require the patronage of powerful men to survive. "He see me, he gon' forget dat white wife. She betta not let him come 'ere," says No. 3.

An awakening of sorts occurs when a fourth woman, alternately known as No. 2 or Maima (Zainab Jah), turns up. Unlike the others, she is impeccably dressed, at least for either singing in a rock band or joining battle in Africa. She wears tight-fitting studded jeans, a midriff-baring top, and sunglasses. She has affected the war name "Disgruntled." Also she carries a military rifle and isn't shy about using it. Shouting imprecations against the government forces of Charles Taylor (the dictator who was deposed in 2003 and is today a guest of one of Her Majesty's prisons in northern England) and teaching No. 4 how to fire the rifle, she suggests another approach for oppressed women: After she obtained her firearm, she notes, "no one could f—k with me," and the C.O. has reconsidered the wisdom of treating her as his sexual property.

So all the women take their cue to rise up as one, assert their rights, and sign up for subscriptions to *Ms.* magazine, right? Not quite: I reiterate that the playwright grew up in Zimbabwe, not Oberlin. The standard feminist template doesn't quite fit the shape of *Eclipsed*. For a start, women rarely do what feminism is urging them to do. No. 4 may be lured by the promise of achieving a measure of independence, but only for a time, and Nos. 1 and 3 would much rather avoid a leap into the unknown. Even in situations in which women are dominated and brutalized by men, they hesitate to declare the solution is to act like them.

## “Unfinished” at Met Breuer

by *Karen Wilkin*

Not since the Whitney Museum of American Art moved to its new Renzo Piano building last year has a New York museum event been as eagerly awaited as the Metropolitan Museum’s expansion into the Whitney’s former home, the Marcel Breuer–designed fortress on Madison Avenue and Seventy-fifth Street. That the Met would have an entire architecturally significant building in which to explore its growing commitment to modern and contemporary art, at least during the eight years of the present lease, was catnip to the art community. Rumors circulated about the planned opening exhibition, “Unfinished,” although no one was quite sure what the title meant.<sup>1</sup> Advance press events served more as appetite-whetters than as sources of solid information. Was the Met planning to become a showcase for trendy art? Reassurance that something far more interesting was envisioned came when “Reimagining Modernism, 1900–1950,” a new, multivalent take on the Met’s twentieth-century collection, was installed in the Fifth Avenue building by Associate Curator Randall Griffey, provocatively combining American and European works in fresh ways. But what was happening to the building?

Finally, in early March, previews of Met Breuer began. For anyone who cares about modernist architecture, it was worth the wait. The lobby now strikes us with its pristine el-

egance. The celebrated circular lights of the ceiling grid are uniformly white and regular—a luminous, continuous plane across the entire space. The clarity and crispness of that rhythmically punctuated expanse makes us realize, retroactively, how worn the building had become. Many of the fixtures, a curator told me, slipped out of alignment over the years, hence the drama of now seeing them not only immaculate but also perfectly ordered. The same kind of subtle refreshment is evident throughout the building. Everything, including the stone floors, looks just as it did, only better. (Yes, the Charles Simonds installation in the stairwell and its echo on the ledge across Madison Avenue are still in place.) And the trees newly planted in the “moat,” their tops just visible as you cross the bridge to enter, offer a promise of a softening contrast to Breuer’s iconic but unarguably brutalist façade.

And we found out what the title of the inaugural exhibition meant. Organized by Met curators Kelly Baum and Andrea Bayer, with the former Met curator Nicholas Cullinan, under the direction of Sheena Wagstaff, chairman of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, the ambitious “Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible” embodies the Met’s often repeated assertion that, in contrast to museums devoted principally to modern or contemporary art, its encyclopedic collection allows works from the present and the recent past to be seen within a deep historical context. “Unfinished” examines the fact, the conception, and the perception of incompleteness, both by artists and their

<sup>1</sup> “Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible” opened at The Met Breuer, New York, on March 18 and remains on view through September 4, 2016.

audiences, in works of art from the Renaissance to the 2000s—from Titian, Donatello, and Jan van Eyck to Ed Ruscha, Joan Snyder, and Kerry James Marshall, by way of Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, and Piet Mondrian, among many, many others. Installed on the museum’s third and fourth floors, the exhibition exhilarates and stimulates, sometimes puzzles, and occasionally annoys, as it provokes us to consider how we now think about finish, spontaneity, boundaries, contingency, permanence, the passage of time, and more, and how these conditions have been thought about in the past. Artists and critics, of course, have wrestled with notions of completeness for centuries. Eugène Delacroix, for example, maintained that finishing a work always spoiled it in some way. Sketches were often preferable to completed paintings because they left viewers free to complete the image in their imaginations. But, as “Unfinished” intimates, since the decline of codified academic standards of finish, the once relatively simple distinction between complete and incomplete works of art came to include a greatly enlarged range of implications and definitions.

Some of the works on view in “Unfinished” are documented as being just that—known to have been abandoned for a wealth of reasons: the artist’s dissatisfaction or loss of interest, the defection of a sitter, the author’s death. These, from whatever period, are identified on the label with a half-shaded square. Despite their actual incompleteness, however, many early examples were prized in their own day, valued for what they revealed of an artist’s thinking or process, and exhibited or sold. Other early works in “Unfinished” were deemed complete by their makers and often signed. But they have the appearance of what was once termed the *non finito*, a bold, energetic “rough” or “summary” style that deliberately ignored ideas about finish current at the time of their making. The exhibition’s more recent works, made well over a century after modernism’s rejection of sleek surfaces and meticulous adjustments, usually do not fit neatly into either category. We are

confronted not only with literally unfinished works (a Mondrian still laid out with tape) and modern-day versions of the *non finito* as a stylistic or expressive approach (Snyder’s crusty, slapdash challenge to the grid) but also with a host of works in which incompleteness, tenuousness, unlimited expansiveness, and/or the suggestion of future and past possibilities are philosophical ends in themselves (Andy Warhol’s mostly blank, do-it-yourself paint-by-numbers violin, to name only one).

Some works trigger questions about their history, such as Edouard Manet’s energetically scrawled portrait of his wife, abandoned mid-stream, or a bizarre portrait of a Spanish noblewoman by Anton Raphael Mengs, highly finished except for the scraped-out face and a space reserved for a lapdog. Mengs produced a completed version of the painting, making the existence of this one more enigmatic. Even more fascinating, though, are works that make us wonder how they were seen in their own day. “Unfinished” begins with one of the most potent of these, Titian’s terrifying masterpiece, *The Flaying of Marsyas* (probably 1570s, possibly his last painting), which normally lives in a remote part of the Czech Republic. There’s debate as to whether Titian completed the work before he died and whether there were additions by another hand—or not. But it’s signed and it was certainly regarded as complete by the early seventeenth century, when it was purchased in Venice. To modern eyes, the painting’s vigorous brushstrokes, flickering light, and nervous rhythms seem perfectly congruent with the chilling image of the hapless satyr, being skinned alive for challenging Apollo. The urgency of the facture, far from suggesting lack of completeness, intensifies the tension between the picture’s eerie stillness and gruesome subject.

If we can wrench ourselves away from *Marsyas*, we find an equally mysterious Titian beside it. *The Agony in the Garden* (1558–62) is an almost unseeable night scene, with the foreground occupied by barely illuminated soldiers and a dog. Lantern-light makes a shimmering chain-mail collar the focal point of the picture, a patch of shining loops that

competes for attention with Christ, hovering against the darkness in a shaft of celestial light, at the top of the painting. *The Agony in the Garden* is so relentlessly dark, its figures so roughly indicated, that it comes as a surprise to learn that it was immediately sent to Titian's great patron, Philip II, the king of Spain. Once we know that, the painting raises fewer questions about completeness than it does about sixteenth-century perceptions of near-monochrome dark color, dislocation, and concealment.

Engaging as these ideas are, as we move through the first part of "Unfinished," we keep encountering superb works that make the show's thesis more or less irrelevant. The Rembrandts, however broadly painted, need no further justification, nor do the other Titians. But when we encounter the admittedly splendid drawings by Michelangelo and Leonardo, we begin to question the exhibition's premise. It's wonderful to see these exemplary works, but for these giants, as for most artists of the Renaissance and for centuries to come, drawings were working tools, used to capture ideas and to investigate forms. Only as much "information" as needed was recorded or developed. That Michelangelo's and Leonardo's images are fragmented, incompletely modeled, or crowded on the sheet seems simply to be an indication of the drawings' function—and of a thrifty use of paper.

On the plus side, more recent works often expand the discussion by reminding us to consider both the artist's intention and perceptions of those intentions. The ample selection of J. M. W. Turner's minimally indicated, atmospheric paintings of big expanses of sky and water, mostly made around 1840, were considered unfinished when the artist bequeathed them to the nation; they remained in storage, we learn, until 1906. How Turner thought about these pictures is unknown, but twentieth-century eyes, trained by post-World War II abstraction, have embraced their detached strokes and pools of thinned-out color as prefigurations of all-overness and of gestural Abstract Expressionism, in the same way

and for the same reasons that they embraced Claude Monet's late water lilies. There is less consensus about Manet's urgently scrawled *The Funeral* (ca. 1867), with its scribbled trees, patchy sky, and schematic buildings. Described as a "painted study" in an inventory made of Manet's studio after his death and purchased by Camille Pissarro a decade later, the painting is regarded as finished by some scholars and as inexplicably unfinished by others. In the context of "Unfinished," its fierce strokes take on new meaning.

*Pace* Turner, "real" modernist all-overness, with its intimations of limitlessness, is represented by paintings by Jackson Pollock and Brice Marden, among others, with another kind of limitlessness and open-endedness alluded to by systematic works such as Sol Lewitt's seemingly endless series of small open cubes—the *non finito* as infinity. Contingency is announced by Willem de Kooning's *Woman I* (1950–52). This celebrated, transgressive picture makes us feel that what we are seeing is only a single moment in an infinite set of permutations, some still visible in the layered, wet-into-wet image, some present as memories or as hints of a non-achieved future. *Woman I* clearly looked very different at various times in its evolution and might look different today, had de Kooning, who had lost faith in the picture, not been persuaded that it was complete. Contingency and instability are also embodied in Medardo Rosso's uncanny "veiled" heads, subtly modeled sculptures that seem to retreat from our sight. An even more extreme notion of instability is declared by Robert Rauschenberg's precarious *Mirrors and Shelly Sand* (1969–70), a long narrow spill of sand supporting a row of mirrors, an arrangement that makes the whole idea of completeness moot by threatening to disintegrate over time—to be undone, rather than *non finito*.

In works more stable than Rauschenberg's, "Unfinished" encourages us to read loose brushmarks and casual gestures, drips and visible revisions as the legacy of the *non finito*. It also makes us specially conscious of passages of unpainted canvas. Once an unequivocal sign of absence and of incompleteness, evidence of what the artist had failed to do, untouched

areas in modern and recent paintings can be interpreted as deliberate choices and/or as the acceptance of something unplanned. All these views are amply illustrated throughout the exhibition. Edgar Degas's ambiguous 1869 portrait of Berthe Morisot's sister seems complete—firmly drawn but so sketchily painted that it seems to coalesce only momentarily as we stare at it. A group of fine Cézannes includes the radiant *Bouquet of Peonies in a Green Jar* (ca. 1898), in which generous zones of white canvas, shaped by scatterings of dark green leaves and minimally indicated pink flower heads, reveal themselves not as voids, but as the luminous equivalents of other blossoms. Whether the painting is finished or not is unknown; it couldn't matter less. There's no doubt about Pablo Picasso's intentions in his grim *The Charnel House* (1944–45), in which drawn still-life elements compete with (mainly) painted piled-up bodies. Bare canvas functions as light, while the discord between the differently treated zones reinforces the picture's uncomfortable rhythms. Similarly, the tension between the painted heads and unpainted surrounding areas, animated by drawing, in a self-portrait by Lucian Freud and a portrait by Alice Neel, enhances both paintings. Neel, we discover, was unable to go further with the work, when her sitter failed to return, but decided it was fine as is and signed it.

The sculptural equivalent of the play of painted and unpainted areas is, of course, the contrast between raw surfaces and highly finished forms, most famously articulated by Michelangelo's tense nudes, emerging from the rough-hewn block. None of these celebrated sculptures are in "Unfinished," alas, but their generating principles are stated by Auguste Rodin's reprisals and by an irritatingly sentimental Louise Bourgeois with a cluster of slick pink marble hands disposed on a roughly chiseled base. A pair of casually cast heads by Bruce Nauman, made in 1990, highly naturalistic but with seams and glitches showing, is plainly intended as current demonstrations of this kind of duality, although it's worth noting that the exhibition's Medardo Rosso bears witness to the

Italian innovator's having made poetic use of the uneasy coexistence of illusionism and the brute evidence of process almost a century before Nauman did.

