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Monstrous!: Actors, Audiences, Inmates, and the Politics of Reading Shakespeare

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I. The Mousetrap

Hamlet insists in his first exchange with the queen that he knows not “seems.” He isn’t pretending; his grief isn’t affected. The inky cloaks and the dark clothes, the dejected sighing and crying, the forms and moods and shapes of grief do not denote him truly, because they are merely the index of grief, not its substance. And the problem with indices of grief, as Hamlet sees it, is that they can be deployed in the absence of genuine woe. They are actions that a man might play, and Hamlet is not a player.

Ultimately, the problem is with grief itself, since grief cannot be presented unmediated by forms, moods, and shapes: the grief that Hamlet experiences can be signified, but it cannot be evident without a medium; it can be presented, but it cannot be present. Also problematic, however, is that Hamlet *is* a player of sorts. Player and playwright. A man may put on a show of grief, but it is Hamlet who puts on an antic disposition, and it is the moving power of make-believe that Hamlet trusts to help determine what’s real and what isn’t. It may be difficult for all of the minutiae of critical commentary on the play to remember generalities—for example, that Hamlet’s reservations about what seems to be are profoundly at odds with his methods of divining what is. After establishing in 1.2 that he is not merely presenting an outward woe but indeed suffering an inward grief, his ability to distinguish between what seems and what is begins to fail. It is an honest ghost, Hamlet is sure in 1.2 (or is he already acting?), but doubt eventually drives him to contrive the playlet of 3.2: “the de’il hath power / T’assume a pleasing shape,”¹ so

he looks to have the ghost's word corroborated. He looks, oddly enough, to his smiling-but-damned uncle for proof that the ghost is what it says it is. The fair and warlike form, the pleasing shape, may be only that: a form or a shape and not the authentic presence Hamlet seeks across the play's various circumstances.

He looks also to "The Mousetrap" itself. The play is the thing *in* which he'll catch the conscience of the king. Is it a problem that Hamlet, suspicious of forms and shapes, turns ultimately to play acting, to actions that men play, in order to verify that what seems to be his father's spirit, is, and that what the spirit says is true?

This line of inquiry leads inevitably to semiotic despair, with forms, moods, and shapes pointing only and always to other forms and moods and shapes. Hamlet will never get to the bottom of what is, eventually settling for a series of inscrutable resignations ("the readiness is all") that critical commentary can manipulate but never quite resolve. Nonetheless, the play's extensive interest in drama—in the relationship between theatre and the reality it represents, in the craft of acting itself—make it a rich resource for questions about what happens when audiences watch actors disappear into dramatic roles. When the make-believe of theatre succeeds most fully, drama can come to bear quite powerfully on the world it sets out merely to reflect. Players and spectators alike can be profoundly moved when the distinction between acting and being appears to disappear. The very thing Hamlet wants to be sure of in himself and in others—that within which passeth show, the "is" that corresponds to "seems"—can be established when actors succeed in suiting forms to their conceits. Here is Hamlet's response to the Player's account of the distraught Hecuba in 2.2:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit
 That from her working all the visage wanned [F: "warm'd"]
 —Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
 With forms to his conceit—and all for nothing—
 For Hecuba?
 What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
 That he should weep for her?²

Hamlet finds it monstrous that an actor could forge so intense a connection with his material that he moves himself to tears of distraction. Ann

Thompson and Neil Taylor (Arden 3) gloss “monstrous” as “shocking or inappropriate,” though given how frequently and variously Shakespeare uses the word, a precise significance is difficult to establish. The *OED* offers various connotations, from “unnatural” to “extraordinary” or “excessive” to “atrocious” and “absurd,” all of which are plausible here.³ But what actually happens when a player of Shakespeare forces himself so to his own conceit that his visage wanes? What happens when an actor disappears into a dramatic role, moving into that space celebrated by actors and audiences alike, in which acting ceases to be merely acting and becomes something else, something that passes show? I consider here several components—conceit, a wanned visage, Hecuba, and of course Hamlet himself—in sketching an answer.

