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RECONSTRUCTING SHAKESPEARE OR HARLOTRY IN BARDOLATRY

CHARLES MAROWITZ

Looking around for a suitable sub-title for this paper I asked a professor of my acquaintance if he could suggest anything and, given the nature of my own Shakespearian rewrites, he said: 'How about *'Tis Pity I'm a Whore*?' I took the liberty of slightly revising that suggestion into the present sub-title. And I don't really think anyone can deny the fact that a good deal of 'harlotry' has insinuated itself into bardolatry. When you have a large, multi-national corporation such as the Shakespeare Industry, it goes without saying that it attracts people of easy virtue, and that's a subject I'll touch on in a moment or two.

As to my credentials, or my lack of them, I have to say that I speak as a professional director – not at all as a scholar or a pedagogue.

A director's relationship to Shakespearian scholarship (Granville-Barker notwithstanding) is very different from an academic's. For the academic, theories, suppositions, and speculations are ends in themselves, and a really solid piece of Shakespearian criticism need only be well argued and well written to join the voluminous tomes of its predecessors. But a director is looking for what in the theatre are called 'playable values' – that is, ideas capable of being translated into concrete dramatic terms. Very often, scholars provide just that, and there is more 'scholarship' on view in classical productions throughout Europe and America than audiences tend to realize. Most directors prefer to play down the fact that many an original theatrical insight can be traced back, not to a director's leap-of-the-imagination, but to a scholar's dry-as-dust thesis. Three notable and acknowledged lifts immediately spring to mind: Laurence Olivier's Oedipal production of *Hamlet* based on a psychological tract by Ernest Jones (*Hamlet and Oedipus*, 1949), Peter Brook's *King Lear*, and The National Theatre's all-male *As You Like It* – both derived in large part from essays in Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1965).

'Playable values' are not always consistent with literary values. A scholarly insight can make very good sense and be untranslatable in stage-terms. Conversely, a playable value can be brilliantly effective in a *mise-en-scène* and yet not hold up to intellectual scrutiny after the event. A classic in production makes demands that are never called for in the study. And perhaps that's where so much of the trouble lies. And by trouble I mean the traditional animosity that tends to smoulder between the professional theatre and the academic community. There is a factor in Shakespearian production which never enters into the academic study of a text. It's a stubborn factor and a transforming factor and, unfortunately, one that won't go away. I refer of course to the director.

In the nineteenth century, men such as the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, Henry Irving, and Herbert Beerbohm Tree were closer to chairmen-of-committees than what we, today, call modern directors. They supervised their actors and decided questions of design but they didn't really insinuate a highly personal viewpoint onto their productions. With the advent of Konstantin Stanislavsky in Russia, Augustin Daly in New York, and Max Reinhardt in Germany, the director, armed with a stylistic prerogative and an aesthetic bias, gradually came to the fore. In the 1920s and 1930s in France, with men such as Jacques Copeau, Charles Dullin, Gaston Baty, Louis Jouvet and Jean-Louis Barrault, and in Russia with Nikolai Evreinov, Eugene Vahktanghov and Vsevood Meyerhold, we begin to see the first signs of another kind of director: men who leave their mark on material as much as they do on actors; directors who begin to reveal an attitude to new and established plays which is more pronounced than before. Sometimes, aggressively so.

The emergence of what we would call the modern director coincides *not* with his imposed authority on the physical elements of production, but his intercession with a playwright's ideas. The old autocrat-director controlled his actors; the modern director appropriates to himself those intellectual ingredients usually reserved for the playwright – using the tangible instruments of the stage as a kind of penmanship with which he alters or gives personal connotation to the text of writers both living and dead.

This is most visible in the works of Shakespeare and with directors such as Max Reinhardt, Benno Besson, Giorgio Strehler, Peter Stein, and Peter Brook: men who began to produce resonances in established works which surprised audiences that never imagined the plays dealt with the themes they *now* seemed to be about. So that, for instance, there comes a production of *King Lear* which charts the rise of the bourgeoisie and the gradual disintegration of feudalism, or another production which treats the play as an Oriental fable entirely detached from any historical milieu, or a version in which it's seen as a bleak, apocalyptic vision unfolding in an arid, Beckettian landscape from which God has been banished.