There's a great deal to engage us, and sometimes perplex us, on our way through the show. But for some of us, the fact that "Unfinished" ends with a row of large, dark green Cy Twombly canvases, made ca. 1986, with cascades of white paint plunging down the surface, is something of a let-down, although there's probably nothing, short of Michelangelo's incomplete, heartbreaking Rondanini Pietá, with its near-fragmentary, whittled-away Christ and detached, over-scaled arm, that could provide a finale to equal the dazzling, troubling Titian that opens the exhibition. The multi-part, graphic Twombly was clearly chosen for its size and scale, and for maximum impact, as final punctuation, but because of that placement, the series becomes, by implication, the culmination of the entire exhibition. Given the wide range, the often stellar works in "Unfinished," and the often interesting questions triggered by those works, that's a very difficult position to fill, and, handsome as the Twombly series is, it may not quite be up to the task. (While we're at it, Larry Poons was making terrific thrown-paint pictures, co-opting gravity as a drawing tool, at least a decade before Twombly did.)

From the start, there have been predictable, mostly knee-jerk complaints about "Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible": not enough diversity, too Eurocentric, not enough cutting-edge contemporary art. Even the essential concept has had its share of abuse. Some of the more disgruntled critics seem to have expected (or wanted) an entirely different kind of exhibition. Perhaps the show of their dreams will materialize during the future of Met Breuer. In the meantime, we can take advantage of the presence of some of the exhibition's many impressive loans and rethink some of the familiar works from the Met's own collection, their often well-known presence altered—at its best—by the thought-provoking context of "Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible." And we can wonder about what will come next.

# London chronicle

by *Dominic Green*

The last Delacroix exhibition in Britain was held in Glasgow in 1964, so “Delacroix and the Rise of Modern Art,” now at the National Gallery in London, was anticipated with some interest.<sup>1</sup> Yet this is a bad exhibition with plenty of good paintings. It topples one revolutionary conceit, that Modern art was invented in 1863 with Manet’s *Olympia*, and erects another: that Modern art was invented in 1822 with Delacroix’s *Barque of the Medusa*.

This scenario, like the narrative of the avant-garde that proceeds from it, is both true and false. It is true that Delacroix combined an explosive technique, a scientific palette, and the passions of a reader who took Byron and Walter Scott at their word. It is false to equate Delacroix’s development of pictorial language with a lack of interest in its earlier development. It is true that Delacroix’s painting erupted with a symbolic force akin to that of another idea of the 1820s, Stephenson’s Rocket. It is false to say that Delacroix appeared from nowhere, or that, because the tracks of influence can run only forwards, change is coterminous with progress. Delacroix was a candid admirer of Rubens, as well as of those improbable revolutionaries, Constable and Parkes Bonington.

To remind us which painters must be admired as fearless modernists, and which derided as craven reactionaries, “Delacroix and the Rise of Modern Art” narrates the familiar his-

tory of nineteenth-century French painting in a series of pairings. Unfortunately, one half of the pair is often missing, or represented in an inferior iteration. Instead of Delacroix’s *Barque of Dante* (1822), we see Manet’s small copy of 1854. Instead of Delacroix’s *The Jewish Wedding in Morocco* (1841), we see Renoir’s copy of 1875. While the Manet was a study made for Manet’s own purposes, the Renoir was painted on commission for the Mulhouse industrialist Jean Dollfus, who owned several Delacroix paintings. Renoir heightens the greenish atmosphere of Delacroix’s original, but it is hard to view his version as an autonomous work. It was painted to complement Dollfus’ Delacroix collection, and be complimented by it. When he painted it, Renoir hoped to gain a second commission, to copy *The Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*.

Worse, the flaming reds, fire-tinged flesh, and leering Satan of Delacroix’s *Le Lever* (1849–50) are represented by the weakest of impersonations. Pierre-Auguste Lamy’s black and white engraving of 1851 retains little sense of spiritual peril or Faustian damnation. Lamy’s Satan, popping up behind the mirror as the nude combs her hair, looks like a naughty priest with a comic hunch. This traduces Delacroix’s charged original, in which the hook of Satan’s nose is a vicious scimitar, a single stroke of red, his eyes and mouth blackened as though burnt, and his shoulders hunched with the muscular menace of a baboon. The only color in Lamy’s engraving is that of the red herring.

<sup>1</sup> “Delacroix and the Rise of Modern Art” opened at the National Gallery, London, on February 17 and remains on view through May 22, 2016.

Nor does Lamy's engraving have much of a relationship to Cézanne's magnificently disturbed *Le Lever* (1885–90). Lamy, bowdlerizing Delacroix's nude for the respectable voyeur, showed more of her left breast, but trimmed her pubic hair to Classical proportion, and thickened the locks that she is combing forward over her shoulder to obstruct the line of vision between Satan's perch and her pudenda. Cézanne intensified Delacroix's arrangement. The enemy reveals himself as a monkey-man with a horse's tail, sliding round the table towards the nude. And the nude, tucking her hair over her shoulder and turning her body towards the viewer, now exposes herself entirely to his gaze and ours.

There are some magnificent Delacroix paintings here. How, among any collection of Delacroix paintings, could there not be a magnificent one? The last of the four versions of *The Bride of Abydos* (1857) is here—the brightest in color and loosest in brushwork, the struggling figures harmonized in a terrible dance, the line created by the meeting between colors. There is *Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains* (1853), where the paint develops an independent existence from the subject, and the virtuosity of color and the suppleness of its application turn a Romantic narrative into a Modern study in what Delacroix called “the abstract side of life.”

There is also the Byronic turbulence of *Combat of the Giaour and Hassan* (1835), partially derived from a Rubens drawing of 1603 after Leonardo's lost *Battle of the Standard*, and possibly from another Rubens, *Combat of the Amazons* (1618), an engraving and copy of which Delacroix owned. Not that either are presented here. Instead, we are directed to look forward, even when, as in this case, the view is a lackluster derivative by Théodore Chassériau, *Battle of Arab Horsemen Around a Standard* (1854).

At times, though, even Delacroix is not himself. Most of the high-quality loans here are from American collections. The Louvre, which holds the keys to any comprehensive Delacroix exhibition, has not been generous. The National Gallery's response is ingenious, but it cannot fully compensate for this ab-

sence. It might be unreasonable to expect the Louvre to lend out a massive masterpiece like *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827–28). But the National Gallery's substitute, a reduced replica of 1846 from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is not even the second best choice.

Delacroix painted the replica prior to selling the original to Daniel Wilson, an English entrepreneur and collector who was living in Paris. The replica includes the technical innovations of the full-scale original—the use of varnishes as pigmented, transparent layers standing alone or between layers of paint—but it has the feel of a reminder, a notation of a favorite recipe in case of need. The better small-scale alternative is the sketch in the Louvre, in which the three-dimensional whirl of color explains the structure of the painting to come. There is something both true and tendentious about the juxtaposition here of Delacroix's replica—reduced in both scale and impact—with Cézanne's harsh and cruel *The Eternal Feminine* (ca. 1877), in which a woman reclines in Sardanapalus's spot, surrounded by men, all trying to impress her.

The pairing of Delacroix's *Bathers* (1854), a tasteful exercise in Classical smut, with Cézanne's light, lyrical, and boldly fragmented *Bathers* (1874) makes sense only if we know that Cézanne drew upon Delacroix, for little in Cézanne's palette or execution proves the link. Too often, “Delacroix and the Rise of Modern Art” achieves its cumulative effect by assertion rather than demonstration. The result, oddly enough, diminishes Delacroix, while talking of his apotheosis. In this exhibition, the paintings from his heirs are frequently of a higher quality than his work. Considering the lengths to which “Delacroix and the Rise of Modern Art” goes to distract our eye away from Delacroix's influences and towards his influence on others, this is ironic. Delacroix comes across as having never fulfilled his promise—as a kind of Richard Parkes Bonington.

“Who lost Bonington?” Eugène Devéria wrote in his journal in 1861. “France or England?”

France gained more. “The English School does not exist,” Renoir wrote to Ambroise Vol-

lard in 1882. “They copy everything: sometimes they paint a Rembrandt, sometimes a Claude Lorrain. There is only one interesting artist, one who is not much talked about, Bonington.”

This was not true, though Renoir might have been on more solid footing had he grounded his argument on quality and sophistication rather than originality and enthusiasm. Two other current exhibitions show what the English painters were up to in the lost years, the period that began with the death of Constable in 1837, the year of Queen Victoria’s accession to the throne, and ended with Roger Fry’s curation of “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” at the Grafton Galleries in 1910—the year, tidily enough, in which Victoria’s podgy, genial son Edward VII expired.

At Leighton House, some of Frederick, Lord Leighton’s old friends have returned for “Pre-Raphaelites on Paper,” from the collection of Dennis T. Lanigan of Canada.<sup>2</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites are often better on paper than in paint, for they can be more interesting to read about than to look at. Also, the modernity of their self-promotion sits oddly with their medieval self-image. The young William Morris, attempting to get inside the medieval mentality, accidentally trapped himself inside a knight’s helmet. The impulse that drove Morris to commit this artistic version of method acting is fascinating; the paintings he produced after he escaped the helmet, less so. His poems are diabolical, worse even than those of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, an artist whose fearless destruction of every art form to which he turned his cack hand anticipates Samuel Beckett’s dictum about trying again and failing better.

Those who view the PRB in the way that farmers view foot and mouth need only know that in Canada this exhibition was titled “Beauty’s Awakening,” after a play of 1899, in which the knight Trueheart attempts to find “the Spirit of all things beautiful.” Visitors of a sensitive nature should be warned that this

<sup>2</sup> “Pre-Raphaelites on Paper: Victorian Drawings from the Lanigan Collection” opened at the Leighton House Museum, London, on February 12 and remains on view through May 29, 2016.

exhibition includes drawings by Rossetti and Morris. Most of them awaken nothing more than perplexity. What, apart from cholera, was in the drinking water? A couple of images are acutely distressing, such as a Morris study for *La Belle Iseult* (1857), in which the master got as far as her head and then either lost interest or, in a fleeting moment of self-knowledge, gave up in disgust. There are also several works by members of the reserve team, like Simeon Solomon who, being both gay and Jewish, was at his most modern when he was not painting.

Still, those of us who grew up among reprints of William Morris’s fabrics and wallpaper, or were exposed to William Blake at an impressionable age, will find much material for the defense in this exhibition. Its focus on drawings and watercolors plays to the strengths of the PRB, and the later Victorians too. For every Rossetti who, asked to draw a silk purse, produces a pig’s ear, there is an Albert Moore or a Frederick Sandys. The critical stock of Moore’s oils was never high in his own time, even though Whistler claimed to admire them. It collapsed quickly after that, and has barely risen since. Here, the study *Female Head in Profile* shows Moore to have been an excellent draughtsman. The back and shoulders are deftly sketched, the head and face natural and unforced.

This contrasts strongly with Moore’s oils—slightly salacious scenes in the spirit of Alma-Tadema, where the vestal beauties seem to be planning an orgy, which will start as soon as we look away. So too the contrast between Sandys’s *King Pelles’ Daughter Bearing the Sancgraal* (1861), and the preliminary drawing in pen and ink here. Leaving aside the Holy Grail business—after all, we overlook the mythological elements in Delacroix, too—the drawing is a subtle and strong study in the tradition of Dürer. With the viewer standing in Lancelot’s position, Elaine proffers the Grail, her face alive with erotic recognition. In the painting, she looks glassy-eyed, and her pinched mouth makes her look as if she is sucking a cough candy.

There are also excellent drawings here by William Bell Scott, William Blake Richmond, Valentine Prinsep, and Evelyn de Morgan. It

makes you wonder what might have happened to British painting if Richard Parkes Bonington had not died prematurely in 1828. Would PRB have made the PRB into painters in the fullest, French sense of the word?

This question recurs in the mass of Victoriana in the second room of the Victoria & Albert Museum's "Botticelli Reimagined."<sup>3</sup> Sadly, to reach the second room, you must pass through the first room. The exhibition is constructed in reverse, from our time to Botticelli's. It is a Spenglerian piece of curation.

You know you are in trouble when the first exhibit is a film loop of Ursula Andress, emerging from the sea in *Dr. No*. After that, *The Birth of Venus* is perpetually restaged, with diminishing returns of interest, and rising desperation among the perpetrators. There is Botticelli by way of Warhol, Rauschenberg, and Cindy Sherman, and, more interestingly, Magritte, Dufy, and Dalí. There is also porno Botticelli (David LaChapelle), fashion Botticelli (Dolce & Gabbana), and pre-op transsexual Botticelli (Joel-Peter Witkin), in which Mars may get more than he bargains for.

The Pre-Raphaelites are often accused of being bloodless. After seeing the French "body artist" Orlan undergoing cosmetic surgeries while a doctor holds up a photocopy of "The Birth of Venus," the second room comes as a relief. This broad, well chosen, and enlightening sequence shows the limits of the Victorian obsession with beauty, but also its fecundity. There are the usual PRB suspects, outright stinkers like Arnold Böcklin's *Birth of Venus* (1868–69), and period fancies like Bouguereau's *Birth of Venus* (1879), in which an

3 "Botticelli Reimagined" opened at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, on March 5 and remains on view through July 3, 2016.

attendant satyr blows a conch while sporting a bowl haircut and an expression more redolent of cretinism than reverence. But there is also the technical skill of Ingres and Joseph Pennell, and the Romantic flair of John Flaxman and Gustave Moreau.