Harold Jenkins (Arden 2) glosses “conceit” as “that which is conceived in the mind (and may have no external reality);”⁴ Thompson and Taylor (Arden 3) refer to G. F. Hibbard’s 1987 Oxford edition, which glosses the whole line: “bring his innermost being into such consonance with his conception of the part.”⁵ “Conceit” may be thought of as the set of expectations brought to the part and informed by the Player’s understanding of the material he is narrating. The second component—the wanned visage (“warm’d” visage, in the Folio)—involves how those expectations are physically manifest as indices of an internal movement from stasis to grief. F’s “warm’d” seems to suggest something quite different from “wann’d,” but as Thompson and Taylor point out, “either a sudden pallor or a sudden flush could be a sign of emotion” (2.2.489n). Hamlet reads the player’s pallor not as a put-on, but as the expression of a genuine passion—of a psychological and emotional reality or authenticity.

The Player is engaged in a moment of what we could call “meaning by Shakespeare,” in which the expectations a performer brings to a dramatic text enable the Player to be moved, in his own person, on behalf of a fiction.⁶ Hamlet, too, is engaged in such a moment, moved by a snippet of a play to berate himself, and then moved by that play to try to move his murderous uncle by means of another play. That is, Hamlet is moved by the loss of his father and king; Hecuba is moved by the loss of her husband and king; the Player is moved by Hecuba’s distress; and Hamlet is moved by the player’s being moved on behalf of Hecuba.

This matrix of dramatic, emotional movement, complexly figured by the differences and distances between what’s real and what isn’t, between what is and what seems to be, is emblematic of what happens in encounters with Shakespeare as they are represented in popular entertainment and public discourse today. These encounters, depicted in professional

pedagogy, in books on acting training, in documentary accounts of prison Shakespeare programs, and in the fictions of popular film and television, reproduce the circumstances of Hamlet's broadly ontological uncertainty and then seem to resolve that uncertainty by turning to the drama of Shakespeare. A timid student shines triumphantly as he recites a passage from *Hamlet*; a terrified understudy conquers her fears on a successful opening night; a guilt-stricken prisoner turns out an improbably forceful performance of a penitent murderer: at-risk or otherwise challenged populations give themselves over to Shakespeare and thereby discover within themselves a powerful humanity, an occluded potential, a fundamental innocence that they and the witnessing audience need to see authenticated. A deficit of some sort is established and then resolved with recourse to Shakespeare, whose power to capture or describe humanity turns out also to have the power to discover and validate humanity.

What specifically is happening in these encounters? People bring to Shakespeare a certain set of expectations—a “conceit”—about what the plays mean as they circulate in popular culture, and about what they will do for the reader, the performer, or the audience, when they are engaged as cultural documents. Via their status as repositories of all that is most terrifying and most noble about the human condition, the plays are expected to produce a certain kind of experience—a movement to distraction of some sort; a psychological and emotional moment of such intensity as to be transformative; an internal emotion so authentic that it will register clearly in a particular wanning or warming of the visage. I want in this essay to look at a number of different examples of inspired and inspiring performances of Shakespeare, across a number of different discursive traditions. The notion that Shakespeare functions today as a marker of authenticity needs further consideration. The phenomenon is not simply a matter of the plays' accumulated cultural capital, I want to suggest, but also of an opacity specific to their language that allows misreadings. Indeed, misreadings are central to Shakespeare functioning as a trope for authenticity. It is not that a connection between within and without is guaranteed in a moving performance. Rather, the fundamental opacity of “that within which passeth show” is displaced into what has become the fundamental opacity of Shakespeare's language. Shakespeare functions as a kind of empty space, sacred and sanctioned, in which a particular kind of therapeutic narrative unfolds independent of semantic particulars. I begin here by considering anecdotes of actor-character communion in actor training literature to suggest how the introduction of Shakespeare into the anecdote tends to privilege the language of the plays

over other traditions of actor training and allows the Shakespeare-centric version to circulate more broadly in the popular imagination. I then turn in the final section to a particular encounter with Shakespeare in order to consider a series of misreadings inherent in the anecdote's central *topoi*. It is the *topoi*, I argue, that supply the semantic function generally supposed to reside in the plays themselves.