In these instances, and in many others like them, what has changed is the philosophical framework in which the play was originally conceived; the 'spirit' of the work radically re-routed even though the 'letter' remains intact. In short, another 'author' has appeared, and he is saying things different from – sometimes at conflict with – the meanings of the first author, and this interloper is, of course, the modern director; a man who insists on reading his *own* thoughts into those traditionally associated with the author whose work he is communicating.

A director who does *not* proceed in this way, who chains himself to unwavering fidelity to the author and pursues his work in selfless devotion to the 'meaning of the text' is unknowingly abdicating a director's responsibility. Since the only way to express an author's meaning is to filter it through the sensibility of those artists charged with communicating it, 'fidelity' is really a high-sounding word for lack-of-imaginative-output. The director who is committed to putting the play on the stage exactly as it is written is the equivalent of the cook who intends to make the omelette without cracking the eggs. The modern director is the master of the subtext as surely as the author is of the text, and his dominion includes every nuance and allusion transmitted in each moment of the performance. He's not simply a person who imposes order upon artistic subordinates in order to express a writer's meaning, but someone who challenges the assumptions of a work-of-art and uses *mise-en-scène* actively to pit his beliefs against those of the play. Without that confrontation, that sense of challenge, true direction cannot take place, for unless the author's work is engaged on an intellectual level equal to its own the play is merely transplanted from one medium to another – a process which contradicts the definition of the word 'perform' – which means to 'carry on to the finish', to 'accomplish' – to fulfil the cycle of creativity begun by the author.

Having cleared that deck, one can finally get to the subject.

The great Shakespearian pastime has always been, of course, tendency-spotting – the intellectual equivalent of bird-watching – and anyone who's been hard at it has discovered the tendency, for example, towards bigger and more elaborate stage-settings; towards politicizing the histories; towards sexualizing the mixed-gender comedies, etc., etc. But the tendency that interests me most is the separation that's begun to take place between the original plays and works on which they are loosely – sometimes remotely – based. To explain this tendency, I think it's useful to look at the recent TV adaptations of the collected works produced by the BBC. The great lesson of those filmed Shakespearian plays is that, in refusing to allow the material to transform – to adapt itself to a different medium – most of the works were denatured. One could praise *this* performance or *that* scenic idea, but all in all, it produced leaden and inert television viewing. And why? Because the underlying assumption of the exercise was: the plays are so great, all one need do is bring together the best British talent one can find and record them for posterity. It is this high-varnish approach to Shakespeare which is his chiefest foe – the detestable conservative notion that all one ever needs do with 'classics' is preserve them.

One ought to be clear about this.

The bastions that protect William Shakespeare have been established by scholars, critics, teachers, littérateurs – people with a vested interest in language and the furtherance of a literary tradition. It's in their interests that the texts remain sacrosanct – that they're handed down from generation to generation, each providing new insights and new refinements like so many new glosses on an old painting. A process which, judging from the past two hundred years, can go on for at least another five hundred because there will never be a shortage of scholars to point out the semiotic significance of the ass's head in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the tallow candle in *Macbeth* or the implications of the syllabus at Wittenberg during the years Hamlet was supposed to have been enrolled there.

In Academe, as I'm sure I needn't tell you, it is considered a step-up-the-ladder to be published in learned journals. It's a help in securing tenure and a fillip towards university advancement. Consequently, the motive for publication is very much like a showcase production for an ambitious actor; a way of strutting his stuff – often at the expense of the material for which that 'stuff' is being 'strutted'. There is very little compulsion behind this kind of Shakespearian scholarship other than scoring points or sticking feathers in one's cap. Often, the writer's underlying aim is merely to catch the attention of a department head or a fund-granting agency. What you might call 'harlotry' in 'bardolatry'. This accounts for the bizarre nature of many of those precious and far-fetched subjects. Then, of course, there is also that peculiar breed of niggling intellectual which actually enjoys picking at the chicken-bones of art in order to re-create a semblance of the whole bird. This breed accounts for many of those microscopic studies of Shakespearian works which seem to be obsessed with every grain, every wart, every follicle to be found in the collected works. They produce the papers that scrutinize the punctuation, the typography, the syntax and the topical allusions of every play. Not only do they not see the trees for the forest, they're often too fascinated by the sap on the bark to even see the trees.