The Botticellis in the last room do not disappoint, although the curators again invert the chronology. You arrive in the central area of the show, which is framed by late works from Botticelli's "archaic" period. The year 1494 was a watershed for Botticelli, and for Florence: the French invaded Italy, the Medicis were turned out of Florence, and Savonarola was on the rise. From penitent conscience or commercial sense, Botticelli turned medieval, abandoning fixed perspective and adopting a tone of not-unconvincing piety. Our Botticelli—that is, the nineteenth century's Botticelli—is displaced onto the side walls.

There are two strong groups here. A long row of tondi depicting the Virgin and Child shows that the opportunist reproduction of Botticelli was not a twentieth-century invention. And a shorter sequence of four portraits of Simonetta Vespucci, the beloved of Giuliano de' Medici, shows Botticelli's idealizing method. In the *Portrait of a Lady* (1485–90), probably by Raffaelino del Garbo, Vespucci is merely beautiful. In Botticelli's "Ideal Portraits" (both ca. 1475–80), her nose is straighter, her lips plumper, her neck longer, her jaw stronger, and her hair elaborately plaited. In his *Allegorical Portrait of a Lady* (also 1475–85), Vespucci, having attained ideal form, expresses a symbolic squirt of milk from her left breast. The significance of this remains obscure, but the chronological inversion of "Botticelli Reimagined" implies that Botticelli took it from Cindy Sherman.

You might, of course, enter the exhibition in reverse. But then you would have to run the gauntlet of rubbish in the gift shop.

# Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

Photography becomes powerful when it combines inscrutable complexity with instinctive attraction. While we may understand little of a medium that engages our lives with ever-greater frequency, we can be compelled by its magic the less we know. After all, on its surface a photograph presents a moment of refracted light captured through near unfathomable means, either through digital impulses or analogue emulsion, imprinted largely without comment for our interpretation of its point of origin. Yet this surface works in contrast with a photograph's absorptive depth, a space that draws us in almost automatically, and where we find reflections of our own emotions in a light of strange and often disorienting affinities.

In his 1980 book *The Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes drew a distinction between a photograph's cerebral propositioning, what he called the *studium*, and its emotional hook, which he called the *punctum*. I like to think that Woody Allen hit on something similar a few years before Barthes in his character Alvy Singer's famously ill-received words with Diane Keaton's Annie Hall: "Photography's interesting, 'cause, you know, it's—it's a new art form, and a, uh, a set of aesthetic criteria have not emerged yet." For which a subtitle appears as translation: "I wonder what she looks like naked?"

The photographer Meryl Meisler arrived in New York City in the mid-1970s at just the Annie Hall moment, bringing her own sensibility for revealing the disquieting humor of urbane sophistication in dialogue with

middle-class Jewish values. Her work is both a fascinating document of a lost time and a delivery vehicle for its intoxicating, riotous sweetness. "I see funny," she recently said. "People come out funny."

Now at Steven Kasher Gallery, Meisler is showing her earliest photographs from the treasure trove of her rich body of work, which has only surfaced within the last few years since she retired from a career as a New York City Public School teacher in Bushwick, Brooklyn.<sup>1</sup>

For an unassuming retired civil servant, Meisler has been on an astonishingly meteoric rise since her work first started coming to light following the publication of two recent books of her photography, *A Tale of Two Cities: Disco Era Bushwick* and *Purgatory & Paradise: SASST '70s Suburbia & The City*.

The titles speak to the boundaries Meisler once regularly crossed with her camera: from her family home in the Long Island suburb of North Massapequa, to the demimonde of the clubs and dancehalls of the city's punk, disco, and burlesque scenes, to the school children of Bushwick finding life in the burned-out streets following the blackout riots of 1977. Rather than indulging in the decadence and decay, Meisler looked for the humanizing touch in the wreckage, the sleaze, and the schmaltz, often positioning herself and her own maturation at the comedic fulcrum.

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<sup>1</sup> "Meryl Meisler" opened at Steven Kasher Gallery, New York, on February 25 and remains on view through April 9, 2016.

The selection at Steven Kasher brings together Meisler's Massapequan adolescence with her first penetrating forays into the nightlife of the city. Black and white and square in format, the photographs draw on the work of Diane Arbus, an acknowledged influence, in both their stark appearance and offbeat eye. Yet Meisler manages to capture a warm light that ultimately eluded Arbus, a depressive who took her own life in Greenwich Village just a few years before Meisler's own arrival.

In contrast to the stripped-down punk aesthetic of the city, Massapequa of the 1970s was high suburban rococo. In Meisler's photographs, the postwar refuge of middle-class flight have become its own overgrown cul-de-sac. Clean mid-century modern lines have been inundated by the wild patterns and overwrought furniture indicative of a period we might call the South Shore Regency.

Meisler first took up the camera while studying illustration at the University of Wisconsin in the early 1970s. Returning east, she enrolled in classes with Lisette Model, the photographer who had taught Arbus. Meisler first turned the camera on herself, posing in her childhood uniforms back home. In *Self-Portrait, The Girl Scout Oath, North Massapequa, NY, January 1975*, she sits in the family "rumpus room" giving the three-finger salute while wearing her old uniform and former hair braids, both saved by her mother. Meisler looks out with a deadpan gaze from the near-camouflage patterns of the matching cushions and drapes. The odd symmetry of the scene is undercut by an incongruous barbell intertwined by her feet, sweatily wrapped in grip tape and on loan, it turns out, from her brother. Another image, *Self-Portrait, A Falling Star, North Massapequa, NY, January 1975*, finds her in what appears to be an old tap-dance outfit, smiling as she slides headfirst off the La-Z-Boy. Look closer and her frivolity amidst the suburban order of the decorous side cabinet and framed wall prints appears imperilled by a porcelain tiger prowling in her direction out of a collection of chinoiserie.

Urban archeologists will undoubtedly appreciate the grit and glamor Meisler soon found in the city's nightlife. Stringer contracts and late-night tenacity brought her past the velvet rope of Studio 54, backstage at

CBGB's, and into even more risqué after-hour venues, where she also worked as a hostess. Yet through a 1978 CETA Artist grant, Meisler then returned to North Massapequa to create a series of photographs on Jewish identity for the American Jewish Congress. Back in the hair salons, wedding halls, dens, bedrooms, and Rosh Hashanah dinner tables, she found a world even more exotic than the exotica of the adoptive city she temporarily left behind.

Now through April 10, "The Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts" offers one of the few annual opportunities for outsiders to visit the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the fantastical honors society encased in beaux-arts amber at the far end of Archer Huntington's Audubon Terrace, at Broadway and 155th Street.<sup>2</sup>

Behind the scenes, we can only imagine that this "invited" exhibition is a battleground of competing interests among the Academy's august membership. Yet what regularly results is often one of the best annual survey shows of serious and lively contemporary art. Well displayed, and spanning a wide variety of media and styles, from abstract sculpture to hyperrealistic figuration, light installations to watercolor sunsets, this year is no different, with thirty-seven artists selected from two hundred nominations, displaying over one hundred works spread across the Academy's campus.

The Invitational is the first part of the Academy's series of honors. The Academy then annually distributes \$250,000 to the artists of the exhibition through awards, prizes, and purchase funds, with the winners returning each May for the Academy's "Exhibition of Work by Newly Elected Members and Recipients of Honors and Awards." This year's recipients, just announced at press time, reveal the Academy's catholic interests—and good judgment. Top prizes go to Guy Goodwin's intriguing colorful abstractions of acrylic, tempera, and cardboard; Anthony McCall's sculptural light installation created by "computer, Quicktime movie file, video pro-

2 "The Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts" opened at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, on March 10 and remains on view through April 10, 2016.

jector, and haze machine”; Nancy Mitchnick’s painterly abstractions found in the profile of Detroit’s demolished buildings; Joan Snyder’s joyful kitchen-sink assemblies of oil, acrylic, papier mâché, rope, wooden hoop, burlap, silk on linen, etching fragments, rosebuds, twigs, and glitter; and Lee Tribe’s haunting, dissolving portraits in charcoal and steel. Also honored are the lyrical-, fantastical-, and hyper-realisms of Patricia Patterson, Carmen Cicero, and Aleah Chapin, and the expressionistic abstractions of Chuck Webster. Still others, including the fraught patterning of McArthur Binion and the riotous sunsets of Graham Nickson, have been purchased for donation to American museums.

All told, the “Invitational Exhibition” again confirms that no single style holds an exclusive ticket to that “funicular up Parnassus,” in Alfred Barr’s choice phrasing—and how fortunate we are to have exhibiting institutions that operate outside of museum mandates. While the exhibition is free, visitors should be mindful of the Academy’s limited hours, while also leaving time to see the reinstallation of the Charles Ives Studio, Anna Hyatt Huntington’s sculptural program lining Audubon Terrace, and the jewel-box museum of the Hispanic Society, now fortunately chaired by the Metropolitan’s legendary retired director, Philippe de Montebello.

I would point out that the Bushwick galleries of 56 Bogart Street are having a particularly strong month, but exceptionalism there now seems to be the rule. Among standout exhibitions are the sound pioneer Audra Wolowiec at Studio10, the disaster artist Joy Garnett at Slag, a vertiginous, cubistic interpretation of the L Train by Isidro Blasco at Black and White Gallery, and a group painting show at Life on Mars featuring Glenn Goldberg, Steve DiBenedetto, and Brenda Goodman, along with their selection of younger artists in the project space.

An exhibition called “Generations,” on view at Theodore:Art, may be the most unnerving.<sup>3</sup> The artist Michelle Vaughan uses a

variety of copying processes, from digital reproduction to pencil drawings, to explore the history of European portraiture—in particular, the “consanguineous unions in Europe’s royal houses” from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries. By overlaying portrait faces of the Spanish and Austrian lines of the Habsburg dynasty—such as Spain’s King Philip IV and Mariana of Austria, both his niece and second wife—Vaughan demonstrates how their shared physiognomies revealed increasingly compromised genomes through generations of planned and ill-fated inbreeding.

Working with genetic historians, Vaughan uses artistic means to show how the repeated intermarrying of the Habsburgs led to high and ultimately destructive “inbreeding coefficient numbers” that eventually “ranged higher than the offspring produced by a brother and sister” due to sequential uncle–niece marriages and prior intermarrying. For anyone who has wondered at the strange faces staring back at us from a Velázquez, it is both interesting and terrifying to realize that these deformations were not the mannerisms of Spanish style but most likely artistic improvements over genetic reality.

A degraded digital print of a 1685 portrait by Juan Carreño de Miranda of Charles II of Spain, the son of Philip IV and Mariana of Austria, is the most haunting of the exhibition. With a quarter or more of his genome consisting of identical pairs, or “coefficient 0.25,” Charles II was riddled with recessive abnormalities, leading to pronounced mental and physical retardation. Known as “the Bewitched” (*el Hechizado*), Charles was defined by his elongated face, a protruding “Habsburg jaw,” and a tongue so overgrown that he could barely speak or chew. Just as this print’s digital data has dissolved into a cloud of bits, Charles was an ineffective and impotent monarch, childless and heirless, whose rule marked the end of the Spanish Habsburg line.

Vaughan brilliantly overlays science, art history, and creative practice in a confluence of interests. Here is a museum-quality exhibition (*attention, Met Breuer*) that will change the way I look at museum portraiture.

<sup>3</sup> “Michelle Vaughan: Generations” opened at Theodore:Art, Brooklyn, on February 26 and remains on view through April 3, 2016.

## Music

# New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

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In opera, there are two big *Manons*: *Manon*, by Massenet, and *Manon Lescaut*, by Puccini. Naming the latter opera, you want to pronounce the second “n” in “Manon,” *all’italiana*. It seems to me that the former opera is more popular in the opera world now. But *Manon Lescaut* is a beautiful, striking, and powerful work, especially when conducted so well as Fabio Luisi did at the Metropolitan Opera.

The Met had a new production, courtesy of Sir Richard Eyre. The soprano was Kristine Opolais, from Latvia, and the tenor was Roberto Alagna, from France (though of Italian parentage). The soprano, by the way, is married to a fellow Latvian, Andris Nelsons, who is now the music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The tenor was supposed to be Jonas Kaufmann, but he withdrew at almost the last minute. Alagna got up to speed in a hurry. At the end of the performance I saw, he shook the hand of the prompter, in grateful acknowledgment of help.

At the beginning of the performance, Alagna was in bad shape. He was straining and struggling and not producing much sound. What sound he did produce was not good. His character’s first aria, “Tra voi, belle, brune e bionde,” should be graceful, lilting, and gay. From Alagna, it was work. The second aria, “Donna non vidi mai” was better: smoothly belted. But it was still not A-1 Alagna. Meanwhile, Opolais sang ably, and she shone in her aria “In quelle trine morbide.” This is essentially a lyrical aria, and Opolais seems essentially a lyric soprano.

She could not fill the bill in the love duet. She simply didn’t have enough voice. I could barely hear her. The stage director did not help in placing the singers toward the back. Those two needed to stand at the front of the stage and sing. Alagna had more voice than his partner, but still too little, and he was sloppy in his rhythm. The duet didn’t build and thrill as it should.