II. The Method

Early in his book on method acting, *A Dream of Passion*, Lee Strasberg recalls a particularly inspired performance by an actor, Giovanni Grasso, in order to introduce the challenge of achieving emotional authenticity in acting. Having seen Grasso in a production of *Othello*, and having been impressed by the actor's "overwhelming emotional range," Strasberg attends a play called *La Morte Civile*, in which Grasso's performance is likewise profoundly moving. Even independent of the language—the play is in Italian—Grasso's acting is so impressive that Strasberg "had to hold on to the sides of [his] chair in order not to call out for help." Grasso, Strasberg says, "had created the character's inner realization," and done so with such thoroughness and authenticity that the effects "were not just physical": impressive though the physical performance is—death throes, realistic convulsing—Strasberg is ultimately more impressed with the "emotional life that seemed to impel" the physical components.⁷ He is disappointed, then, on a subsequent occasion, when Grasso is unable in the first two acts to achieve the same physical and emotional intensity Strasberg saw in the earlier performance. Having convinced friends to come along to see his stage discovery, Strasberg feels responsible. He is relieved when the magic eventually returns, during "a confrontation between Grasso's character and his wife":

I have seen inspired performances, but I have not seen the moment of inspiration strike as suddenly as it did then. He touched her, and the touch seemed to create an impulse. Suddenly, the blood rushed into Grasso's face; his eyes distended. This wasn't acting: this was real—real blood, real bursting of blood vessels. From that moment on, his face, his whole body, and his entire performance changed. I sat upright in my chair, willing to take bows. The great actor had suddenly proved that he *was* a great actor! (26)

"Some actors are able to reach the highest level of creativity," Strasberg explains: "call it inspiration if you wish" (26). It is the difference between

acting and being, between going through a series of motions understood to signify or designate a state of passion and actually experiencing a passion. It is the difference between the representation of emotion in the course of a performance and the actual, palpable presence of emotion in the performer.

Such anecdotes are common in mid-century books on acting. They are particularly common in books concerned in some way with “the method,” which despite the many differences among teachers and practitioners, seems deserving of the definite article, given the recurring concern with authenticity or “inspiration.” Authenticity, inspiration, and so forth are in some sense merely ways of talking about good acting, and the anecdotes serve consistently to set up the same question: how can an actor best prepare so that she can summon the inspiration, the emotional presence, that will move her to a transcendent passion on stage? Constantin Stanislavski was among the earliest to take up the issue. His *An Actor Prepares* (1936) is essentially a single string of such anecdotes, framed as a diary-style account of a student learning “the system.” The book begins with Kostya, the narrator, performing a scene from *Othello* for Tortsov, the teacher-director (and the Stanislavski figure). After a series of rehearsals, Kostya takes the stage as Othello in front of his teacher and stumbles through his debut, which is generally disastrous but which ends in a triumphant stretch in which authentic emotion conquers an actor’s stage fear:

I was ready to turn myself inside out, to give [the audience] everything I had; yet inside of me I had never felt so empty. The effort to squeeze out more emotion than I had, the powerlessness to do the impossible, filled me with a fear that turned my face and hands to stone. . . . I was making a failure, and in my helplessness I was suddenly seized with rage. For several minutes I cut loose from everything about me. I flung out the famous line “Blood, Iago, blood!” I felt in these words all the injury to the soul of a trusting man. Leo’s [another student’s] interpretation of Othello suddenly rose in my memory and aroused my emotion. Besides, it almost seemed as though for a moment the listeners strained forward, and that through the audience there ran a murmur. The moment I felt this approval a sort of energy boiled up in me. I cannot remember how I finished the scene, because the footlights and the black hole [of the audience] disappeared from my consciousness, and I was free of all fear.⁸

Accounts such as this one, given from the perspective of the performer, often feature a strong sense of immersion and an associated loss of memory regarding specifics. Later, as Tortsov discusses with his pupils their exhibition performances, he points out the difference between these select

minutes, in which “you who were playing, and we who were watching, gave ourselves up completely to what was happening on the stage,” and the rest of the performances, in which the students had committed any number of mistakes and failed actually to live the parts they were playing. Tortsov singles out Paul, the student who had acted Iago, saying that Paul’s performance “had some interesting moments, but [that] they were rather typical of the ‘art of representation.’” Paul insists in response that he “really did live the part” as he first rehearsed it, though he also admits that later he used a mirror “to be sure that [his] feelings were externally reflected” (19). Tortsov explains:

Actors of the school we are discussing do what you did. At first they feel the part, but when once they have done so they do not go on feeling it anew, they merely remember and repeat the external movements, intonation, and expressions they worked out at first, making this repetition without emotion. (20)