But for people without such obsessions, whose main concern is reconstituting Shakespeare's ideas and finding new ways to dramatically extrapolate them, this myopic preoccupation with the canon seems, more than anything else, like the scrutiny of one chimpanzee fastidiously picking the nits off another.

But to return to Shakespeare and the media. Had the BBC treated the plays as 'material' to be refashioned for a new medium, had they not felt obliged to freeze them for posterity, each one might have been a unique televisual experience without losing the essence of the stage-work on which it was based. A method more successfully practised in motion pictures.

If you do a swift comparison of the early Shakespearian films with the later ones, you find that the biggest single difference is that in the 1930s there was a valiant attempt to stick to the narrative and, as much as possible, to the text, and these are virtually unwatchable today. But from about the 1940s onward, filmmakers were more inclined to abandon the original texts and move off into purely cinematic directions. Which is why, for instance, Olivier's *Richard III* is so much better than Hollywood's *As You Like It* with Elisabeth Bergner, directed by her husband Paul Czinner, or *Romeo and Juliet*, starring a somewhat superannuated Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard. In *Richard III*, Olivier truncated the text, decided on three or four main character-points and then expanded the battle scenes with a kind of inspired, epic filmmaking: the same scenes which on the stage are perfunctorily choreographed duels, usually implausible, and which almost always stop dead the action of the play. What Shakespearian filmmakers discovered was that the more one expanded the cinematic possibilities and the less one felt restricted by the straitjacket of the text, the better the work was realized.

What is it for instance, about Kurosawa's *Ran*, that Japanese director's treatment of *King Lear*, which makes it a reinterpretation of Shakespeare's play and, at the same time, a bold diversion into a completely new work of art? For me, it's the liberty that Kurosawa exercises in following the play wherever, in his own personal imagination, it takes him. And if the imagination of an artist is rich and resourceful, it leads him to a highly personalized statement on the play's themes which could never have been made without taking the play as its point of departure.

Writing about this film, Jan Kott says:

> Kurosawa's greatness lies in his capacity to reveal historical similarity and variance; to find a Shakespearean sense of doom in the other, remote, and apparently alien historical place. He trims the plot to the bone. Hidetora's three sons are all that remains of Lear's three daughters and Gloucester's two sons. Shakespeare added the second plot of Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund to the old folk tale about three daughters (two vile and one noble). Kurosawa has cut and compressed it. In this Japanese condensation of plot and character, only the eldest wife's son, a substitute for Goneril and Regan, is left in the castle where Hidetora has murdered her entire family. In this samurai epic, it is her drive for vengeance that destroys Hidetora's clan and legacy.[1]

And, discussing the distancing of Shakespeare's play by radically altering its setting, Kott says:

> in Shakespeare's dramas, the other place – the other 'historicity' outside Elizabethan England – gives, at the same time, the plays' other universality. And what is more, the place often supplies their other contemporary meanings . . . The farther the 'other' setting in Shakespeare's dramas is from Elizabethan England, the less likely it is that the image will match the text. It stops being an illustration and becomes its essence and sign.

Its 'essence' and 'sign' – and the whole assumption of these words is that it's possible to retain a play's essence by changing its 'sign'. Indeed, it is by changing its sign that its essence is both retained and enlarged. It is through a classic's imaginative metamorphosis that its eternal verities shine through. And I would say, the reverse proposition is also true. That by trying to contain those verities in their original enclosure they become attenuated and reduced. Because as one generation supplants another, as new ideas force us to test the validity, or at least durability, of the old ones, artists are obliged to verify or nullify what they find in the old works. This 'verification' or 'nullification' is what determines the nature of the new work – and, in an inexplicable way, it often reinforces the integrity of the original.

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[1] Jan Kott, 'The Edo Lear', *New York Review of Books* (24 April 1986), pp. 13–15.