At some point along the way, something happened to Alagna: He got “hooked up,” as some say. His vocal apparatus kicked into gear. His sound was riding on his breath. He was free, unstraining, and *loud*. I have learned, over the years, that you can never write Alagna off in an opera. If he starts out rocky, he can hit his stride. As for Opolais, she sang the opera’s final aria, “Sola, perduta, abbandonata,” with honor. But without enough voice. The casting of undersized voices is a scandal in opera today.

Sir Richard Eyre’s production is set in Nazi-occupied France. Nazi occupation is a fashion in opera today. In Salzburg a few summers ago, I saw a *Norma* set in—where else?—Nazi-occupied France. It was ridiculous. Sir Richard’s production is not ridiculous. When I saw Nazis with rifles, I simply ignored them, concentrating on *Manon Lescaut*. The production’s concept, or conceit, does not interfere. And I must say, the third act was unbearable. What I mean is, the parading and mocking of those courtesans was poignantly, rawly, and heartbreakingly staged. I think I had to turn away.

What made the night was Fabio Luisi and the Met orchestra. This was an unusually

orchestral *Manon Lescaut*, by which I mean, the orchestra was unusually present and important. Luisi supported the singers, sure. But he also supported Puccini. He gave an example of disciplined Romanticism (much as the company's music director, James Levine, does). The score was tender, insouciant, scalding, and riveting. Luisi conducted the opera as though it were a masterpiece—which maybe it is.

The next morning, the New York Philharmonic played a concert with a guest conductor: Juraj Valčuha. When you attend the Philharmonic regularly, you hear an array of young, or youngish, conductors. This lets you know who's who, who's where, and who's up and coming. In our February issue, I wrote about James Gaffigan (not to be confused with the famous comedian Jim Gaffigan), an American who works in Lucerne. Valčuha is a Slovakian who works in Turin. The first piece on his program was Kodály's *Dances of Galanta*—Galanta being in Slovakia. Perhaps the thinking was that Valčuha had a home-field advantage.

These dances are delightful, clever, and full of color. Valčuha conducted them well. He did not conduct them with Gergievian electricity and wizardry. But it must be added that Gergiev himself is sometimes un-Gergievian. Valčuha demonstrated command and understanding. He was very precise. From where I sat, he got from the orchestra what he wanted, and he got it without working very hard for it.

Some of this music ought to be warm and filling. It ought to fill a hall with warmth. This did not happen on this particular day. Was it because of the hall, the maligned Avery Fisher, or David Geffen, as it's now called? The hall is to get a thorough renovation. Then orchestras will have no excuse. They won't have the old acoustics to kick around anymore.

In a different hall—Weill Recital Hall, upstairs in the Carnegie building—the Jasper String Quartet played a concert. The JSQ was formed at Oberlin Conservatory in 2003. This was well before “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings,” I believe. How did these four survive? In any

event, they are named after Jasper National Park in the Canadian Rockies. And they began their concert the way string quartets often do: with a work by Haydn. In this case, it was the String Quartet in G, Op. 76, No. 1. And the JSQ played it superbly.

I was looking forward to the next piece on the program—a new work by Aaron Jay Kernis—but the concert was stopped. That is, the momentum was killed, and the atmosphere was killed, by talking. A member of the quartet stood up to talk about the Kernis piece. He said, for example, that it would begin with a beautiful cello solo. Couldn't we have heard that, if only they had played? He quoted from the evening's program notes. Couldn't we have read them, or not? He said that the new work presented “challenges,” but “there are more challenges for us than for you listeners.” In other words, “Don't worry: it won't be so bad.” Is this helpful, to anyone? The quartet spokesman talked at length, telling the audience how good the piece would be, prejudicing the jury.

No one is ever offended, so far as I know: not composers, not audiences, not anybody. Oh, well.

In 2009, as he was leaving the New York Philharmonic, I interviewed the conductor Lorin Maazel. One question I asked was, “Who are today's composers worth listening to?” Immediately, he said, “Penderecki.” Then he paused for a while. “Mention some American composers I've conducted here,” he said. “I hesitate,” I said. Then he said, “Kernis? I think he's a very, very talented composer, a master of what he does.” That is high praise.

Kernis, according to the program we received in Weill Recital Hall—the one the spokesman quoted from—“came of age in the 1970s and '80s, when the cracks in the edifice of high modernism were widening into fissures wide enough for younger, more independent-minded composers to leap through with abandon.” Thank heaven for those cracks and fissures. Kernis's bio also says that his music “defies easy classification.” It's hard to find a composer's bio that does not say his music “defies easy classification.” One time, it would be amusing to read, “Smith's music, unlike others', is easily classified.”

What the Jasper String Quartet played was Kernis's String Quartet No. 3, dubbed "River." It was written for them and is dedicated to them. It was commissioned by seven organizations, which speaks well for collaboration in the music world.

Kernis has written long and fairly detailed notes on his "River" quartet. Apparently, he is a close analyst of his own music. Is this a good thing or a bad thing in a composer? My impression is, some composers like to analyze their music and are good at it; and some don't, and aren't. Kernis cites literary influences on his quartet. And he says he is concerned with "change, flow, and flux." The quartet is in five movements, which are labeled as follows: "Source"; "Flow/Surge"; "Mirrored Surface—Flux—Reflections"; "Cavatina"; and "Mouth/Estuary."

I thought of another interview—one I did of the composer Ned Rorem in 2002. He was saying that music could never really be "about" anything (music without words, that is): "A composer will go to some lengths to tell you that something is about something. Take *La Mer*. If the audience were unalerted, you could tell them that the first part was about slaughterhouses in Paris, the second part about having coffee at La Flore, and the third part about bordellos. They'd believe it, if you told them that."

On hearing Kernis's "River" quartet, I did not notice any water, though I was of course prepared to. But who cares? This is music we're talking about. A world of musical notes, apart from the physical world. If Debussy had not called that piano piece *Reflets dans l'eau*, would you think of reflections in the water? Hard to say.

Kernis's String Quartet No. 3, "River," begins—as advertised from the stage—with a beautiful cello solo. The first movement has touches of folk, pop, bluegrass. You see? Kernis's music really does defy easy classification! The movement has an anxiety—quiet anxiety—as so much modern music does. I have frequently said that this period in music ought to be called "The Age of Anxiety." In due course, the first movement turns savage, or dissonantly emphatic.

The second movement is quivering, spiky, and churning. It is fleet and scherzesque (to use

a funny coinage of mine). It ends with a kind of scream. Initially, the third movement put me in mind of Debussy or Ravel. It is squirmy and quiet. Then rhapsodic and tumultuous. Then disembodied and whispery. It ends on a delicate, questioning note.

The fourth movement—the one marked "Cavatina"—is indeed a song. An almost lush song, which builds intensely. I had a thought: "This is the true Kernis. His natural compositional self. This is what he does. All the rest is for show. It's to prove he's not a fuddy-duddy, not a mere tunesmith. It's to be cool, to buy some peace from his less talented peers." This thought could be utterly wrong, and I suspect it is. But it occurred to me.

Like the first movement, the fifth and final movement begins with the cello alone—something like a cadenza. Then the music is, as before, squirmy and anxious. Also pretty and somber. Toward the end, there is a rather American tune, played in unison by the violins. In these final pages, we get a kind of resolution or release, I think—quiet. Frankly, I did not much care for this work. But I had the feeling it was brilliant and potentially lasting. I look forward to hearing it again, especially if played by the Jasper String Quartet, which was magnificent. Aaron Jay Kernis is a big talent, a master. Maazel said so.

In Carnegie Hall, the Vienna Philharmonic played a three-concert stand, under the baton of Valery Gergiev, the aforementioned wizard (or sometime wizard). Actually, Gergiev rarely uses a baton. He has been known to use a toothpick (really). In the three concerts, Gergiev was often at his best, providing a top-drawer musical and orchestral experience. The VPO, of course, did their part too.

On the second concert was a new work, by Olga Neuwirth, an Austrian, and therefore an especially inviting composer for the VPO. This piece is called *Masaot / Clocks without Hands*. "Masaot" is Hebrew for "travels." Carnegie Hall's program described the piece as "surreal." And Neuwirth has written a long note about it.

She was asked to compose something that honored Mahler in some way. Also, she had a dream, about her grandfather—a grandfather

she never met, but whom she knew a little through photos and stories. He appeared to her in a sunlit meadow, “playing one song after another to me on an old crackling tape recorder.” He said, “From the start, I was strikingly different. I was an outsider and never entirely fit into my Austrian surroundings. All my life I had the feeling of being excluded. Listen to these songs: This is my story.”

His granddaughter was so moved by this dream, she had to process it by writing a piece, “because for me writing always has to do with memory.” Mahler’s music is soaked with memory too. Some years ago, my colleague Fred Kirshnit wrote a paper on Mahler’s symphonies called “The Persistence of Memory.” Neuwirth wanted her piece to make a listener think he was dreaming, or listening to “something being dreamed.” She also wanted time to dissolve. And to convey the idea that a person can have several homelands, at least mentally.

So, there you go: a work concerned with time, space, and memory. Aren’t we all?

Neuwirth’s piece starts out as a bleakscape (to call on another coinage of mine). There arises a cacophony or din. You would think the orchestra was warming up. Out of the cacophony or din—out of the modern music, if you will—come snatches of popular music. This is obviously Mahlerian, and Ivesian. I think I heard something Spanish, and some jazz licks, and a Scottish or Irish reel. Everything is hazy, woozy, off-kilter—as in a dream. There is loud ticking, maybe from an amplified metronome, or metronomes. I thought of Prokofiev, and how he makes the clock strike midnight in *Cinderella*.

The piece is about twenty-five minutes long, and after about ten minutes I thought, “All right already. I got it. There will be this din, or modernness, and out of it will come a popular tune. No need to go on.” But frankly, I wanted to see what would come next: what tune, what song, what dance. I could not quite get bored. The last thing I heard, I think, was a bit of klezmer music. I thought this was significant. Is the composer saying something about being Jewish in Austria? What exactly was the fate of her grandfather? Anyway . . .

She rose from her seat in the auditorium to mount the stairs at the side of the stage

and take her bows along with the conductor and orchestra. As she was going up the stairs, a security guard grabbed her arm, stopping her. She had to pause to explain what she was doing. Someone later joked, “The guard was commenting on her piece. She had no right to go up and bow.” Yet I was interested in the piece, and ultimately admiring of it. As with our friend Kernis and his river, I’d like to hear it again.

Many years ago, I saw *The Tender Land* and *Oklahoma!* in fairly close succession. The former is the opera by Copland; the latter is the musical by Rodgers (and Hammerstein). They are similar in their settings and stories. And at the intermission of *Oklahoma!* I said, “You know? If a genie offered me the chance to have written either *The Tender Land* or *Oklahoma!* I wouldn’t hesitate. I’d choose *Oklahoma!* in a heartbeat. It is much the superior work.” I thought of this recently when seeing another R&H musical, at Lincoln Center’s Vivian Beaumont Theater: *The King and I*. Let me count the wonders.

There is the “March of the Royal Siamese Children,” an ingenious piece. I have long marked its kinship with “Wedding Day at Troldhaugen,” which belongs to the *Lyric Pieces* of Grieg. Stephen Hough, the British pianist, has made a marvelous arrangement of Rodgers’s march. As a friend of mine has commented, it sounds like it could be in the Grieg set, though with extra virtuosity. Also in *The King and I* is “Shall We Dance?” with its irresistible lift. Songs such as “I Whistle a Happy Tune” and “Getting to Know You” can sound dumb out of context, and performed badly. But in context and performed well, they are very good indeed.

Crowning the musical is “Something Wonderful,” that mezzo aria, if you will. Puccini might have eyed it with envy, or at least admiration. Classical singers have always wanted to sing it. Marilyn Horne recorded it. And Bryn Terfel made it the title song of his Rodgers & Hammerstein album. Can you imagine having written that sublime, everlasting song, or aria? Then again, I should not look down my nose at *The Tender Land* either.

The media

## Politics without honor

*by James Bowman*

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Prominently featured in Ted Cruz's radio ads heard in the run-up to Super Tuesday was the asseveration that "Trust is everything." That was where he made his big mistake. In the world of postmodern politics, a world in which Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were then already seemingly on the glide path to winning their parties' nominations for the presidency, trust was, if not nothing, at best not counting for very much with voters, except maybe in Texas and a few other places. Mr. Cruz was trying to induce his would-be supporters to reach back into an increasingly hazy folk memory of a time when politics was still connected with traditional notions of the "honorable"—a word now surviving only as an honorific before a congressman's or senator's name. "Honorific" means "bearing honor," but nobody, including Ted Cruz, has a very clear idea of what honor means anymore.

Like trust, to which it is closely related, it is not something you get just by saying you have it. It has to be conferred on you by a group of your peers, to whom you give the right to judge you. How trusted is Ted Cruz by his Republican senatorial colleagues? They loathe him, virtually to a man. If he's not trusted by those who know him best, how can he expect to be trusted by voters to whom he is mostly a stranger? In his ads, Senator Cruz also boasted of having "stood up to" his own party in Congress. Perhaps he was thinking of the time he used what would once, in days of honor, have been considered grossly unparliamentary language and called his party's leader

in the Senate a liar? He was very free with similar accusations against both Mr. Trump and his main rival for second place, Senator Marco Rubio. Now, it seems, there is not even a folk memory of the time when such language would have involved him in a challenge to mortal combat.

