**Shakespeare’s Professional Guilt: acting, monstrosity and the Devil**

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*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 his visage waned,*

*Tears in his eyes, distraction in’s aspect,*

*A broken voice, and his whole function suiting*

*With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.*

This is one of the clearest articulations of the paradox of acting ever written, and perhaps the most beautiful. It’s framed, of course, as a question; in a dramatic canon defined by questions, *Hamlet* is the play of questions *par excellence*. What is the question? At this point in the play: is it not monstrous? Thatis the question.

Many theatre artists have consequently questioned the implications of this passage in terms of acting values then or now: what was or is a dream of passion? What did or does it mean to force your soul, and how do you do it? What was or is the relationship between that act of forcing and the observable physical effects: waned visage – or is it wann’d?, tears, distraction, broken voice? What did or do those observable effects actually look or sound like on stage? What were or are the forms that must attend your whole function? What did or does whole function even mean?

In recent years, neuroscientific studies into brain activity during performance have thrown up fascinating results across a number of very different artistic styles, from Noh to naturalism. Pretty much regardless of the style or medium, electrical activity in the performer’s brain is concentrated in the same places: areas of the brain related to sense of self; visualisation; motor function; and empathy.

Hamlet is using EM language to describe precisely this process. To “force the soul” means to change the sense of self. “Conceit” – visualisation – is the “working” part: the effort made to envisage how the changed self changes the appearance of the extrinsic world. From this “working” springs observable physical change; and its cause is the imaginative empathetic association made with the character “for nothing. For Hecuba!”.

But what’s “monstrous” about it?

In his extraordinary ‘documentary novel’ *The Devils of Loudun*, set in 17th-century France, Aldous Huxley encapsulated precisely and exquisitely a fundamental difference between Early Modern sense of selfhood and our own, in the context of the limited number of psychological theories which they had available:

*You might search the writings of Aristotle and Augustine, of Galen and the Arabians; in none of them could you find any hint of what we now call the subconscious mind. For our ancestors there was only the soul or conscious self, on the one hand, and on the other God, the saints and a host of good or evil spirits. Our conception of a vast intermediate world of subconscious mental activity, much more extensive and, in certain respects, more effective than the activity of the conscious self, was unthinkable. The phenomena which we now explain in terms of this subconscious activity had either to be denied altogether, or else attributed to the action of non-human spirits.*

Since Huxley wrote this, in the early 50’s, our knowledge of the subconscious has increased exponentially, and exponentially confirmed the importance of subconscious mechanisms. Nonetheless, in Shakespeare’s day and in our own, people perceived existence through their own subjective perspectives. In what ways might the moral implications of our subjective perspectives differ from what the Early Moderns experienced?

We tend to think of ourselves as having a self-identity which relates to our agency, to the choices we can make; we imagine this self-identity as being at least in part a moral agency. We believe ourselves to make moral choices, which while culturally conditioned are nonetheless self-perceived; frequently we may experience tension between our subconscious desires and our moral or cultural frameworks. These are general conditions of the post-Freudian mind. But Shakespeare did not – could not, quite – share them.

Shakespeare lived at the very beginning of the intellectual revolution which over three centuries brought us by degrees to the self-aware modern mind, and beyond, to the neuroscientific mind. His empathetic awareness sparked questions that the psychological terminology of his time could not answer adequately: why should it be ‘monstrous’ to act? For Shakespeare and those who shared his moment, to change the sense of selfhood – to “force the soul” – has troubling moral and theological connotations, even if – and perhaps because – its psychological implications were so impenetrable.

‘Monstrous’, like most words Shakespeare chooses so carefully, is an interesting word. It ultimately derives from Latin *monere*, which means ‘to warn.’ A monster is something *un*natural, an evil omen. Something to fear.

Shakespeare likes these words: *monstrous* appears 64 times in 28 of his 38 plays, and *monster* 87 times in 27 plays. He uses the word and its associated forms liberally. It’s never really morally neutral except as an occasional expression of scale (“most monstrous size”). The vast majority of Shakespeare’s uses of the word have moral connotation: to be ‘monstrous’ is to be associated either actually or rhetorically with the abstract and inchoate forces of evil, in classical terms. In the prevailing religious dogma of Shakespeare’s society, to be ‘monstrous’ is to be engaged willingly or unwillingly in the Devil’s work.

Of course, in Shakespeare’s day, there were a lot of people, especially religious Puritans, who did genuinely believe that theatre was the work of the Devil. They did so, no doubt, in part because of an intrinsic and subconscious resistance to certain forms of art or thought, just as some naturally small-minded people do today. But they also believed it in specific intellectual terms. The Ten Commandments instruct us not to bear false witness, not to swear to that which is not, not to lie. When an actor assumes the person of someone they are not, they are lying. Therefore acting is the work of the Devil. Monstrous.