The advantage that films have over plays is that the medium insists the original material be rethought and then expressed differently. The disadvantage in the theatre is that there's a kind of premium put on some abstract notion called 'fidelity' – which from the standpoint of the purists seems to mean again, make the omelette but don't break the eggs. The only fidelity that cuts any ice in the theatre is a director's fidelity to his personal perceptions about a classic; how well and how truly he can put on stage the visions the play has evoked in his imagination. How much of those visions have to do with him and how much with Shakespeare remains an inexhaustible moot point, and there's nothing to be gained from delving into that one now. The central point, it seems to me, and the one that determines the validity or nullity in the final result is: what added dimensions does the director bring to the original work? If, as is so often the case, a director's imagination falls short of the work he's trying to realize, then he deserves all the calumny that's gleefully heaped upon his head. If he manages to transcend it – and makes something of it that was never expected and never seen before – he has enriched a classic. And if the word classic has any meaning at all it must refer to a work which is able to mean again and perhaps mean something else.

To combat such subversive ideas we have the counterargument succinctly put by Maynard Mack. He writes:

> The most obvious result of subtextualizing is that the director and (possibly) actor are encouraged to assume the same level of authority as the author. The sound notion that there is a life to which the words give life can with very little stretching be made to mean that the words the author set down are themselves simply a search for the true play, which the director must intuit in, through, and under them. Once he has done so, the words become to a degree expendable. . . . In the hands of many directors in today's theatre, where the director is a small god, subtext easily becomes a substitute for text and a license for total directorial subjectivity.[2]

For Maynard Mack and others of his ilk, the play is a 'given' and as such, there is a tacit obligation to deliver its original intentions. For contemporary directors, it's an invitation to undergo process, and only when *that* is done can its 'meaning' be understood, and because theatrical process is inextricable from contemporary sensibility, the play is either proven or disproven through the act of interpretation. When Antonin Artaud exclaimed: 'No more masterpieces', he not only meant we must lose our myopic reverence for classics, he also meant the Present, like a Court of Appeal, must confirm or deny the *presumed* greatness of a 'masterwork'. The hard evidence for such an appeal is the director's view of the work as performed by his company and received by his public. Often in such cases, it is the interpreter's vision which is rejected and the masterwork, in all its traditional greatness, which is confirmed. But just as often, it is the artist's metamorphosis of the masterwork that wins the day and when that happens, it *is* the director and his actors – who, in Maynard Mack's words, '*assume the same level of authority as the author*'. To view this as some kind of usurpation of proprietary rights is to misunderstand the nature of dramatic art and its tendency endlessly to reappear in different shapes and forms.

There are basically two assumptions about Shakespearian production. The first, what one might call the Fundamentalist View, is that if a director cleaves to what the author has written, delves deeper into the complexities of the text and discovers more nuance and more shades of meaning than his predecessors, he has rendered a service to the author and re-established the supremacy of the work. (Many of the Royal Shakespeare Company productions fall into this category.) The second, what one might call the Reform Approach, assumes that an ingenious director, by interpolating ideas of his own often far removed from the ideas traditionally associated with the play, can sometimes produce a *frisson* – or 'alienating effect' – which is so enthralling in itself, people are prepared to forgive the liberties he's taken to achieve it. Set against these two, now fairly standard, practices is what I would call The Quantum Leap Approach to Shakespeare by which an idea, inspired by the text, but not necessarily verifiable in relation to it, creates a work of art that intellectually relocates the original play and bears only the faintest resemblance to its progenitor. There have been a few examples of this kind of work but each so unlike the other that no general definition can as yet be formulated.

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[2] Maynard Mack, *King Lear in Our Time* (Berkeley, 1965; London, 1966), p. 33.

Edward Bond's *Lear* is an entirely original work, and yet it still feeds off certain ideas of class and cruelty served up in Shakespeare's original play. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, despite its autonomy as a work of art, remains thematically related to *Hamlet* and still operates within the orbit of the original work where, for instance W. S. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, being an out-and-out parody, does not. You could say of Brecht's *Edward II* or *Coriolanus* that they are intensifications of certain aspects of the works on which they're based – but they still derive a lot of their power from the reference point of the original. Whereas, in a work like *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, although *Richard III* is knocking around somewhere in the background, the play's historical vigour owes more to the author's assembly of contemporary political history than it does to The Wars of the Roses.