Clearly, Senator Cruz is banking on weakened ties of party loyalty among Republican-leaning voters, voters who themselves feel like "standing up to" the party which they believe has let them down. But in that case it should not be "trust" that he emphasizes but his willingness, like any Snowden-type "whistleblower," to violate trust for principle's sake. Not that that is likely to do him much good either. Neither trust nor principle is a word that even their supporters associate with Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. In Mrs. Clinton's case the appeal is arguably an honorable one, since she is felt to have been strongly loyal to two of the Democrats' largest and most important constituencies, progressive blacks and women. Loyal to a fault, some might say. Mr. Trump revealed in one of his many Tweets that he couldn't even spell "honor," but those who vote for him admire him for the kind of authenticity encapsulated in the expression: "He says what he means." Somehow it doesn't seem to matter so much if there remains a doubt that he also means what he says.

Mr. Rubio was not quicker than Mr. Cruz to pick up on this aspect of his rival's appeal, but it was bigger news when the man Mr. Trump had ridiculed for his less-than-manly innocuous-

ness suddenly started hitting back during and after the tenth television “debate.” The media’s view was divided between those who cheered him for it (a fight is always good box office) and those who thought that Senator Rubio had lowered himself to the Trump “level”—though if voters didn’t mind the Trump level for Trump, he must have thought it unlikely that they would mind it for Rubio. The candidates had already acquiesced in the media’s view of the struggle between them as a reality-TV-style knockout contest, so it wasn’t that big a step for it to descend just a bit further into the old-style Trumpian flying contest that, if it had taken place on the street and among a people who tend not to vote Republican, would have been called “the dozens.”

The *bien pensants*, of course, couldn’t stop their tsking about the childishness of it all. Richard Cohen of *The Washington Post* even took it upon himself to reach still further back into the past and disqualified Mr. Rubio from the presidency for a lack of “decorum,” albeit with an uneasy sense of his own ridiculousness in doing so. Even the new-minted believers in decorum—last heard from when Bill Clinton was president and a sense of decorum all round could have done him some good—must have secretly welcomed the insult contest as adding to the entertainment value of the campaign and only wished that it might have involved more wit and less crudeness on either side. Either way, however, it could only have confirmed what most people already knew, namely that our political culture is now nine-tenths entertainment and ten-tenths vulgarity.

Decorum is another word that, like honor, is so far estranged from its original meaning that it can now only be used—and therefore used wrongly—for partisan purposes. Now, like politeness (see “Manners Makyth Man” in *The New Criterion* of January 2016), it’s always the other guy who lacks it, never a rule to discipline ourselves. In this it is also like the “lies” that the other guy, so we’re told (especially by Ted Cruz), is always telling. But that’s why the public has already learned to discount the charge, however plausible, as motivated by partisanship—which is why, in turn, those who have hurled it at each other so promiscuously

during the campaign have seemingly gained no political benefit from doing so. Besides, the public has already had to cope with rather heavy demands on its dwindling reserves of outrage.

The death of Antonin Scalia in February and the shamelessness with which both sides in the battle over President Obama’s prospective attempt to name a successor contradicted their own positions in past years provided another recent example of the hopelessness of trying to reintroduce any notion of honor or decorum back into *The Circus*—to use the non-ironic title of Showtime’s series of campaign documentaries—of American politics. Back in 2007, when it looked possible that President George W. Bush might have a chance to nominate a third justice to the Supreme Court, Senator “Chuck” Schumer of New York, now the heir apparent to Senator Harry Reid as the Democratic leader, had insisted, according to *Politico*, that Senate Democrats, then in the majority, should not allow the Court’s “balance” to be thus upset. Likewise, according to *The New York Times*, Vice President Biden had said something similar in what turned out to be the last year of the first Bush administration, in 1992. Now, both men strongly denied that they had said what they clearly had said. “One’s apples, one’s oranges,” said Senator Schumer. The Vice President, according to the *Times*, “issued a statement saying that his remarks had been misinterpreted, and stressing that he believed, then and now, that the White House and Congress should ‘work together to overcome partisan differences’ on Supreme Court nominations.”

Nice one, Joe! Just like, when you were in Congress, you worked to overcome differences with the White House over the Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas nominations, I take it. There are good reasons for supposing that it is to Mr. Biden himself that our thanks are due for the bitter partisan battles over judicial confirmations of the last thirty years, which date from his assumption of the chairmanship of the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1987. But what of that? His denials now are of a piece with his partisanship then, and both are examples of a lack of capacity for self-detachment

and self-irony, qualities that have gone out of our politics, not coincidentally, along with honor and decorum—and wit. Now there is only the increasingly bitter partisanship of the Manichaeian struggle between light and dark, of which the incipient war of the Scalian succession is only the latest theater.

The media, who make money from the passions thus stirred, characteristically issue their call to arms in the name of opposing not Republicans as such but Republican *partisans* or *extremists*. Linda Greenhouse, who covered the Court for *The New York Times* for nearly thirty years wrote for the *Times* of Scalia's death that

Fate has handed the justices a chance to hit reset. If that seems an uncharitable, even tasteless observation, so be it. I've become increasingly concerned, as my recent columns have suggested, that the conservative majority is permitting the court to become an agent of partisan warfare to an extent that threatens real damage to the institution. Justice Scalia's outsize role on and off the bench contributed to that dangerous development to an outsize degree.

In other words, the Court is becoming an arena for political partisanship, and it's all the fault of the other side! The absurdity of that proposition is at least as striking as it is in Messrs. Schumer and Biden's retrospective explanations of what they really meant by saying that a (different) president should not have a chance to nominate another justice in his final year in office. Ms. Greenhouse's absurdity is imperfectly masked by the long-standing but increasingly threadbare pretense of the *Times's* (and her own) non-partisanship. But even those who still subscribe to that polite fiction of the governing classes ought to be able to see the mean-spiritedness of such an attack on the recently deceased. Ms. Greenhouse, rather charitably to herself, herself calls it "uncharitable."

In the same spirit, Lawrence Tribe, blogging at length for *The New York Review of Books*, pays tribute to the sharpness of Justice Scalia's legal reasoning but denies that he was the "originalist" he claimed to be. He was, it seems, as guilty

as the next justice—nay, guiltier!—of finding in the Constitution only what he wanted to find there. It is not enough for Mr. Tribe to claim that the late Justice was an enemy of those, like himself, who advocate "the just and inclusive society that our Constitution and laws should be interpreted to advance rather than impede." No, he must also deny that Scalia could claim any principle, anything but his own personal preferences—presumably for an unjust and non-inclusive society—in opposing these things and, with them, the tribe of Tribe.

There is a kind of totalism, not to say totalitarianism, about such polemics that has been more and more in evidence in the media over the last decade or so. It may be described as an adaptation of the media's "Bush Derangement Syndrome" of the waning years of the last administration to the age of Obama. Peggy Noonan wrote of it, also à propos of Justice Scalia, in *The Wall Street Journal*:

There is something increasingly unappeasable in the left. This is something conservatives and others have come to fear, that progressives now accept no limits. We can't just have court-ordered legalized abortion across the land, we have to have it up to the point of birth, and taxpayers have to pay for it. It's not enough to win same-sex marriage, you've got to personally approve of it and if you publicly resist you'll be ruined. It's not enough that we have publicly funded contraceptives, the nuns have to provide them. This unappeasable spirit always turns to the courts to have its way.

Progressives, that is, have become the captives of their own conceit—not just that their political views are the only correct ones but that they are the only moral ones. To oppose them, therefore, is not just to be in error but to be scandalously indecent. Obviously, there can be no compromise with hatred and bigotry or with the evil that, *ex hypothesi*, characterizes the other side. Thus the absurdities unconsciously embraced by Chuck Schumer or Joe Biden, the meanness and bitterness of Linda Greenhouse or Lawrence Tribe, are all comprised in this original absurdity, this foundational meanness of progressivism, which wouldn't

be progressivism if it had any capacity for self-examination or self-doubt.

Peggy Noonan goes on:

If progressives were wise they would step back, accept their victories, take a breath and turn to the idea of solidifying gains, of heroic patience, of being peaceable. Don't make them bake the cake. Don't make them accept the progressive replacement for Scalia. Leave the nuns alone. Progressives have no idea how fragile it all is. That's why they feel free to be unappeasable. They don't know what they're grinding down. They think America has endless give. But America is composed of humans, and they do not have endless give. Isn't that what we're seeing this year in the political realm? That they don't have endless give? And we'll be seeing more of it.

She doesn't say so, but the implication is clear: if there isn't "endless give" in the American people to the progressive agenda, the evidence of it is Donald Trump, who appeals to shockingly large numbers of people in spite of (or perhaps partly because of) his manifest shortcomings as a man and a candidate, mainly because they see him as someone who can stop, if anyone can, the progressive juggernaut that the other candidates are mostly too polite (or cowed by the media) to call attention to, let alone criticize.

Actually, Mr. Trump seldom calls attention to it either, though not because he is cowed by the media. Rather, he is media-savvy enough to know that he will pay no price to show by his words and deeds his contempt for "political correctness" while otherwise confining himself, for the most part, to emotional appeals

to "Make America Great Again." But it is the media and the political culture which they lead that have reduced our politics to this raw emotional level, from Barack Obama's meaningless "Hope and Change" to Hillary Clinton's vacuous "fighting" for the "hard-working" middle class—who, asks Barton Swaim, will fight for the lazy?—to Bernie Sanders's fantastical "revolution" to Donald Trump's Greater America. By comparison to the others, the Trump slogan almost sounds substantive.

In the past when America has substituted morality for honor in politics it has generally been because she wants to go to war. It always helps to bring the masses along if the other side can be portrayed as the devil. And sometimes it looks as if we may be headed that way again. As early as the Tea Party rallies in the first Obama term, Lee Harris was writing of *The Next American Civil War*. But war or no war, from the media's point of view the beauty of emotional politics lies in its inclusiveness, to adapt Lawrence Tribe's great desideratum. While it takes an effort to think, anyone can feel angry. As in so many other ways, Donald Trump is simply using the media's own weapons against them, conjuring up a whole new and hitherto unsuspected set of scandals to embroil those who oppose him and make them forget about those that might otherwise be crippling to him. That kind of tooth-and-nail partisanship is what the old and now all-but-forgotten honor culture evolved over centuries in order to obviate. We can't now hope to recover it with the end in view of its serving our partisanship. Not that either Ted Cruz or Linda Greenhouse is ever likely to understand that.

## Books

# Fritz in full

by *Henrik Bering*

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As king, Frederick William I of Prussia gets credit for having created a strong army and an efficient civil service, but, as a father, he left something to be desired. A crude and violent man, his chief pleasures were hunting, relaxing with his “tobacco parliament” of beer-quaffing officers, and inspecting his soldiers on the parade ground in Potsdam, which he spelled varyingly as Bostdam or Postdam. Book knowledge and cultural pursuits in general he despised as unmanly and “the work of Satan.” In his ledgers, wages for academicians came under the heading of “expenses for the various royal buffoons.” In his zealous frugality, he had fired the court’s castrato singers and its chocolatier and ordered its elaborate silver centerpieces and precious knick-knacks melted into bars to be stashed away in the cellar. He was subject to drastic mood shifts and spells of insanity, brought on by porphyria, a congenital illness which causes multiple swellings and blisters and, to top it off, turns the sufferer’s urine blue.

The brunt of the king’s wrath was borne by Frederick (1712–1786), his eldest son, a precocious boy who preferred books and flute lessons to hunting and military reviews. From an early age, Frederick learned to dissemble—“I would very much like to know what is going on in that little head,” his father noted—but could not hide his fear of gunfire or his clumsiness on horseback.

On his own, Frederick had assembled a secret library with works by the main enlightenment figures Voltaire, Locke, and Bayle. And

a visit at the age of sixteen to Augustus the Strong’s splendid court in Dresden opened Frederick’s eyes to a very different world of refinement, opera, and literature. Meanwhile, the humiliations increased: at mealtimes, he was placed at the bottom of the table—his mother had to send food to his room so he wouldn’t starve—and the physical abuse reached a point where the king forced him to kiss his feet. If he had been subjected to such indignities from *his* father, he would have killed himself, Frederick William mocked.

At his wits’ end, Frederick thought up a plan to flee to France and then on to England. When caught, he was subjected to solitary confinement and threatened with execution. His friend Lieutenant Hans Hermann von Katte was beheaded, the girl who had accompanied him on flute was whipped and sent to Spandau prison, his library was sold and his tutor was banished. After which his father forced him to undergo a strict regimen of religious observance and to become engaged to Elisabeth Christine of Bevern, “thick as two short planks” according to his mother, and smelly to boot, no doubt caused by “a dozen or so anal fistulas” in the catty words of one of his sisters. Frederick finally submitted, started taking military matters seriously and learned to sit properly on a horse, and with marriage got his own household, easing his situation somewhat.