The important terms in these anecdotes—emotion, feeling, inspiration, reality—stand as markers of authenticity. They are all attached to accounts of transcendent moments on stage, and they may be taken as hypostases of an acting ideal in which a performer loses himself in a role and ceases to “act”: for the duration of the performance, he *is* the part he plays. He “knows not seems,” we may say, because he has that within that passes external movements, intonations, and expressions. As with Grasso, the performance is more than physical; there is an “emotional life” from which the actor’s body draws its movement as form is suited to conceit and the visage warms. Insofar as “the method” can be understood as a homogenous discipline, it is this central project of inner authenticity that drives the training and the notion of success on stage.

Shakespeare does not necessarily occupy a privileged space in these accounts. As in the Stanislavski excerpt here, it is often a Shakespeare play in which an example is set, and Shakespeare is accorded the usual reverence. But specific approaches to acting do not typically share a focus with Shakespeare, and indeed, there is a robust tradition within Shakespeare-centered acting practitioners that sees Shakespeare and “method acting” as incompatible, antithetical, and even actively antagonistic: to do Shakespeare properly, a performer needs only and exactly the words of Shakespeare; anything else will get in the way. Defenders are quick to point out in such instances that the antithesis is based on a warping or misunderstanding of “the method,”⁹ usually one that fetishizes the principles of “emotional memory” or “affective memory,” in which an actor

uses personal experience and personal recall in order to bring to a role an emotional memory necessary or appropriate to the lines. But even among practitioners with no particular objection to method-based approaches, Shakespeare tends to be accorded more importance than actor training. The playtexts themselves can be trusted to supply the inspiration that elsewhere might require honed technique on the part of the performer. If you focus on the language of Shakespeare, the argument goes, you will be moved to the appropriate emotion. Here is a brief excerpt from Patsy Rodenburg's *Speaking Shakespeare*:

Faced with poor writing, it is only natural [for a performer] to throw in any effect that might help enable a disabled text. With Shakespeare by contrast, you can relax, trust and allow the text to shine through you. Let your habits go and as you do Shakespeare will hold you up. An act of trust and commitment will allow him to play and transform you. You will be held safely—re-energised and transformed.¹⁰

An actor charged with performing “poor writing” will strive to make up for the shortcomings of the material, but the actor doing Shakespeare has a different kind of challenge—he has to learn to “trust” the text, erasing himself in order to let it shine—speak—through him. The word “habits” here has negative connotations, and there is the suggestion that Shakespeare has the power even to counter bad acting patterns or faulty training.

For the most part, practitioners like Rodenburg aren't interested in condemning contemporary acting techniques. It is not that acting training itself is at fault; rather, training is suited to the state of contemporary drama and to the social movements and conditions that produce it, both of which present an impediment to performing Shakespeare effectively. In her book *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice*, for instance, Kristin Linklater notes that “the big difference between contemporary drama and Shakespeare's drama lies in the language that expresses extremity. Today the unspoken is as dramatic as the spoken on stage because that's how it is in contemporary life.”¹¹ For Shakespeare's “Elizabethan society,” however, things were different, because “language lived in the body. Thought was experience in the body. Emotions inhabited the organs of the body” (6). The importance of “emotion” is still central, then as now, she argues, but the modes of expression have changed:

It would not, I think, be going too far to say that the twentieth-century experience of emotion is actually the experience of neurosis: that is, the

deflection of emotion from breath and voice to nerve endings and external muscles. The twitching jaw muscle, biting back feelings The twentieth-century actor, playing twentieth-century characters, experiences “truthful” emotions through these accepted response mechanisms. The voice *must* squeeze out through a narrow throat, clenched jaw and nasal resonance in order to be culturally accurate. (5)

To do Shakespeare, an actor needs to bracket off these habits. Linklater quotes Hamlet’s advice to the players: “suit the action to the word, the word to the action.” If a performer can learn to do this, she will eventually arrive at “a larger and deeper experience of thought and emotion, and from there [be led to] to a more fundamental, more individual and enlarged experience of ‘truth’” (6–7).