But much closer to the kinds of transmutations I'm talking about are works such as *Kiss Me Kate* – which can be seen as a brilliant riff on *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *West Side Story* which uses only very general elements from *Romeo and Juliet* (social unrest, family-feuds, etc.) to confront contemporary issues of juvenile delinquency, gang warfare, and ethnic clashes. In a film such as *Forbidden Planet*, a science-fiction movie of the 1950s, one has all the narrative threads and many of the relationships from *The Tempest* without actually treading on any of Shakespeare's turf. Knowledge of the Ur-text here may enhance a filmgoer's appreciation but it's just as keen for people who never heard of the original. But all these examples are a little off the mark, for as soon as you have an entirely new wodge of material, a completely different format – that is, a musical form as opposed to straight drama, a movie rather than a theatre piece – you're really in the world of allusion rather than derivation, and given the habits of the Greek and the Roman dramatists, *that* practice is as old as drama itself.

But let's take a play like *The Tempest* for instance. If you consider it in a contemporary frame of mind, it's hard not to be struck with what we today would call its psychological symbolism. Connotations of the Ego and the Id have been read into this play for quite some time now. Now, what is the fable of that play if we remorselessly rethink it along those lines?

In a kind of private sanotorium stuck away in a rustic setting such as Surrey or Hampshire, we encounter a man who suffers from a curious delusion – not unlike Pirandello's Henry IV. He imagines himself shipwrecked on a desert island of which he has become the absolute ruler. Prospero's 'condition' has been brought about by the trauma of having lost his power to his scheming brother Antonio. To avoid the social consequences of that loss and to help him psychologically assimilate it, he creates a fantasy-world, and he peoples it with characters that relate to his condition. There is a good and blameless daughter with whom he strongly identifies. She, like himself, is an Innocent, the antithesis of the scheming, usurping and villainous brother who, unlike Miranda, knows all the ways of the world and how to turn them to his own advantage. There is a 'spirit' that will do his bidding for him; exercise that power which he has lost and, being lost, has to be compensated for with illusions such as Ariel. There is a personification of his own basest nature; that part of him which he recognizes as full of vindictiveness against his wrongdoers and is, at the same time, the deeply suppressed alter-ego of his enlightened and intellectual self. Which not only accounts for Caliban, but explains why he threatens Miranda, that thinly disguised symbol of Prospero's own virtue. And in this fantasy-world, peopled by psychic extensions of his own enemies and ideals, he creates a situation in which he can take revenge against those that have wronged him; can, as all psychotics do in daydreams, 'right the wrongs of the real world' through imaginary actions in his fantasy realm.

However, amidst all this delusion, Prospero is forced to confront his own inadequacies; that in his former position conveniently projected into the guise of the Duke of Milan, he was very ill suited to his job – being more concerned with books and intellectual pursuits than the humdrum business of politics; that, in a sense, being usurped by his brother was not entirely attributable to Antonio's villainy but could, in some way, be blamed on his own lack of qualifications. Which is perhaps why he lays such arduous chores on Ferdinand who is trying to win his daughter's love – that's to say, on a surrogate brother who is trying to prove himself to the virtuous Miranda – that fantasy projection of Prospero himself. And when his delirium has run its full course and he has liberated himself from the irresponsible freedoms he preferred to the duties of his former position *and* confronted the frustrations and aggressions of his own base nature – that is, *freed* his Ariel and *rehabilitated* his Caliban – he is ready to return to the real world; the world in which he must abandon his fantasies and assume his responsibilities. This is why he asks for his 'hat' – that traditional symbol of social respectability, and his 'sword', the practical weapon of defence which, from that point on, will serve him instead of his magical staff. The end of *The Tempest*, like the end of any psychotic delirium, restores the patient to the known world with a greater measure of self-awareness than when he left it.