The ultimate father from hell, Frederick William in “all his appalling glory” roars and bullies his way through the early chapters of Tim Blanning’s extraordinarily rich biogra-

phy of his son, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, until he thankfully dies in 1740.<sup>1</sup> But even when in deepest despair, Blanning notes, “Frederick never seems to have considered the most obvious solution—regicide.” Rather, as is not unusual in such cases, the victim still hankers after the praise of his parent. In a dream long after his father’s death, Frederick heard himself saying to him, “Your approval is worth more to me than that of everyone else in the universe.” Thus as king, Frederick was determined to surpass the achievements of his old man, and, without ever becoming a “reductionist” Freudian, Blanning sets out to explore the many facets of Frederick’s character: the hedonist who was a stern ruler, the atheist who tolerated religion, the anti-Machiavellian who could deceive with the best, and the philosopher king who as warlord transformed Prussia into a great power.

After an upbringing like this, a certain amount of mental repair work is necessary, notes Blanning. For Frederick, this meant wholeheartedly cultivating the interests he had been forced to pursue in secret, and creating an aesthetic environment to his liking, “turning his father’s Sparta into Athens (or even Babylon).” Rather than Berlin, he chose Potsdam as his main residence, where he spent the winter in the Town Palace and the summers at Sanssouci, his rococo idyll, which he crammed with sugary *fête galante* scenes by Watteau, Lancret, and Pater and with enough statues of naked youths indoors and outdoors to make the horses blush. Blanning certainly does not hold back in conveying the “camp” aspects of Frederick’s all-male court, with its hothouse maliciousness and exotic practices.

Though many historians have ignored it or tiptoed around it, says Blanning, Frederick’s sexuality “was not something peripheral, to be passed over in furtive silence or to be explained away. It was central to his assertion of his own personality.” After his father’s death, he settled Queen Elisabeth Christine in a modest château in Berlin and thereafter totally ignored her.

<sup>1</sup> *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*, by Tim Blanning; Deckle Edge, 688 pages, \$35.

He likewise despised Maria Theresa of Austria and Elizabeth of Russia for the fact that they were women. His misogyny extended to his beloved greyhounds who sensing the unease of their master would howl at the mere sight of a woman.

In Frederick’s daily routine, music played a crucial part. He played the flute at the crack of dawn, at midday, and in the evenings with a small orchestra, and he wrote music himself. Musically, notes Blanning, he had definite dislikes. He dismissed Handel as being past it and Haydn’s symphonies he described as “a shindy that flays the ears.” He was a strict taskmaster: regarding orchestration, tempo, key, “there was nothing he did not decide, and the punishment for transgressors was severe,” his conductor wrote. Unwilling to be treated like some recruit, the Italian singer Ferrandini turned down an invitation.

Along with music, reading remained his favorite occupation. There were libraries in his six major palaces and a mobile one for his campaigns. He wrote extensively on politics, war, and history. Poetry, too. One of his first acts when becoming king was to invite Voltaire, who helped polish his early essay *Anti-Machiavel*, to come and stay with him. Voltaire’s impact on Frederick’s personality Blanning finds in his “mocking tone,” his use of “much wit, but also in much spite,” his penchant for finding “something ridiculous in everyone he met.”

Though often described as a Francophile, notes Blanning, he did not think much of contemporary French culture. A cultural conservative, what he enjoyed were the plays of Corneille and Racine. But the most important influence on him, says the author, was not French, but classical, though he had to read the classics in French as his father had considered Latin lessons a waste of time. Predictably, what he called “the abominable plays of Shakespeare,” received short shrift: “Ridiculous farces which merit only to be performed in front of savages in Canada.”

His native German he considered much too harsh, a language only fit for soldiers and horses, in the opinion of Voltaire. It could be “much improved,” Frederick muses, by stick-

ing an “a” on to the end of words, turning the verb “*sagen*” into “*sagena*,” for instance. Goethe and the other German authors of his day left him cold. But, as he stated, “What greater service could I have performed for German literature than that I did not bother with it?”

On the matter of religion, his father’s brand of harsh Christianity had put him off the subject for good. Seeing himself as a philosopher king, “a beacon of reason,” he viewed Christianity “as an old metaphysical fiction spawned in the fevered imaginations of the Orientals.” But mindful of the havoc wrought by the Thirty Years’ War and of the self-inflicted economic wound when the 1685 revocation of the Edict of Nantes drove out the Huguenots from France, he provided freedom of worship for his subjects. Considering himself “neutral between Rome and Geneva,” he even allowed a Catholic church to be built in Berlin: “From my subjects I demand nothing more than civil obedience and loyalty.”

Instead, Blanning speaks of “the sacralization of culture,” with art being promoted from “being an instrument for the glory of God to being God itself.” In Berlin, Frederick built an opera house, the first “freestanding” edifice of its kind in Europe—before, such venues were either found within the royal palace or right next to it. So big was it that during the winter, soldiers were drafted to help heat it with their warm bodies. The opera became “the metaphysical cathedral of Frederick’s art reign.”

For all his hedonist inclinations, Frederick had an “exceptional capacity for hard work.” And, says Blanning, just because he was indifferent to German literature does not mean that he was not conscious of his German nationality. He repeatedly hammers the French for arrogance and decadence and for persecuting dissent. “Frenchmen, flaunt your riches/ Your luxury, and your languor. . . . My more frugal nation/ Can only oppose its virtues.”

Considering himself the first servant of the state, he had inherited the stern Pietist work ethic, “an ethos of duty, service, self sacrifice, fairness and efficiency.” And he was acutely conscious of his public image, says Blanning. While at the court at Sanssouci he would fop around in a resplendent white suit with fancy

trimmings; when out riding among his subjects, he would wear a modest uniform and doff his hat at the people he passed.

Not the delegating kind—“his ministers [were] only the instruments of his will,” wrote a senior minister—he made constant inspection tours, and Blanning enumerates a series of choice epithets in his marginal comments when he encountered foot-dragging in the bureaucracy, including “Thieves, apes, rascals, lackeys, scallywags, jokers, idiots, cheats and rogues.”

He abolished torture and saw to it that capital punishment was used sparingly. We see him personally trying to intervene in a court case where he believed a miller had been treated unfairly in his case against a nobleman—he was wrong, it turned out, but the incident shows his commitment to the principle of equality before the law.

Blanning also has him reduce a six-year sentence for poaching, which would fall in Frederick’s category of crimes committed by poverty or folly. But if violence was involved, there was no leniency. Violent and premeditated robbery earned the perpetrator a death sentence or life imprisonment. Blanning also mentions the summary execution of an army chaplain who had heard confession from two soldiers who intended to desert and had kept quiet about it. His body was allowed to rot in the roadside gallows.

And make no mistake: though he had sided with the said miller, notes Blanning, he was very much the nobility’s man—“I will not tolerate non-noble vermin in the officer corps.” What the incident merely showed was his willingness “to distinguish between actions of individual nobles and the interest of nobles as a class.”

Also, says Blanning, one should not overstate his commitment to freedom of expression. Although he is famous for having stated that, “If newspapers are to be interesting, they must not be interfered with,” and for ordering pamphlets attacking himself to be placed lower on the gates of Sanssouci to be easier to read, he soon reinstated press censorship, though perhaps not so effective in practice.

And while Julien Jean Offray de La Mettrie, the materialist author of *L’homme machine* benefitted from Frederick’s policy of offering refuge

to persecuted writers and was given a post at the Berlin Academy, his *Discourse on happiness* with its advocacy of flagrant hedonism was burned publicly. Rousseau, for his part, was granted asylum in Neuchâtel, the Swiss principality, then a Prussian possession, but Frederick cautioned, “anything should be done to stop his writing. The man is a lunatic.”

Thus, as a ruler, while Frederick does not fall in the despot category, says Blanning, “he was definitely an autocrat,” of whom “it is safe to assume that he would never have ceded one jot of his absolute authority.”

This same steeliness we find in Frederick the soldier. Not content with merely possessing a strong army and bragging about it, as his father had been, says Blanning, Frederick actually wanted to use it: his country’s status as what he called “the sandbox of the Holy Roman Empire” badly needed changing. Exploiting the predicament of Maria Theresa of Austria, who after the death of her father Charles VI in her own words was left “without money, without credit, without an army, without experience or any knowledge of [her] own, and finally without any kind of advice,” he chose Silesia, the richest of the Habsburg provinces, as his prey.

Frederick had just published the *Anti-Machiavel*, emphasizing that only defensive wars were just, and that for a statesman to lie was counterproductive, as his credibility would be destroyed. Yet he was perfectly willing to have his foreign minister cook up a phony justification for invading Silesia: “Bravo, that is the work of a good charlatan.” Here Blanning cites the historian Theodor Schieder’s argument that whereas Frederick’s anti-Machiavellianism was more of an intellectual exercise, his Machiavellianism came naturally. Having underestimated Maria Theresa’s resolution, writes Blanning, “he spent the rest of his life trying to hang on to his booty.”

Reviewing the three wars Frederick fought over Silesia, Napoleon praised him to the skies for the 1757 battle of Leuthen, where 35,000 Prussians licked 65,000 Austrians: “a masterpiece of movements, enough to . . . rank him among the greatest generals,” Blanning is less

impressed: examining his record as a battlefield commander, Blanning joins Christopher Clark, the author of *Iron Kingdom*, in reminding us that out of sixteen major clashes, he lost eight. In fact, says Blanning, his brother Henry proved himself to be a better field commander.

But Frederick did enjoy some crucial advantages over his enemies: unity of command against the bungling decision-making process of his opponents, which at key moments prevented them from coordinating their efforts; the superior training of his infantry, which enabled them to fire at more than double the rate of the Austrians; and the loyalty of his troops, even when things looked most bleak, which he had earned by his willingness to share their privations.

After the peace of Dresden, which ended the Second Silesian War, Frederick was hailed as Frederick the Great for the first time. But this peace didn’t last for long, and seeing his enemies massing on his borders, in 1756 he launched a preemptive attack on Saxony, thereby triggering the Third Silesian War, which was part of the greater Seven Years’ War. Facing him was a powerful coalition consisting of France, Austria, and Russia, while he only had a limited agreement with Britain himself. The thought that old enemies like France and Austria could combine had never occurred to him, says Blanning.

In the ensuing war, Frederick came close to losing several times. After the battle of Kunersdorf (1759), his greatest disaster, where “my coat was riddled with musket balls” and two horses were killed under him, the allies could have ended it, if the Russians and the Austrians had joined forces and marched on Berlin: but in what he referred to as the miracle of the House of Brandenburg, they didn’t.

In 1762, he had another stroke of luck when the Tsarina died. Peter, the new Tsar, had an “inexorable passion” for Frederick, turning Russia from enemy to ally overnight. And when Peter was assassinated, his widow Catherine remained passive. But Blanning dismisses the idea that Frederick was saved by “a fluke”: “By this time all the continental combatants were exhausted, out of money and willpower. It was the Prussian state that could still generate the necessary funds and manpower to win

the last battles.” The Treaty of Hubertusberg confirmed Silesia as Prussian property.

To sum up Frederick as a warrior: while Frederick’s brother Henry may have been a better field commander, if Frederick had been killed by the Russians at Kummersdorf, says Banning, Henry would have thrown in the towel and ended Prussia’s great power dreams: “Frederick’s tenacity made sure that Prussia held on to Silesia, no matter how dire the situation.” “In short,” writes Banning, “he was an indifferent general, but a brilliant warlord.”

As Banning notes in his conclusion, “Frederick’s protean nature leaves him open to many conflicting interpretations”: to suit their own agenda, some have overstressed his enlightenment side, others his authoritarian side. But in his enlightened absolutism, Banning finds “enough progressive elements” that would make educated Prussians feel good about their country. “The severity and security of the administration of justice gave the Prussian subject a certain noble defiance and rare self-confidence that one finds among common people only in England and Holland,” says Banning. “In an ocean heaving with irrational cruelty, a sovereign who was merely severe stood out as an island of humanity.”

As a warlord, his feat of turning Prussia from a backwater into a European great power caused Churchill and others to speak of an inexorable progression of Horrible Huns stretching from Frederick through Bismarck and Der Kaiser and culminating in Hitler’s Third Reich, a process whose inevitability, however, has been convincingly refuted by Christopher Clark’s *Iron Kingdom*.

But “whatever one might think of the impact on subsequent German history, no one can read [Frederick’s] works or listen to his music without realizing he possessed extraordinary gifts,” concludes Banning. And while the careers of the Sun King and Napoleon certainly conform to Enoch Powell’s old line, quoted here, that “all political careers end in failure,” Banning sees Elizabeth I and Frederick as exceptions, two monarchs who went out on a note of triumph.

## The world’s a stage

*Michael Riedel*

*Razzle Dazzle.*

Simon & Schuster, 464 pages, \$27

*reviewed by Jonathan Leaf*

How did Broadway go from being a fabulous invalid to a mint? That’s the story the *New York Post* theater columnist Michael Riedel tells in his very entertaining new book, *Razzle Dazzle: The Battle For Broadway*.