The academic critique of the tenets and politics of actor training is almost as robust as the body of training literature itself. W. B. Worthen and Sarah Werner in particular have offered thorough and careful ideological assessments of the stakes and the terms of actor training literature with regard to the question of authority in Shakespeare.¹² I forgo rehearsing these critiques here in order to focus instead on the way that some form of authenticity is important both to method-centric acting discourse and to Shakespeare-centric acting discourse. Both celebrate the moving power of emotional or psychological identity between actor and role, and both frame “truth” of some sort as the objective and the inevitable result of a successful performance. But the Shakespeare-centric model is distinct on two interrelated points. First, it ties the effectiveness of the actor-role communion specifically to the language. Grasso’s turn in *La Morte Civile* comes to life not during a spoken line, but when the distraught husband touches the wife, and the performance moves Lee Strasberg despite being in a foreign tongue. In the opening anecdote of *An Actor Prepares*, however, Kostya feels Othello’s injuries *in the words*—even in the opening anecdote of the seminal text on method acting, the student actor doing Shakespeare stumbles into a moving performance as he feels a connection in the “famous line.” And the training literature of which Rodenberg, Linklater, Cicely Berry, and John Barton are representative is built around the language. “If the plays are spoken and performed,” Linklater writes, “and if the sounds of the words and the rhythms of the language are felt, Shakespeare’s voice will call to the voices of eloquence that live in everyone” (195).

Second, the Shakespeare-centric version of the actor-character identity anecdote also circulates much more widely than its method-centric counterpart, which is limited for the most part to performance in profes-

sional theatre. Whether it is an outgrowth of something that originated in actor training literature or (more likely) a parallel development with much older roots in the history of Shakespeare in North America, the inspiring Shakespeare performance anecdote is actually more visible in broader public discourse than in theatre training. Linklater's appeal to "the voices of eloquence that live in everyone" marks a point of crossover, as Shakespeare is supposed to offer a transcendent experience not just for actors and other professionals: "his articulation is as accessible to the educationally underprivileged as it is to the college graduate. Time and again I have seen, heard and felt Shakespeare's words enter and restore power to a boy or a girl, a woman or a man, whose sense of worth has been obliterated by childhood abuse, social inequity or racial bigotry. This happens *not when they read Shakespeare, not when they hear Shakespeare, but when they speak the words themselves*. They speak the words and hear their stories told, recognizing that their experiences are part of the fabric of human experience" (195, emphasis original). Differences of history, of class, and of culture, are immaterial, Linklater argues, since Shakespeare "provides a speaking language in which vast pain can be articulated . . . a language which expresses the depths of our experience more fully, more richly, more completely than our own words can" (195).

Though it is tempting simply to dismiss this argument (which Linklater makes at length) on the grounds of its appeal to a universalism, the dual emphasis on language and universal accessibility invites a more nuanced response, together with some academic introspection. The language argument itself functions in part as a response to the academic critique of universalism. As the cultural status of "Shakespeare" withers under the cumulative force of various objections, the universalism argument has shifted sites, from "Shakespeare" to "the words themselves." Perhaps the shift is also the result of academic emphasis on "text"—as the most prominent readers of Shakespeare, our own text-centric practices model the very approach now dominant in other modes of engaging Shakespeare—and on the multiplicity of meaning, the possibility of competing and conflicting but nonetheless equally valid readings. Whatever its etiology, I want to suggest that the real power of the language, the property that makes it ideally suited to hosting these moments of communion and inspiration, is its opacity. While there is no reason to challenge the experiences Linklater describes, and while readers and performers of all sorts surely do recognize in the plays their very own stories, Shakespeare can serve as a space in which profound experience takes place because the accumulated mystique of the language ensures that it never gets in the way of what the

speaker of the words needs them to mean. That is, despite the emphasis on the particulars of the language, it is really its overdetermined status, its indeterminability, that allows it to speak to and for anyone.

