Political Shakespeare and the Blessing of Art

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It may seem inappropriate that in order to contribute to a discussion on the ideological position that Shakespeare's plays occupy in our culture that the present text gives its central focus to what in many ways is a close reading- and a close reading that will often appear to sidestep this very discussion. It is hoped, however, that through this tangential approach I am able to demonstrate how the plays themselves attempt to frame the relationship their art takes towards culture. To this end the text will examine how the plays make use of a particular set of strategies- those of disfiguration and distinction.

The relationship between ideology and the plays has of course been a subject for a great deal of contemporary criticism, one which most often grounds itself in material history. It is a critical approach that- broadly speaking- divides itself into two camps. One perspective that searches for subversion but finds only the illusions and strategies of containment of a dominant ideology, and the other, which sees the operations of power and ideology as more disjunctive, and understands this mass of competing forces as offering the possibility for genuine subversion. Each wing, however, appears consistent in understanding, in the words of Leonard Tennenhouse, ‘the opposition between a literary use of language and a political use of the same linguistic materials as being largely a modern invention’.[1] Art is taken to be confined within and seen as working according to larger frames of ideological discourse.[2]

I would like to explore this relationship by going back to Tennenhouse and looking at his discussion of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* from the 1994 collection, *Political Shakespeare*. For Tennenhouse the *Dream* operates conservatively; he argues that Shakespeare uses his drama to authorize political authority, and political authority, as Shakespeare represents it, in turn authorises art.[3] While Tennenhouse remarks the play’s multiple violations of the categories that organize Elizabethan reality, he understands these disruptions as occurring within the framework of festival. He argues that the disorder they voice is in this way displaced onto art- finding example of this in the transposition of the lovers’ misadventures into the ‘story of the night told over’, and in the Pauline inversions of Bottom’s vision finding reformulation as dream. Tennenhouse draws his central example from the scene where Theseus and his party come upon the sleeping couples lying intermingled on the ground. Theseus’s line, ‘No doubt they rose up early to observe/ The rite of May’ (4.1.32-3) is taken as acting to identify the lovers as revelers, and Tennenhouse argues that in this way Theseus not only decriminalizes the lovers’ transgression of the law, but identifies their state of disarray with the order of art. When the revelers in turn fall on their knees before Theseus, this is seen as completing the reinstitution of political authority. Tennenhouse goes on to give particular attention to the last act, seeing it as theorising the process of inversion whereby art and politics end up in this mutually authorizing relationship.[4]

I agree that the last act foregrounds concerns of art and power, yet would like to argue that the authority that the *Dream*attempts to establish is the sovereign authority of art. And I hope to demonstrate that rather than taking a mutual relationship to the dominant ideology, the play (as I would suggest at least a great part of the canon does) proceeds through disruption to instead claim for its operations a distinct and separate space. I will end by briefly discussing if such an arrangement undoes the ideological interpretation and appropriation of Shakespeare’s work- or if, somewhat perversely, it works to facilitate it.

The *Dream* operates throughout in markedly self-aware terms. It underlines again and again the artifice of its own aesthetic construction, by which I refer to its configuration in the processes of illusion and dissimulation. And I would argue that it is this arrangement- rather than carnival inversions of category as Tennenhouse has it- that determines the play’s subversive energies. Political claims are given presentation- and exploration- but these presentations are revealed as realized through and bound up in the fictions and deceptions of the theatre. This has the effect of undoing- or as I would prefer to term it, of disfiguring- any final and unequivocal ideological assertion. At the same time, in stressing the unreal conditions of its own realization, the *Dream* marks its separation, that is to say, its distinction, from the world beyond the stage. Tracing these features of disfiguration and distinction through the last act will hopefully provide a fuller picture of how I see the *Dream* as working to position itself.