Riedel begins his story with the Shubert Brothers, the challengers and successors to the Theater Syndicate run by Edward Albee’s grandfather, Edwin Franklin Albee II. The Syndicate dominated the booking of popular performers sent about the country during the period of Vaudeville.

Natives of Syracuse, the Shubert brothers were immigrants with little education who saw theater-owning as a way out of poverty. Not surprisingly, their involvement began where the money was: the box office. The brightest and most driven of the three brothers, Sam, had started out working in the box office of the Syracuse Grand Opera House as a teenager.

Recruiting his brothers J. J. and Lawrence to work with him, he shifted roles and began managing and producing. By being supportive of the “talent,” the Shuberts won success through a willingness to pay performers better than the Syndicate, a group which had few scruples about trying to keep the Shuberts out through monopolistic practices. The fight with the Syndicate led Sam and his brothers to begin building their own theaters as a way to compete.

Although Sam died in a train car accident in 1905, his brothers were able to expand the company into a powerful Broadway theater chain by the time of the Great Depression. That economic collapse coincided with the rise of talking pictures. At the same time, it destroyed the Syndicate and left the faltering Shubert chain as the survivor positioned to profit from the post-war recovery and the big musical smashes written by Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, and Frank Loesser.

The family’s capacity for leading the company they had constructed was, however, confronted

by a hereditary compulsion: alcoholism. Over time that led the Shubert board to rely more and more upon two energetic and highly competent lawyers employed by the firm, Gerald Schoenfeld and Bernard Jacobs. These men would eventually wind up running the Shubert organization from the early 1970s through the early 2000s.

Schoenfeld was a dogged and serious man who played a central role in the clean-up of Times Square and in developing and promoting the advertising campaigns that have made Broadway such a magnet for out-of-towners. But he and the organization he headed up also played a critical part in the near death of the American dramatic play as a living art form. In the course of his engaging account of the tens of millions made by musical producers like Michael Bennett (*A Chorus Line*, *Dreamgirls*) and Cameron Mackintosh (*Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Miz*), Riedel tells this tale, too.

When off-Broadway awakened in the mid-1960s with memorable new playwrights like Lanford Wilson, the Shuberts encouraged the unions—including Actors Equity—to make it a special target. The union's success drove up costs to such an extent that off-Broadway today is only rarely a commercial venue.

At the same time, the Shubert organization for many years took the lead in the negotiations between Broadway producers and the unions. Indeed, Schoenfeld sometimes served as the producers' top negotiator. But, as the Shubert organization is principally a theater owner, not a producer, it had little interest in picking fights with theatrical unions since a strike would idle its properties. For this reason, the Shuberts proved notoriously pliant.

Thus, some stagehands now make \$300,000 per year, and the capitalization for even a dramatic play runs into the millions. Necessarily, Broadway producers interested in producing straight plays look not for good scripts but for star vehicles with motion picture actors attached to them. So it is that the recent Broadway season includes Keira Knightley in yet another version of Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* and a miscast Bruce Willis in a stage adaptation of William Goldman's film adaptation of a Stephen King pulp novel.

This rapid increase in the cost of mounting shows has led to an equally swift ascent in

the price of Broadway tickets and a drop in the number of performers employed in the typical production. That reflects the cost of paying actors for walk-on speaking parts: over two thousand dollars per week plus benefits. This is in accordance with union contracts, and it results in an emphasis upon small-cast plays and a declining number of new dramas receiving commercial productions. Producers avoid plays with large casts and dramas by playwrights without established names. Young playwrights, discouraged, now leave for more lucrative and reliable gigs as staff writers on television serials and procedurals. Meantime, young ticket-buyers are deterred by Broadway's startling ticket prices.

Hence, while *Razzle Dazzle* is a story of the phoenix-like rebirth of a local industry and the giant corporations like the Shubert Organization and Walt Disney that profited from this, it is not, sadly, an account of a Golden Age.

## An exquisite personal history

*Edmund de Waal*

*The White Road.*

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 401 pages, \$27

*reviewed by Anthony Daniels*

Happy the man who develops an obsessive interest early in life that remains with him and that he can turn to constructive account. Edmund de Waal is such a man: he alighted on ceramics as a boy and they have remained the focus of his working life ever since.

To the general public, however, he is probably more known as the author of *The Hare with Amber Eyes* than as a ceramic artist. That book, which became a surprise bestseller throughout the world, recounted the story of one side of his family, an enormously rich pan-European banking family originating in Odessa, through the checkered fate of a collection of netsuke that he had inherited. This was not merely a family saga, but an account of the virtual destruction of an entire civilization and way of life, a theme of some of Stefan Zweig's stories. But *The Hare with Amber Eyes* was more than just a lament:

it was a call for people to take an interest in the history of the objects around them, and not to take them just for granted, as if they materialized only the moment we looked at them.

The author returns, somewhat tangentially, to this theme in *The White Road: Journey into an Obsession*, a literary *macédoine*, as it were, of the history of porcelain, autobiography, travelogue, and philosophy. At times it strikes me as a little precious and self-indulgent, and the use of the historical present suggests an intimacy with the actors in the history that can appear presumptuous, but the end of the book is (or was to me) as startling and unexpected as the ending of any crime novel.

Here I must confess to an ignorance of, and comparative uninterest in, porcelain as an art form. I am guilty of precisely that taking-for-granted of those few pieces of porcelain that I own that *The Hare with Amber Eyes* counteracts, which for me are highly decorative and even beautiful but do not engage my full attention in the way that my pictures do. The deficiency is no doubt in me, not in porcelain as a medium; recently, for example, I went to an exhibition of modern Japanese calligraphy which opened to me, or perhaps I should say left ajar to me, an entire art form which I scarcely knew existed but which is regarded as *the* supreme art form in Japan and China. Needless to say, an hour in a museum and the reading of one book is not enough to enter into an art world so alien that it would take a lifetime of study to understand it truly, but it is certainly humbling and salutary to realize that you have been, and remain, profoundly ignorant of the highest artistic medium of more than a fifth of mankind, whose beauty you can appreciate only in the most superficial way.

It is not quite so bad with porcelain, of course, but bad enough, and after reading this book I shall certainly look with closer attention at the medium. Its history is fascinating, though perhaps I would have retained more of it had it been set out in a less fragmented and personal way than it is here, where it is recounted like a pilgrimage to the sources of de Waal's art.

The Chinese discovered (if discovered is quite the word) porcelain several hundred years

before the Europeans. For the latter, porcelain was long a rare and precious cargo, brought at the cost of every possible hazard, the possession of even a small quantity of which conferred enormous prestige on the possessor. The King of Saxony swapped an entire regiment of soldiers for some grand porcelain vases owned by the King of Prussia, so great was his lust for them (and so little, one might add, his concern for the life of others). The Europeans longed to discover the secret of the extraordinary material, translucent, strong, and malleable into myriad exquisite forms, eventually attaining their goal first in Saxony and then in England, guided in their efforts by the reports of the French Jesuit missionary to China, Père d'Entrecolles.

The manufacture of porcelain requires two materials, a stone called *petunse*, and a clay called *kaolin*, after a mountain in China called *Kaoling* where it is found in great quantities. It is a measure of my ignorance that before I read the book I associated kaolin with the binding agent of the *mixt. kaolin et morph.*, a sludgy brown medicine that was once used for the symptomatic treatment of diarrhea, freely available over the counter, and consumed in large quantities by desperate addicts on account of the small quantity of morphine that it contained.

It so happened that the two ingredients of porcelain existed in large quantities together in Saxony and England (the latter soon supplying half the kaolin used in the world for the manufacture of porcelain). But of course much more goes into the making of the porcelain that we take for granted than the mixture of the two ingredients: at every stage, from the molding to the coloring to the glazing and firing in the kiln, something may go wrong and the product abandoned. When de Waal went to the city of Jingdezhen, the millennial capital of the Chinese porcelain industry, he found mounds of millions of pieces of smashed porcelain, like the slag-heaps of coal mines, many of them hundreds of years old, from porcelain dishes that turned out imperfect and therefore unusable—for in a nation of imperial and scholarly connoisseurs imperfection was impermissible.

The Chinese porcelain industry took advantage of the extreme division of labor hundreds of years before Adam Smith described its effect

on productivity. There were painters of one particular motif and nothing else, for example; they were proletarians in the mass production of aesthetic perfection in a society in which most people lived not far above the level of subsistence. Their conditions of work must have been abominable and the grossest occupational disease rampant among them, though probably accepted as inevitable and inseparable from existence. Mao said that power grew out of the barrel of a gun; it sometimes seems as if the exquisite grows out of the imposition of hardship.

## Honey & hogwash

*Jay Parini*

*Empire of Self: A Life of Gore Vidal.*  
Doubleday, 480 pages, \$35

*Michael Mewshaw*

*Sympathy for the Devil: Four Decades of Friendship with Gore Vidal.*  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 224 pages, \$24

*reviewed by John Simon*

Gore Vidal was at best a snob, at worst a snot, depending on how you assess his patronizing demeanor. He looked and sounded patrician, but stopped short of being a dandy (witness his perennial gray pants and blue blazer). He was, however, a lot of other things, as two new biographies attest.

They are *Empire of Self: A Life of Gore Vidal* by Jay Parini, his friend and literary executor, a responsible, solidly researched, traditional biography; and Michael Mewshaw's *Sympathy for the Devil: Four Decades of Friendship*, breezier, sassier, more anecdotal. Taken together, as they should be, they constitute a fully rounded portrait of a witty, trenchant, mischievous, talented but often superficial and arrogant writer and man.

Compelling essayist but uneven fictionist, he did also have his good sides: loyalty to friends and generosity with money. Deluded as a would-be politician, he was a largely judicious critic and, it must be said, consummate liar.

What makes both books valuable is that, friendship notwithstanding, they remain objective, unswayed by amity, and, with novelist authors, exhibiting style, structure, and fluency not always given to mere biographers. Possessor of a murderous charm, Vidal emerges both smart and often irrational, egocentric but curious about others, and genuinely, though not selflessly, concerned with America's present and future in a state of steady love-hate.

Parini quotes a good deal from and about Vidal, including from shrewd observers American and foreign; Mewshaw concentrates on his personal experiences and on adducing as many Vidal bon mots as possible. Both biographers note that for all the years spent in Italy, Gore never bothered to learn the language of the land, often merely adding Italianate endings to English words and thinking he was speaking Italian. There were Italian friends, too, but mostly expats such as those that formed what Mewshaw calls Hollywood on the Tiber.

I cannot claim to have read extensively the writings of this somewhat dubious polymath but incontestable polyhistor; I have reviewed some of his books, met him very briefly, and watched him on his beloved medium—"Never miss a chance to have sex or appear on television," he memorably declared. His TV debates with Mailer, Capote, and William Buckley are as good as television gets.

Parini's very title is apt: Vidal, who often derided the United States as an Evil Empire, considered his own work as an empire of self, a triumph of self-realization. We learn much about Gore's boyhood, notably his adoration of his blind grandfather, Senator Thomas P. Gore of Oklahoma, for whom he was a seeing-eye dog on the Senate floor and thus acquired a taste for politics. He liked his father, Eugene Gore, pioneer aviator, sportsman, and football coach at West Point, and nurtured an abiding hatred for his flighty, hard-drinking-and-divorcing mother. He disliked his several schools, including the final one, Exeter, though for some reason he did not follow it up with Harvard, for which he harbored a lifelong reverence, making it eventually his chief legatee.

Although he boasted of never being in love, he did claim an Exeter classmate, Jimmie Trimble, as the one person he loved. That relationship, consisting at the utmost of two

facing bodies rubbed together into mutual orgasm, Gore may have greatly exaggerated, even unto several friends' wondering whether it ever took place. As Jimmie perished in the Service in the Pacific theater of World War Two at age twenty, he became a readily idealizable figure.

Parini performs a helpful function by offering précis of all of Vidal's major works, facilitating the choice of which ones to seek out. Equally valuable are his quotations from Vidal as epigraphs for each chapter. No less useful are what Parini calls "brief first-person vignettes between the chapters, recollections of moments in our friendship . . . culled from my journals." They stand out as close-ups among the text's more frequent medium and long shots. The epigraphs include such things as the Vidalian refrain: "Actually, there is no such thing as a homosexual person, any more than there is such a thing as a heterosexual person. The words are adjectives describing sexual acts, not people." Or: "The genius of our ruling class is that it has kept the majority of the people from ever questioning the inequity of a system where most people drudge along paying heavy taxes for which they get nothing in return." Or this: "Happily for the busy lunatics who rule over us, we are permanently the United States of Amnesia."

Both biographers quote a number of the epigrams, for which, along with his essays, Vidal may live longest in human memory. Herewith a few. About Warhol: "A genius with the IQ of a moron." About Mailer, who hit him with a glass tumbler: "Mailer is, as usual, lost for words." About Reagan: "A triumph of the embalmer's art." About Eisenhower: "Reading a speech with his usual sense of discovery." Or Truman Capote's death, "a wise career move." Again: "Reality is something the human race doesn't handle very well." Or: "What other culture could have produced someone like Hemingway and not seen the joke?" And, as quoted by Mewshaw: "The three saddest words in the English language: Joyce Carol Oates." And again via Mewshaw: "I take my hypochondria very seriously."