III. The Madness

The particular encounter with Shakespeare that I would like to close with draws together the several elements discussed above—Hamlet’s anxiety over that within which passeth show; the Player’s wanned visage; the recurring trope of the moving performance; and the power of the language to articulate a profound pain or sorrow—but compels us also to think about the role of the witnessing audience. This anecdote comes from a 2002 installment of the popular National Public Radio program *This American Life*. In installment 218, “Act V,”¹³ the program’s contributing editor and the episode’s narrator, Jack Hitt, follows a production of *Hamlet* mounted by prisoners in the Missouri Eastern Correctional Center. It is primarily the story of the prisoner playing Horatio, who moves from an initial resentment of his role and of the play to what Hitt characterizes as a triumphant acceptance. Here, however, I consider a brief interview with another prisoner, Edgar Evans, who plays the part of Claudius. In this excerpt, the prison program’s director, Agnes Wilcox, discusses Claudius’s attempt to pray at the end of 3.3:

When Claudius is in the chapel and speaks about his sin and his regret and his ability to undo it, it broke my heart, because the man playing it felt all of those things fully. And, you know, I know these guys have deep regrets, but it was *palpable*. The audience was stunned—you could hear a pin drop. And, that was especially true with the inmate audience.

Wilcox then begins to recite the speech—“O, my offense is rank”—and the narration, overlaid with audio of Edgar Evans performing the speech, fades to an interview with Evans:

My name is Edgar Evans, and I’m 39 years old, and I played the king—King Claudius—in *Hamlet*. I don’t consider myself no great actor or nothing, but I try to do the best I can, and when I did the speech, I was looking upward—the chapel was at an incline there—and I was just looking up toward the top and it’s like no one was there but me. I literally—I honestly didn’t see a soul in the chapel when I was saying this. . . . it seemed almost like I was praying this actual speech to God. [. . .] I have a wife and four kids, and, by being incarcerated, I feel that I’ve really let them down. When I said that speech, and my wife was here, in the visiting

room, I don't know if it had an impact on her; I don't even know if she truly understood all of the content, but I wanted her to hear that speech more than anybody. [music rises] "O wretched state, O bosom black as death, / O limed soul struggling to be free [sic] / Art more engaged. Help, angels, make assay. / Bow, stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel / Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe. / All may be well."

Interspersed with moments from the speech as performed by Evans, and set to music, the sequence is heavy with pathos, and the implication is clear: Evans is greatly moved, affected with the part he is playing and seeking in the words of Claudius an experience of genuine repentance and sorrow. He is transported from the position of player in a performance of *Hamlet* to a space of solitary penance, "praying this actual speech to God." Like the Player on behalf of Hecuba (or Kostya as Othello, or one of Linklater's students), Edgar Evans's whole function is suiting with forms to his conceit: a deeply human experience of sorrow and guilt and the desire to make reparation for a crime. That Claudius's attempt to pray fails—"my words fly up; my thoughts remain below / Words without thoughts never to heaven go"—is beside the point for the moment, though I will return to the problem later. Conceit here is a matter of the set of expectations that Edgar Evans, along with Agnes Wilcox, Jack Hitt, and the NPR listening audience, brings to an encounter with Shakespeare.

The psychological and cultural work Shakespeare does in this encounter is simple and satisfying on one level but extraordinarily complex and tangled on another. It is simple and satisfying because a profoundly troubled man looking for a way to articulate his sorrow, his fears, and his regrets, finds in Shakespeare a voice that can accommodate that need, both for him and for the people he most wants to feel his sincerity. A figure of intense pathos, ill-equipped to perform Shakespeare (he is a prisoner, not an actor, not even a student of literature) meets the challenge and delivers a powerfully moving speech that allows the radio audience to experience him not as a criminal, but as a person doing what he can to navigate the difficulty of his circumstances. It is, in short, a greatly affecting moment of melodrama, in which occluded innocence is recovered and established in the wanned visage and broken voice of a man we want to experience as redeemed and rehabilitated.¹⁴

The moment is complex and tangled—"monstrous," even—because the work Shakespeare does here is bound up in "Shakespeare," with all the attendant social, cultural, and political problems explored in critical discourse of the past 50 years. Edgar Evans comes to Shakespeare with a set of expectations about the value of Shakespeare as a sanctioned cultural