Now this remorselessly Freudian reading of Shakespeare's play, I would suggest to you, can be played out in a single, contemporary room, in modern dress, with Prospero on a couch and a silent psychiatrist alongside, without any magical or spectacular accoutrements, with a few bits of furniture and some salient bits of modern attire to dramatize our protagonist's voyage from fantasy to reality. It's as valid a reading as setting the play on another planet with all the characters in spacesuits (as has been done in several American university productions), or setting it on a Caribbean island full of characters drawn from a turn-of-the-century naval battalion with Caliban as an insubordinate military lout and Ariel as Prospero's dutiful cabin-boy. For in all these far-fetched extrapolations of Shakespeare's play, there is some unmistakble line, which, stretched as it may be to breaking-point, still connects up to the themes and ideas contained in the original material. The validity or nullity of these far-ranging interpretations depends on the consistency of a director's *mise-en-scène*: how much of a piece he can make of that vision which he sees staring back at him when he gazes into the ruffled pool of Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*.

In the case of *The Tempest*, we laid a heavy twentieth century net over the play. But there are also ways of reordering a classic's given material from within.

Let's take another example, a play we all know – like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which itself has gone through quite a few permutations in recent years – and recently transmogrified by Woody Allen in the film: *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*. And if Woody Allen can reinterpret Shakespeare, one wonders with trepidation, is Mel Brooks far behind? We've had dark *Dreams* that emphasized the labyrinth of the forest, and bright *Dreams*, like Peter Brook's magically-Meyerholdian version of 1970 and inevitably, throwbacks to rustic *Dreams* where the nineteenth century version of the play semed to be reasserted with a vengeance. But let's say, based on the sexual mysteries of the work, one chose to interpret it in a decidedly pre-Christian – even decadent – manner, *insinuating* rather than uncovering ideas. According to this reading, the story of the play might run something like this:

Oberon, a vindictive homosexual chieftain who exerts immense authority among his circle of followers in the forest, has tried repeatedly to wrest a beautiful Indian boy from his former lover, now rival, Titania – who is himself a homosexual given to dressing up in women's clothes. Titania's refusal to give up the youth or share him with others (which has been the established sexual convention) has incensed Oberon and caused irremediable friction between both camps.

To wreak the revenge burning in his bosom, Oberon arranges through Puck, not an ethereal sprite at all, but a superannuated and embittered slave, to administer a potent aphrodisiac to Titania which causes him to become sexually obsessed with the first creature he encounters. Because of his immense age and incompetence (as well as the imprecise nature of Oberon's instructions), Puck administers the drug to two of the four refugees who have wandered into the wood to escape arbitrary measures meted out by the State. This causes a series of promiscuous imbroglios, presumably uncharacteristic of the four persons involved.

Eventually, through guile, Oberon manages to appropriate the boy for himself, and Titania, now caught in the spell of the aphrodisiac, becomes enamoured of an amateur actor, one of several rehearsing a play in the forest, who has been transformed into a beast by the vindictive Puck. Having now acquired the coveted youth who is the unquestionable cause of all the play's strife, Oberon takes pity on Titania's condition, releases him from the spell, and the old, sharing homosexual relationship is restored. The wood, transformed into an erotic labyrinth which is what it must be given the proclivities of Oberon and Titania, encourages the lovers to pursue their carnal and licentious desires until Puck lifts their spell. Once returned to Athens, freed from the diabolical influence of the wood and no longer forced into arbitrary bonding, the lovers settle back to enjoy the entertainment laid on for the Duke's wedding, but Puck, in a final act of vindictiveness, upsets the performance of the play, terrorizes the wedding guests and reminds them that despite their heterosexual celebrations, nefarious, anti-social spirits such as himself are the true rulers of the world and characters such as Theseus and Hippolyta only its figureheads.

A preposterous imposition, I can hear some of my listeners muttering to themselves. A travesty of a play that deals with visions of Arcadia and rustic innocence. And yet, as many scholars have conceded, the *Dream is* a play about forbidden fruits – no pun intended; about promiscuity, bestiality, the slaking of carnal appetites, all those irrepressible desires that society firmly represses in order to ensure an orderly perpetuation. Midsummer Night, as the Scandinavians know better than most, is a night of unmitigated revelry in which the most potent sexual and anti-social cravings are released. Shakespeare, being a bourgeois writing for a bourgeois public, had to cloak the expression of these pernicious desires within a