The last act opens presaging the artisans visit to the palace. Their homage would seem to underline the comedy’s conservative resolution, reaffirming the centrality of marriage and the authority of state. As C. L. Barber has observed, the coming of the artisans into the palace bears kinship to the mumming May-King and Queen’s good luck visit to the great house of their neighbourhood.[5] Barber notes that their arrival also follows the pattern of the May-Games in marking the movement from the town to the woods and back again, ‘bringing in summer to the bridal’. This sense of blessing that the artisans’ presence conjures is further extended through the associations evoked by the surname of their leader, Peter Quince. Patricia Parker has noted that the quince not only played an important role in solemnising Athenian nuptials, but also right through to the Elizabethan period the fruit brought to newlyweds the promise of fortunate issue.[6]

The endorsement that these various associations imply is of course undermined at the first opportunity. Quince’s presentation of his prologue immediately introduces the note of disfiguration- its punctuation is disordered and this transforms what was intended as a civil address into a volley of comic insults. This opening points to how in the last act genre undergoes a subtle but certain disfiguring shift. It moves from comedy to something more like, to borrow Quince’s mis-formulated term, ‘tragical mirth’, and the sophisticated members of the original audience would have understand this as undoing the ideological assertions that the marriage comedy would otherwise appear to enable.

The most overt manifestation of this shift is the interlude itself. Even though the artisans provide it an absurd realization, the story of ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ serves to remind the audience that lovers’ confusions may not always end happily, but they might also be the stuff of tragedy. This does more than simply provide parody of the main action; in highlighting the *Dream*’s explication and apparent ideological resolution as generically determined, the play’s abstract and artificial construction is emphasised. This has the effect of underlining the distinction between the conditions by which the play’s comedy operates and those conditions which are in effect in the world beyond the stage. For even though the artisans’ ‘tragic’ performance also unfolds according to the conventional generic prescriptions, in its presentation of death, and a despair that goes unalleviated, the interlude can be said to make reference to some of the grimmer circumstances that enfold human experience beyond the stage, and which the form of comedy necessarily ignores.

This marking of the *Dream*’s form as artificial and distinct- and in this way limited- is reiterated in Puck’s first epilogue. Initially, the comedy appears to mark its closure in formulaic terms: Theseus, as is appropriate to his rank, is awarded the lines that precede the Athenian aristocrats' exit, and his words promise these lovers 'nightly revels and new jollity' (5.1.356). But rather than the play ending there, Puck returns to the stage and provides an epilogue that underlines the palace's peace yet simultaneously places it at a remove. The play’s happy resolution is marked as abbreviated, being presented as having application only to the fictional figures of the stage. As Puck's reiteration of the night terrors that lie beyond the palace walls and beyond the peace of comedy makes clear, the play’s movement to conclusion indicates the resumption of a set of harsher conditions for the theatre audience: the world to which they must return is pictured as one in which ‘the hungry lion roars,/ And the wolf behowls the moon’ (5.1.357-8).

Puck’s final epilogue repeats and develops this marking off of the play-world further still. Here the figure asks the audience to consider the performance ‘but a dream’ (5.1.406)- disingenuously relegating the play’s art to that of the peripheral, supplementary and meaningless. But, clearly, this formulation does not suggest to the audience the poverty of art’s illusion, nor even illusion’s penetration. Rather the epilogue once more outlines the theatrical space as separate from and operating outside the conditions that determine the world of its audience. For while Puck asks the spectators to consider the play an airy nothing, the speech itself works to extend and complicate the play’s structures of performance. While the direct address of the audience points to the renouncing of theatrical illusion, the figure delivering the speech still continues to assert his stage identity. Furthermore, it is an identity which maintains the dissimulations of persona that characterize the role (‘as I am an honest Puck’ (5.1.417), ‘Else the Puck a liar call’ (5.1.421)), and which, as we see in the final line's switching from 'Puck' to 'Robin' (5.1.424,) continues to play on the ambiguities which that identity has accumulated. Puck's final epilogue then not only points us to the separation of the play world from that of the world of the audience, but reveals this distinction as brought about by an investment in the paradoxes that art’s elements of dissimulation and illusion allow.