repository of all that is noble and terrifying about the human condition, and it is perhaps those expectations that do the work of melodramatic redemption. More to the point, it is perhaps those expectations, and not Claudius's doomed attempt to pray, that enable Edgar Evans to experience penance, regret, and sorrow in the lines leading up to "all may be well." The lines address prayer and penance, *so there must be prayer and penance in them*: the expectation of a redemptive experience, together with the general opacity of Shakespeare, arrange for a spectacular misreading, in which the suggestion of prayer is enough for Edgar Evans to have an emotionally and psychologically authentic experience of prayer. He certainly hopes to communicate as much to his wife, looking on: "When I said that speech, and my wife was here, in the visiting room, I don't know if it had an impact on her; I don't even know if she truly understood all of the content, but I wanted her to hear that speech more than anybody." What is "all of the content"? It is not necessarily an easy matter even for professional Shakespeareans to determine, though there is palpable regret evident in "O wretched state, O bosom black as death" and a basic earnestness in "Help, angels, make assay." But does Edgar Evans realize that Claudius cannot repent? Does he realize that the penance he seems to us (the listening audience) to feel, and that he seems to want his wife to hear, is not Claudius's, *but his own*? Considering the prominence of the necessary qualifiers here—"seems"—perhaps the more appropriate question is, What is Claudius to Edgar Evans, or he to him, the he should be so moved?

I have suggested that the role of Claudius to Edgar Evans is "Shakespeare." Claudius is an expectation that in this play *Hamlet* there is some distillation of great art that can help a player (or a spectator or a reader) capture and express a profound sorrow. Shakespeare is the height of drama, of western literature; he is perceived and expected to demand careful attention and to offer transcendent rewards for the effort. If you are suitably distressed, and willing to put yourself to appropriate further distress in tackling the challenge of Shakespeare, you can expect to come out a changed person.

But consider the dynamics of representation involved here: Edgar Evans at prayer, playing Claudius at prayer, in a radio documentary that presents the performing of Shakespeare as an act of salvation in its own right—reading this moment involves so many other acts of reading that it is impossible to say exactly what Edgar Evans feels or thinks about Shakespeare, or about the understanding of and regard for Shakespeare that informs the successively removed valences of audience who hear Evans's

story, framed as it is by the documentary style narration of *This American Life*'s "Act V." Indeed, it may be actively irresponsible to try to establish what a prisoner—or anybody, for that matter—feels as he works his way through Claudius's treachery and attempted penance, particularly as "Act V" does not tell us what Evans thinks of the play-within-the-radio-show in which he plays Claudius, or of the radio show itself. But ultimately, I am not trying to recover whatever it might be that actually happens in contemporary encounters with Shakespeare; even if we could create an exhaustive inventory of the various dynamics comprising an instance of reading—even supposing we could establish boundaries for an act of reading to begin with—it's not the particular, local, individual experiences that are at issue, but rather how we talk about them, how we represent them, how they are produced and consumed in popular discourse and popular entertainment. And that involves not only the actors in such encounters, but the audiences who witness the performance—the audiences for whom such encounters are pre-read as part of the larger script in which the Shakespeare script unfolds. The misreading only begins with Evans.

Recall that Hamlet, watching Claudius, concludes that Claudius is at prayer. He misreads Claudius because that is what the play *Hamlet* needs him to do: if Claudius is engaged in some act that relishes of salvation, to murder him is to send him to heaven, and so Hamlet mistakes what seems to be penance for an act of salvation. The mistake is plausible as an excuse for the play, if not entirely probable for the character, and for most of us, it is an acceptable condition under which the plot moves forward. The NPR listening audience fills the role of Hamlet here, accepting that Evans-as-Claudius is at prayer, because that is what the radio show "Act V" asks us to do. Like other narrated encounters with Shakespeare, "Act V" deploys the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, in which everybody plays a part, from the prisoners here in the script of *Hamlet* to the radio audience, who are contained within a larger script and constrained by the rules of the genre—emotional authenticity underwritten by Shakespeare; redemption by Shakespeare; "Shakestherapy"—to take what seems to be for what is. The player Evans, like the Player in *Hamlet*, forces his soul so to his own conceit that he is moved to distraction, and we are lookers on, in a sense, over-hearers of a repentant Edgar Evans with reasons enough of our own to read the playing as real, to take what seems to be for what is. The distance that separates Evans from Claudius, and us from Evans, is the space of appropriation, the opportunity to read and misread, to forge whatever relationship we need with the plays of Shakespeare in order to make them do what we expect them to do.