Contemporary psychology tells us much more nuanced things about truth, subjectivity, and our capacity to believe things conditionally than were available to most EM thinkers. While some in contemporary Western society may be upset by some of the things that can be said in narrative drama, few are disturbed by the idea of acting *per se* (though many, perhaps, continue to distrust actors personally). In Shakespeare’s day, though, even actors would have had to ask themselves the question, *is it not monstrous?*, since many in society fervently believed it was. The moral uncertainty that is part of every considered life in the context of its own environment led Shakespeare to consider extensively the idea of monstrousness.

The most frequent uses of the word ‘monster’ in any of Shakespeare’s plays are the 37 uses in *The Tempest*. This extremely high frequency is because ‘Monster’ is used in the play as a nickname for Caliban, the formerly non-linguistic sub-human who pretends to human expression. Caliban isn’t human; rather, he’s a character who forces us to ask what it is to be human. The human characters around him, who mock our moral human aspirations, call him ‘Monster.’ Caliban’s monstrousness is more apparent in what is said of him than in his own behaviour; he has no distinct moral agency, and of course is heavily inebriated for most of the play – another behaviour which Shakespeare associates extensively and explicitly with devilishness, especially in *Othello*.

The next highest number of uses of ‘monster,’ and the greatest number of uses of the descriptive ‘monstrous’ which we encounter in Hamlet’s description of acting, are both in *Othello*. It’s no coincidence that this is also the play with the highest number of uses of the word ‘devil,’ which appears 27 times. There’s a direct link between Hamlet’s use of ‘monstrous’ in 1601 and the concern of *Othello* as a play with the operation of the Devil in the world in 1604, as well as a thematic through-line from *Othello* to *the Tempest* in 1611 in terms of the devilish effect of alcohol.

The Devil and his agents are, of course, major characters in Early Modern drama and literature, from Mephistopheles and Lucifer’s onstage presence in Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* to the centrality of Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. But it’s Hamlet who holds the mirror up to nature and expresses the beliefs of his time with regard to the devil with greatest clarity:

*The Devil hath power*

*To assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,*

*Out of my weakness and my melancholy …*

*Abuses me to damn me.*

The Devil could assume any shape – like Richard Burbage or Edward Alleyn, he’s a ‘delightful Proteus for shapes’, he ‘assumes’ a character, he acts – in order to seek the damnation of souls. Indeed, the Devil was the Master of Disguise, who could act with perfect plausibility in order to pursue his super-objective of recruiting souls to the legions of the damned. The Devil is also, of course, the Master of Lies; so it’s also no coincidence that the word “honest” is used in *Othello* 42 times, more than double the number of usages than in any other Shakespeare play; and mostly, it’s used of Iago. There are multiple suggestions that Iago, Shakespeare’s most consummate performer, is to be identified with the Devil; not least, of course, his manifesto “I am not what I am”, challenging by inversion as it does God’s declaration in Exodus 3:14, as he plays the part of piece of burning vegetation: “I am what I am”.

Drawing the thread between these Hamletian and Iagan statements, and intervening directly between them chronologically, is a character we don’t usually associate with the Devil: Viola, or rather, the at-this-point-nameless hero-heroine of *What You Will*. She thinks she’s monstrous too: “poor monster”, she calls herself in a speech where she also notes

*Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness*

*Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.*

The previous scene, in which Viola meets Olivia, contains multiple demonic references: “let him be the Devil”, says Toby Belch of Cesario; “if you were the devil you were fair” says Cesario of Olivia; and, extraordinarily

*By the very fangs of malice I swear I am not that I play.*

There’s a clear line from “I am not that I play” to “I am not what I am”, and I can’t think of a better gloss for the “fangs of malice” – to me one of the most noteworthy and extraordinary oaths in Shakespeare – than “by the teeth of the Devil”, or hell-mouth.

There are hints at the relationship Early Modern actors may have had with performance guilt, in the story attending Edward Alleyn’s foundation of the College of God’s Gift at Dulwich. Is the appearance of an extra devil on stage perhaps a mythicised parable for something more interior and personal? Both Alleyn and Burbage were described as Protean actors; clearly transformative acting was not a Stanislavskyan invention but highly valued in the Early Modern period. Alleyn attempted to retire from the stage in the late 1590s, at the height of his fame; shortly after his allegedly enforced return to the stage he bought the land upon which the college was built, and not long after he was also endowing almshouses. Clearly pious activities in the Early Modern period were expiatory; what was it Alleyn felt so guilty about?

Jonathan Bate has suggested that Shakespeare too retired from performing in 1603. If this is true – and it’s unproven – it might of course simply be a result of his extra duties as writer-director of the King’s Men. Even if there is a more sinister reason, it could just be that he removes himself from the limelight after the *Tragedy of Gowrie* controversy, which he must have been at least a little implicated in. But there is a remarkably concentrated frequency of hints in his writing at the devilishness of the performer in the years around the turn of the century.