Another ironically reflexive announcement of the play’s aesthetic workings has occurred earlier- spoken by the playwright, Quince. Where Puck’s lines pass off the experience of Shakespeare’s play as but a dream, Quince’s pair of prologues have claimed the interlude as the aesthetic realization of a profound insight into the true conditions of existence: ‘and by their show,/ You shall know all [,] that you are like to know’ (5.1.116-7); ‘But wonder on, till truth make all things plain’ (5.1.127). The paired formulations of Puck and Quince are ironically overemphatic and contrasting statements of art’s meaning. Yet at the same time, they work together to underline the play’s aesthetic explication. They point to the conditions by which the *Dream*works – and serve to announce its achievement; the play’s signification is compassed within the illusory dream terms of its theatrical realisation, yet within the limits that this form prescribes the play enjoys a sovereign freedom of revelation.

If we understand the artisans’ visit to the palace as indicating a form of marital benediction, then the fairy blessing itself would operate as another of the play’s reiterated and transmogrified doubles. This would be further underlined if - as is at least a possibility- the actors who performed the artisans doubled as fairies. And this role doubling would further contextualise the significance the audience might give the fairy charm- for it would relate its magic and blessing to the fundamental fact of theatrical illusion. Even without the role doubling, the effect of the two groups’ conceptual doubling would mean that the fairy blessing would be immediately understood as coloured by the elements of disfiguration that the audience has just remarked in the interlude.

This is picked up on immediately. The first words of Oberon’s blessing allude once more to the night-bound nature of the fairies- and in this way recall the fairies’ dubious provenance: ‘Now, until the break of day,/ Through this house each fairy stray’ (5.1.387-8). And the blessing’s final words reformulate this: ‘Trip away; make no stay;/ Meet me all by break of day’ (5.1.408-9). These lines point the audience back to Puck’s designation of the fairies as night-bound creatures (3.2.377-87). Re-echoed here at the point of blessing, these associations serve to undermine both the integrity of the fairies and the salutary complexion of the blessing to be rendered.

The promise of fortunate issue that Oberon’s charm would effect is formulated according to the peculiar and ambiguous schema preferred by the fairies. We have seen it already when Puck, in his apparent attempt to differentiate the fairies from their more traditional and sinister associations, employs the odd strategy of providing these night monsters emphatic and extended description (3.2.378-88). More precisely, and I think more significantly, the blessing of the bridal bed’s issue is formulated in distinct echo of First Fairy’s lullaby charm of protection for the subsequently bewitched Titania (2.2.9-23)- which configured itself through the invocation of the very terrors it would exclude:

> You spotted snakes with double tongue,
> Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen;
> Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong...
> Weaving spiders, come not here;
> Hence, you long-legg'd spinners, hence!
> Beetles black, approach not near;
> Worm nor snail, do no offence. (2.2.9- 22)

Oberon’s nuptial charm unfolds in the same vein:

> And the blots of Nature’s hand
> Shall not in their issue stand;
> Never mole, hare lip, nor scar,
> Nor mark prodigious, such as are
> Despised in nativity,
> Shall upon their children be. (5.1.395-400)

With First Fairy’s lullaby, events will turn out to invert the terms of magical protection offered, and go far beyond the mild terrors the charm conjures to conclude instead in the monstrous and unnatural. Echoed here, it would surely have suggested that Oberon’s blessing may be subject to a similar unravelling.

The various ambiguities serve to engender the audience's skeptical attention and direct it to the figures of the blessing's recipients. The lines which detail Theseus and Hippolyta's future fortune appear, however, in themselves, unclouded by the polysemy that marks the rest of the speech:

> And the issue there create
> Ever shall be fortunate.
> So shall all the couples three
> Ever in true loving be. (5.1.391-4)

These promises, though, come at the end of a play already filled with infidelities and broken oaths, and they will be followed by an ambiguously ringing reference that develops the connection to First Fairy's lullaby. The 'field-dew consecrate' with which the fairies will bless each chamber (5.1.401-3) links itself back to Puck's description of the monster in Titania's 'consecrated bower' (3.2.5-6), referencing again her magically engineered humiliation. In such a context- of deception, humiliation, and unnatural desire- the promises of fortunate issue and lasting love that configure the blessing would have surely prompted the audience to recall the alternative and darker history that classical myth provides to the blessing's recipients.