The story of Edgar Evans in “Act V” is a minor episode next to other stories, told in much more detail, of prisoners finding salvation in Agnes Wilcox’s prison Shakespeare program. And “Act V” of course is only one narrative in a larger “documentary” tradition of troubled populations finding redemption in Shakespeare: Hank Rogerson’s *Shakespeare Behind Bars* (and to a degree, Amy Scott-Douglass’s book about the same program, *Shakespeare Inside*); *The Hobart Shakespeareans*, a 2007 documentary that follows immigrant children in a Los Angeles elementary school and that rehearses many of the same basic movements; but also the countless classroom anecdotes we circulate among ourselves formally and informally, in which struggling students triumph in a moment of improbable mastery of Shakespeare. Beyond these, there is a whole industry of popular entertainment, from the films *Dead Poets Society* and *A Midwinter’s Tale* to the recent Canadian television drama *Slings & Arrows*, in which Shakespeare hosts moments of salvation, redemption, rehabilitation, and transformation for any number of troubled students, misfit actors, boorish businessmen, and so forth, together with the audiences who complete characters’ transformations by playing their own parts as witnesses.

My inclination here is to take the critically unfashionable position that Shakespeare can and should function as a means of giving readers, performers, and audiences of all sorts an essentially positive, human experience. Though this comes close to the model of Shakespeare we often work in the academy to discredit, it does accommodate the desire scholars, educators, and other guardians and curators of “Shakespeare” have for people to enjoy productive encounters with the plays. The other option, also critically unfashionable, is to acknowledge that Shakespeare is not accessible to everyone, that all readings are not equally valid, and that the tradition represented by “Act V” is built on the worst kind of misreadings. Framing an either/or choice between these two overstated positions is admittedly disingenuous, and no doubt many of us would prefer to see both the good and the bad, and to do so not along a single axis, but within the dynamics of a much more complex matrix. But complexity is part of the problem—it is part of what got us here, to a point at which the success of Hollywood Shakespeare has generated a non-matriculating public that consumes Shakespeare recklessly, with no regard for the ideological self-scrutiny we use to police our own consumption; a point at which our insistence on reading Shakespeare as a cultural construction seems mostly to ensure that Shakespeare is read as the constructor of culture. The more academics talk about Shakespeare, the more opaque he becomes, and so the inscrutability of Shakespeare’s language that drives such readings

is, ironically, partly attributable to academic attempts to prevent them. While it seems to me too much to say that we are not doing our jobs in the academy as the foremost curators of Shakespeare—that the failure of popular discourse about Shakespeare to be “right” is our failure to talk about Shakespeare in a way that makes sense outside of the academy—I do think we can do more to recognize our complicity in a system that paves the way for misreadings of Shakespeare, even if that means simply accepting that a particular blenching comes from, or begets, a particular misunderstanding. Finally, we could do more to come to terms with competing impulses that make it difficult for us to reconcile our social politics, our classroom practices, our scholarship, and our popular entertainment choices. After all, we are among the guilty creatures sitting at this play.

Notes

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¹*Hamlet*, 2.2.534–535. I cite the Arden Shakespeare Third Series, eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, except where otherwise noted.

²*Hamlet*, 2.2.486–495.

³“monstrous,” *OED* 2nd ed. 1989.

⁴See Jenkins, 2.2.547n.

⁵Qtd. in Thompson and Taylor, 2.2.488n.

⁶The phrase is from Terence Hawkes’s book *Meaning by Shakespeare*.

⁷Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion*, 24.

⁸Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 9–10.

⁹Most overview accounts of method acting begin by acknowledging the problems of definition. See for instance Robert Lewis, *Method-or Madness?* (Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou Press, 1958).

¹⁰Rodenburg, *Speaking Shakespeare*, 9.

¹¹Linklater, *Freeing Shakespeare’s Voice*, 4.

¹²W. B. Worthen’s *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) offers a thorough treatment of Linklater and others who invoke a lost past as a source of authority in the production of Shakespeare. Sarah Werner’s *Shakespeare and Feminist Performance: Ideology on Stage* (London: Routledge, 2001) takes up similar issues with a specific focus on gender politics in the work of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

¹³The hour-long episode, number 218, is available in various formats from the programs website (see Works Cited). The sequence discussed here begins about 39 minutes in.

¹⁴The terms “melodrama” and “occluded innocence” come from Peter Brooks’s *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976; rpt. with new preface, 1995) and are vestiges of a link to the larger project of which this essay is a part.

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