Vidal, like Falstaff, was also the source of wit in others, viz. his biographers. Thus Parini's comment on Gore's rejoicing in being on camera in a TV documentary about Venice: "Gore

loved performing in the role of Gore Vidal." Or: "Without the name-dropping he wouldn't have been Gore Vidal." And, from Mewshaw: "He put on a splendid performance, repeating quotations that I had heard him polish for months." Further: "Many of Vidal's memorable sound bites were the products of practice. It showed how much of his success, which seemed effortless, depended on hard work. But that wasn't to say he didn't excel at spontaneous wit as well."

This isn't the place to rehearse the fascinating life of Gore Vidal; it is the place, though, to give you a sense of the biographers' writing. But I must not forget to mention Gore's touching lifelong closeness to his partner, the good Howard Austen (really Auster, which Gore made him change to Austen as less Semitic), which started as quick sex at the baths, but lasted sexlessly for decades until Howard's death, from which Gore never quite recovered.

So let us compare how the two biographers describe a basic contradiction in their subject. Parini has: "He was both angel and monster, even at the same time." And: "He often sided with the poor and dispossessed, and could summon a proper rage on their behalf, but he had no wish to mingle with them, preferring suites in five-star hotels and good restaurants." And now Mewshaw: "When Linda [Mrs. M] remarked that he appeared to be enjoying life in the United States, he turned snappish. 'I would like nothing more than to lead a revolution of rebels from Canada.' . . . He was a man who treasured evenings with Betsy Bloomingdale and Nancy Reagan—and wanted to eradicate all they represented."

To this I would like to add a modest contribution of my own. In Mewshaw, page 131, we read Gore on Jimmie Trimble: "His sweat Gore said, 'smelled like honey.' 'What does honey smell like?' Donald asked. 'It smells like Jimmie Trimble.'" Now turn to page 170. "Gore repeated a story about one of his caregivers who was sexually attracted to Swedish women because of their smell. He dismissed this as idiotic romanticism, pheromonal hogwash, utterly at odds with his own erotic urges . . . 'I just like to get it up, get off, and hurry to get it up again.'" Honey versus hogwash.

By the way, nice word, "pheromonal."

# The politics of (new) music

by *Daniel Asia*

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It is chic in sophisticated musical circles to suggest that all music is equal. Which is to say, that all music has the same value, or the possibility of value; that the experience received from any music, if not the same, is of equal worth. To suggest otherwise would be, in all likelihood, to discriminate and show poor judgment. Thus, we should admire hip hop or country, klezmer or mariachi, pop or classical, world music or jazz, as different manifestations of the human spirit. Since all of these musics are made of tone, rhythm, color, dynamics, and melody, and all express human emotion in some form or other, that is where judgment should stop. We are forbidden to judge relative merit, as in our time, all music is self-evidently equal on the playing field of sound.

This attitude is also to be found in the post-minimalist contemporary music community, where it is the norm for composers to pride themselves on their keen relation to pop music, the folk tradition, the influence of shaped note music, the sound of a Bulgarian women's chorus, or Tibetan chant, to name a few. Anything, that is, except for the tradition of Western music.

The glories of Western music are eschewed: recognizable melody, counterpoint, and harmony. But most importantly, the two factors which should knit all of these elements together are spurned—continuity of argument, and a sense of motion, directionality, as well as a teleological relationship to time. There is also the question of a style that has some relationship, and provides continuity, to the past—the

longer the better, George Rochberg would have said—and that allows for a multiplicity of emotion and the possibility of surprise; a music that is supple and detailed, and worth returning to for many hearings.

That most post-minimal music is also political should be no surprise. Whether regaling us about the poor and downtrodden, the evils of war, sexual liberation of various stripes and kinds, the rights of workers, or the ubiquitous dangers to Mother Earth, this music has a pervasive, and not usually very subtle, political and moral tone. There is a self-evident problem with this: the best music is moral in and of itself, as it leads to a deeper understanding of our human nature. Music whose content itself is moral or political only ends up being kitsch and provides no emotional sustenance—it is superficial, bland, and maybe even downright harmful. Or as Roger Scruton writes in his book *Beauty*: “Works of art are forbidden to moralize, only because moralizing destroys their true moral value, which lies in the ability to open our eyes to others. . . . Many of the aesthetic faults incurred by art are moral faults—sentimentality, insincerity, self-righteousness, moralizing itself?”

If the modernists were trying to hold onto, and continue the importance of, the tradition through its radical transformation—Picasso of the cubist phase, Stravinsky of the *Rite of Spring*, and Eliot of *The Waste Land*—they also wanted to avoid the kitsch of popular culture. Through the difficulty of their respective arts, they wished to be removed from the masses, and in fact to provide barriers to access their

art. But they later found a middle ground, the blending of difficulty—or better, richness—with accessibility.

Today, the passion and zeal to find that middle path has dried up—instead, pandering is the order of the day. The goal now is to merge and blend with popular culture; in fact, become an offshoot of it, a little branch on its hulking trunk. Years ago I could sympathize with this desire. There was a time in the '70s when this engagement was thought possible and even artistically viable, when free jazz and new classical music seemed to be striving for the same sensibility. There seemed to be a congruence of ideas that animated Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew*, Weather Report, Ornette Coleman, McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra, and the new music of Robert Dick, Sal Martinano, early Steve Reich and Philip Glass, Earle Brown, and Bernstein. Yet, as with Gunther Schuller's Third Stream of the '50s and '60s, this too led to an artistic cul-de-sac. The commonalities and areas of intersection disappeared rather quickly and each side went its own way. As a side note, Schuller was also very clear to differentiate between the fecund world of jazz and contemporary classical music and the banal world of commercial music, his reference to pop.

But jazz and classical music have diminished in importance under the onslaught of popular culture, which is no better defined than by pop music. No matter what the sub-genres, and they are legion, everyone—the kid in the TV ad, Meryl Streep, doctors and lawyers, the cabbie, and post-minimal contemporary composers—wants to be a rock star. And like the rock star, no one wishes to grow up. The politics of transgression and alienation present in the music is part and parcel of a fixed adolescent behavior; in a fifty-year-old with kids and a mortgage this is a little odd, if not just dumb—and this dumbness is reflected in a dumbed-down music. For the most part, pop music is bad stuff. Its tunes are anodyne, freeze-dried, lacking any substance. Its rhythm is base and never changing. The music starts nowhere and goes nowhere—it has no function other than to cause excitement in the listener. It has no true line of argument, and

contains no musical thought. It is a vapid music with no consequential content. It is a vehicle for the performer, for and about the cult of the performer, and hardly at all about music itself. It is demonstrative of the extreme narcissism of our time. (For more on the ideas synthesized here, see Roger Scruton's *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture*, Chapter 10.)

Sad to say, this has also been the case more generally in the classical music world for some time now, with the ascension of the conductor and performer to the top of the hierarchy. The music is subservient to the cult of their personality. As Joseph Horowitz writes, it began in this country with the deification of the Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini. It continued with the celebrity status of Leonard Bernstein, as in the ordering of names on CDs—BERNSTEIN's Beethoven—as if Ludwig just wouldn't be important without Lenny to promote him. This continues in our time with the rise of the *young conductor*, from Dudamel on down. Not that a number of them might not already be truly great, old souls in young bodies, but it should be understood in the field of conducting that life experience, and so greater age and maturity, goes hand in hand with a deepening of insight brought to the music. But no one now really cares about this matter, or can tell the difference. There is, of course, also the problem of the absenteeism of the jet-setting conductor. Is there any other business that allows its CEO to be a CEO at a rival company simultaneously? Can the head of United be the captain of American at the same time? Can Pete Carroll coach the Seahawks and the Steelers simultaneously? Oh yes, there are differences to be sure between a conductor and a CEO and a coach—but just how much?

Many orchestras now will not commission or perform the music of composers over forty, let alone recently dead ones, assuming that the younger audience they hope for must be entertained by their peers. The older canon is played, but the recent past is gone. Conductors and artistic administrators seem not to know that many composers, like conductors, actually get better with age, and that there is a legacy of composers of the recent past, particularly American composers, whose music

they should be championing. And these young conductors certainly don't know the American canon or the history of American music, and have no interest in learning it, nor presenting it to their audiences.

The situation is analogous in the post-minimalist world of contemporary music. It began, I suspect, with the cult status assigned to John Cage, wherein his writings and personal characteristics—I am thinking of his pixie-like demeanor and smile; his fondness for picking mushrooms; his interest in Zen; his anti-institutional and general anti-bourgeois stance—became more important than the music. It also involves the notion that as long as there is a stance of utmost seriousness, this somehow disallows, or makes irrelevant, the act of judgment of the music on the part of the listener. How else can one explain the case of Cage's performance piece of amplified scrapings of cactus, which is just a silly idea from the get-go?

Another example is Laurie Anderson, who very early took on the persona of a rock performer, with all of the paraphernalia of amplification, cool and trendy hair and costumes, and video used as accompaniment, both in her live shows and as the primary means of purveying the product. Her early break-out piece, *Oh Superman*, is an unbridled appeal to an unthoughtful, unthinking adolescent politics. It has an admittedly catchy tune, steady pulse, and a woeful bounty of two chords. It seems to aim for a drug-inspired somnambulism. Her persona has not changed since then.

Another case is Meredith Monk. She started off with extended vocal techniques and works of minimal/tonal content in the '70s with pieces like those on her album *Key*, exploring simple vocal overlays and the world between speech/non-speech and music, including timbral transformation. Much was, by necessity, improvised, and performance was done in a faux séance-like or "spiritual" setting. She then later moved to multi-media work involving dance/movement/video and music, and to pure orchestra pieces. Perhaps her work should be placed with such ecstasies as the dancer

Isadora Duncan, or the jazz performer Keith Jarrett, as exemplified in his Köln Concert. But here is the rub: while Monk's art may be about community and innocence, and, like Cage's, very, very serious—when it comes right down to it, the music is incredibly and sensorially thin.

Lastly, I will mention briefly the music of Yoko Ono, resurrected for us recently by MOMA. While given a laudatory review in *The New York Times*, here is another cross-disciplinary artist, a mother of the avant-garde. Her music is mostly comprised of a background of mediocre rock music with her shrieking above it all her own banal texts. It is pathetic both as conceptual art and for its musical content, or lack thereof.

With the likes of Anderson's *Superman*, or Frederic Rzewski's *Coming Together*, one might ask if one isn't encountering something on the order of Susan Sontag's take in *The New York Review of Books* back in the '70s of the new Leni Riefenstahl—namely that she wasn't much different from the old one. Whether glorifying Hitler or the women of Nubia, she fetishized the body, or uniforms, or power, putting beauty at the service of a fascist philosophy. Thus the art is kitsch of the worst order, as it is kitsch that can glorify the worst acts of mankind. *Superman* and *Coming Together* do the same and result in the same kitsch. As Sontag writes:

These ideals are vivid and moving to many people, and it is dishonest—and tautological—to say that one is affected by *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympiad* because they were made by a film maker of genius. Riefenstahl's films are still effective because, among other reasons, their longings are still felt, because their content is a romantic ideal to which many continue to be attached, and which is expressed in such diverse modes of cultural dissidence and propaganda for new forms of community as *the youth/rock culture, primal therapy, Laing's antipsychiatry, Third World camp-following, and belief in gurus and the occult* [emphasis mine]. The exaltation of community does not preclude the search for absolute leadership; on the contrary, it may inevitably lead to it. (Not surprisingly, a fair number of the young

people now prostrating themselves before gurus and submitting to the most grotesquely autocratic discipline are former anti-authoritarians and anti-elitists of the 1960s.)

This seems to have remained current in our own situation.

Leni was on the Right and most in the new music community are on the Left. Many in the new music community, however, prostrate themselves to new or old gurus, and submit to a newfound allegiance to a distorted set of musical and political principles. A respected colleague spoke recently in wonder of the new-primitivism of various sects in Brooklyn; he was not speaking of a new branch of religious fundamentalism, but of various composer groups who tout their lack of formal musical training, or who seek a return to a music that itself is primitive. Something similar happened in the early part of the twentieth century—it didn't get music very far then and it won't now. There are also those who were trained at our

most respected musical institutions and pretend to act innocent of the entire musical past, and encourage a new form of Merry Pranksterism among their acolytes—the result of which was, and is, a puerile juvenilism. Or those who glom onto the latest irritant from Europe, be it French spectralism or the wisps of sound from a still Nazi-traumatized Germany.

Riefenstahl went on to photograph Mick Jagger, who embodies the notion that the pose is all. (One of my greatest fears is that I will be in the old-age home on my walker, and I shuffle down the halls to the canned music of—what else—“I can't get—no—satisfaction”—over and over and over again!) That pose, and all it represents, is increasingly prominent in our post-minimal new music, and general classical music, communities. Perhaps we are in the time of a new Rococo period, like that which came after J. S. Bach, when his music was considered old-fashioned, and his sons and others took over with a music of lightness, effervescence, style, and—emptiness.

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