According to myth, the amorous pursuits of Theseus do not find their conclusion in his marriage to Hippolyta- rather the episode of their matrimony ends in a bloody and tragic debauch. While their union is still intact, Theseus and Hippolyta are blessed with an issue that does indeed seem fortunate, the handsome and chaste Hippolytus. Yet, Theseus becomes enamored of Phaedra, and, according to Ovid, kills Hippolyta. Phaedra however falls wildly in love with her step-son. Hippolytus rejects Phaedra's advances, and in revenge she tells Theseus that Hippolytus raped her. An enraged Theseus takes his son's life.

Recalling the tragic outcome myth gives to the story of Theseus and Hippolyta greatly complicates the relationship between the *Dream*'s Duke and Duchess and the play-world they inhabit. It also complicates the play-world's relationship to the myths and genre it makes use of- while at the same time extending the claims that the play seems to make for the operation of its art.

We have already seen that Puck's epilogues indicate the distinct set of conditions that determine the world beyond the theatre, and the resumption of their terms once the 'dream' of the play is concluded. This arrangement points up the illusory nature of the work, and indicates that its narrative and the figures it has presented are confined to and given no extension beyond the play's performance. Yet, as we can see here, the blessing appears to operate at the play-world level to suggest the tragic fate that consumes the mythological figures which these stage presences are configured according to. This arrangement would seem to point- paradoxically- to a continuation of the existence of these stage presences, and- ironically- locate this continuation in the tragic dimensions of what Theseus has dismissed as 'antique fables'. The irony would be given full explication in that the *Dream*, after making great comic play with the equivocal relationship between the play's Theseus and his mythological counter eventually suggests for the play-figure an independent existence that not only escapes the confines of his current fictional realization but reconfigures him according to his tragic mythological fate.

Such an interpretation would see the art of the *Dream* as operating more or less according to the aesthetic formula framed in Puck's epilogues. In both instances, art highlights its own structures of illusion yet refuses to forfeit them, and in doing so it claims for itself an independent yet wholly contrived world. Yet- and again in both cases- the tragic note cannot be ignored. For it would seem to suggest that the fairy blessing is no more capable of preventing the explication of death and disaster for its mythological play figures than the 'dream' of art (as in Puck's formulation) is able to alter the conditions of existence that determine the lives of its audience, and to which- as we recall Puck first prologue indicates- they must return.

However, in light of the approach that I have proposed throughout this reading, there is a diametrically opposed way of understanding the consequences we might attach to the fairy blessing. This reading would also work according to a self-reflexive comic irony and too suggest the limitations that the work is subject to, only it would instead place its emphasis on the absolute and transformative power that its art is capable of realising within the limits of this form. Rather than the skeptical formulation given to Puck, this reading would understand the blessing of art more in line with Quince's claims- as absolute and overwhelming. While the final act's invocations of the tragic fate that myth accords to the play's principle pair is asserted, the audience might instead understand this as another instance of the *Dream*'s comical mythological revisions. Taken in this way, the play suggests that contrary to the myths that it has made such play with throughout and in distinction to the darker elements and skepticism that it has entertained, the play's Theseus and Hippolyta will indeed be blessed: their issue shall be fortunate, and that they shall 'Ever true in loving be' (5.1.394). It would complete a final refutation of the identities of these roles, and a final renunciation of the tragic conditions of myth- vouching the play's most absolute assertion of its comedic structures of design over the material of its realisation. Like the first reading, it points to the formal limitations of its art, yet while doing so asserts the profound, transformative powers that this aesthetic strategy allows within these limits. And I would suggest that it would completely miss the mood and structure of this constantly shifting and myriad play if we felt compelled to choose one reading over the other.

This approach then understands the self-aware art object as flaunting the paradoxes of its own nature. The work's realization is emphatically marked as being managed through illusion and unreality. And it is these false terms that serve to distinguish the art-work from the world beyond stage, and to underline the play-world's freedom from the conditions that determine the reality of its audience. When the 'true' things of the world are translated into the theatrical space, they are reconstructed in terms that are immediately dissimulating. For this kind of art object then, the relationship it takes to the world is one of displacement; it makes no truth claims about the world, but simply references the things of the world to effect a series of explorations which- as penetrating and profound as they may be- will invariably be equivocal and disruptive.