At least, we might say that Shakespeare had a subconscious anxiety about his work, which he works through in part by making conscious and considered the moral implications of his craft. It was a mindset foisted on him by his cultural moment. Actors were rogues and vagabonds in legal terms, corrupters of mankind in religious terms. When Hamlet defines actors as “the abstract and brief chronicles of the time,” he’s making a vast intellectual leap beyond the credal dogmas of his day. But to imagine that Shakespeare himself could uncomplicatedly believe that self-lionising description of the performer is to remove him from the context of his time, especially given that the same play harbours such apparent doubts about the moral implications of his craft. Cognitive dissonance need not be considered exclusively a feature of the modern mind.

If indeed this suspicion – that his profession might endanger his soul – did afflict Shakespeare, we might expect to see him not only describe but attempt to excuse it, as does anyone – soldier or tyrant – whose job involves moral insecurity. I believe we can, in Shakespeare’s ubiquitous and highly sophisticated use of metatheatre. If a fiction is acknowledged by all and made clear in its very form, does pretence take on a different moral dimension? After all, the examples I’ve used to indicate what Shakespeare might have experienced as professional moral doubt are also metatheatrical. The actor playing Viola is also not that which he plays, any more than Viola is. The actor playing Iago is not Iago, nor the Devil that Iago essentially represents. Metatheatre offers, perhaps, a way out of the moral bind. However truthful the performances Shakespeare and his fellows gave may have been, the given circumstances of every play they performed included a necessary moral and theological caveat.

The high-water mark of pretence, in EM drama, is the swearing of oaths: calling divine witness to the untruths of a performed unreality. Shakespeare displays throughout his work a particular interest – more, I think, than any other Early Modern playwright – in the form and implications of oaths. From Touchstone’s riff on mustard and pancakes and honour to Iachimo’s tortuously credible forswearing; from Iago’s “faith of man” to Viola’s “fangs of malice”, Shakespeare examines the circumstances and implications of swearing in depth and detail.

The high stakes of Shakespearean drama means that such invocations are ubiquitous, whether calling on personalised divinities, abstract concepts or actual objects of especial importance to the character. Of course, the use of the latter two types of oath – *by my honour* or *by my hand* – need have no bearing on the moral dimensions of the pretence. But to ‘take the Highest to witness’ is to put the soul in especial danger.

The Act to restrain the Abuses of Players of 1606 has been extensively considered in terms of the changes it may have engendered in texts which exist in pre- and post-1606 forms. Less attention has been paid to its effect on Shakespeare’s dramaturgical choices. After 1606 Shakespeare never sets a play – the collaborative Henry VIII excepted – in Christian Europe; as a consequence, significant on-stage oaths are to Jupiter, Mars or Apollo. ‘By God’ appears in his plays only six times even before 1606, with at least a couple of those uses not certainly from Shakespeare’s pen, and with one use, by Richard III, being interrupted by a self-admonition: Elizabeth’s observation that ‘God’s wrong is most of all’. After 1606, he even abandons “by heaven”, with the exception of two uses in Henry VIII and two in TNK– which again, may be from Fletcher’s pen. As Diana says: “what is not holy that we swear not by”.

We’ve perhaps tended to think of this act as a law intended to be protective of public morality, and to judge it through a modern post-Whitehouse lens. Certainly, an Iago stripped of zounds and sblood and even tush is malice defanged, a profane wretch lacking profanity. Shakespeare’s decision to shift settings may have as much been to ensure that he could still have his characters swear creatively as to protect the souls of the performers. But perhaps even the act itself – despite punitive fines which seem to us intolerable censorship – might have been put in place in part to protect the souls of players swearing to that which is not.

If, as I propose, consistent metatheatrical reference and a creative approach to swearing and forswearing absolved the actors speaking Shakespeare’s lines from some stain or smack or relish of the old stock of sin, then we can see in the very strategies he uses to evade spiritual perjury that Shakespeare fears, somewhere in his soul, the implications of his customary professional activity. This need not be surprising, given that we can perceive in many corners of the surrounding culture such sentiment; even, eventually, in the law of the land. What is fascinating is to consider how profound the effects, both conscious and unconscious, might have been on his art and practice.

This monstrous tension, between conscious choice and unconscious urges, between assumed deportment and habituated behaviours, appears again in a knotty passage later in *Hamlet*. It’s a speech which dwells on all these related Shakespearean tropes: of the difference between seeming and being, reality and performance, inner nature and outer appearance; of the soul as battleground between the devil and our moral imperatives; of the damaging moral implications of routine or customary activities that can change our inner sense of self; and of the need to be understood and forgiven by our fellow humans. In his quest for an ever greater sounding of the soul, it feels intimately related to the expiation Shakespeare must too have sought:

*Assume a virtue, if you have it not.*

*That monster custom, who all sense doth eat,*

*Of habits devil, is angel yet in this:*

*That to the use of actions fair and good*

*He likewise gives a frock or livery*

*That aptly is put on …*

*For use almost can change the stamp of nature,*

*And either lodge the devil or throw him out*

*With wondrous potency. Once more good night,*

*And when you are desirous to be blest,*

*I’ll blessing beg of you.*

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