One might imagine that, formulated in this way, the art object is capable of refuting ideological appropriation. And perhaps in the formalist, limited and discrete space that I have attempted to illustrate the plays as operating in (that is to say, taking the plays almost completely on their own terms), they may manage this aesthetic chastity. Obviously however, as the cultural materialists would assert, outside of this aesthetic self-circuit, neither a sovereign nor even a discrete relationship to ideology is possible. Moreover, it could be the case that an art such as Shakespeare's- an art that realizes itself through a complex and ambiguous multiplicity- may all the better facilitate its own ideological conscription.

Political Shakespeare and the critical movement that it went a long way to developing can be understood as in great part enacting Raymond Williams' concept of dialectical materialism, a specifically Marxist mode of engagement with literature and culture. As the introduction makes clear, the collection 'registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order that exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class'.[7] The book was published in 1994, and it is worth pointing out that in the same year Michael Portillo, the Chief secretary of the Treasury, and then-darling of the political right, quoted a redacted version of Ulysses' speech on degree and reason from *Troilus and Cresside* at the Conservative party conference, passing it off as a high cultural alibi for what were some of the most extreme social policies modern Britain had seen.[8] A few years earlier, Nigel Lawson, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, used the same speech to defend the economic policy of the Thatcher government.[9] I am of course not alone in thinking that this represents an absurd understanding of Ulysses' lines, one that appears- willfully, or otherwise- ignorant of the context that the play offers them. For *Troillus and Cresside* is surely a play of high camp and arch nihilism; a work in which no position is held with conviction, but where instead we are presented with a static moral debate which seems to call into question not only the presumptions of the debaters but the whole means of rational discourse itself. This interpretation derives of course from my own critical partialities, reflecting the same kind of engagement by which I just explored the *Dream*. Cultural materialists would no doubt analyze the play in another mode altogether, yet, one imagines, its explication would still offer a challenge to the play's conscription by the right. Yet the mere fact of this huge disparity in more or less contemporaneous readings of Shakespeare- readings that find in the plays ample confirmation of their own critical, cultural and ideological prejudices- would seem to force a rather banal conclusion. It may be the case that an art of prodigious breadth, complexity and multiplicity may- through its sheer aesthetic sophistication- reveal itself as compatible and complicit with any surgence of power.

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[1] Leonard Tennenhouse. “Strategies of State and Political Plays.” *Political Shakespeare*. Eds. Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2012. P 110.

[2] This sketches out the broader impulses of the movement. There are, admittedly, a number of critical voices that would be categorized as cultural materialists, or new historicists, whose analysis is not confined by the description offered above. Happily, two of these provide readings of the *Dream*. While Louis Montrose in *The Purpose of Playing* pursues a ‘poststructuralist historical and cultural criticism’ (92), he nonetheless provides an interpretation of the *Dream* that works to explore the ‘reciprocal relationship between formal innovation and changes in conscious’ (92), and which prefers a set of ‘inconclusive conclusions’ over the ‘bold assertions that have become commonplace in the critical literature on the Elizabethan theatre’ (104). Similarly, Patricia Parker’s work on the *Dream* (to which parts of this article are indebted) reveals the play’s complex interrelations with a dizzyingly broad field of contemporary discourse, yet still foregrounds the multiple discursive possibilities that the play’s poetics uniquely make available.

[3] Ibid., 111.

[4] Ibid., 111-2.

[5] Barber, C. L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959), 137**.**

[6] "(Peter) Quince: Love Potions, Carpenter’s Coigns and Athenian Weddings.” *Shakespeare Survey 57*. Ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge) 39-54.

[7] Ibid., viii.

[8] Portillo utilised the speech to argue that “order in society depends upon a series of relationships of respect and duty from top to bottom”, and to condemn a “New British Disease: the self-destructive sickness of national cynicism” (*Independent*, 16 January 1994).

[9]*The View From No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory radical* (London, Bantam, 1992), p.6.