

The poet's craft and the art of drama

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How did Shakespeare himself, whom others both praised and criticized as the poet of nature, view his craft and creativity? The question, raised in the introduction, is dealt with in numerous places in the canon. From the beginning, Shakespeare's comments on the issue have a complexity usually lacking in similar discussions by his contemporaries:

Look when a painter would surpass the life
 In limning out a well-proportioned steed,
 His art with nature's workmanship at strife,
 As if the dead the living should exceed;
 So did this horse excel a common one
 In shape, in courage, colour, pace, and bone.

Prima facie, this stanza from *Venus and Adonis* (289–94) echoes the traditional assumption that art transcends nature by its tendency to idealize. But then we realize that the painter's more perfect horse only serves as analogue to a real one which Shakespeare, in the following stanza, describes in the most concrete detail.

Even where Shakespeare echoes the commonplace of art's superiority over nature directly, he undercuts his own statement by drawing attention to a lifeless artificiality to all art. "In scorn of nature, art gave lifeless life," he says of a painting described in *The Rape of Lucrece* (1374). "It tutors nature. Artificial strife/Lives in these touches, livelier than life," comments the Poet while looking at a portrait done by the Painter. Only the imaginative cooperation of the beholder can redeem art, at least temporarily, from its deathlike artifice.

Poet: Admirable. How this grace
 Speaks his own standing! What a mental power
 This eye shoots forth! How big imagination

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Moves in this lip! To th' dumbness of the gesture
 One might interpret.
Painter: It is a pretty mocking of the life.¹

In other words, art, where it is claimed as surpassing nature, does not even equal it. At best, it may be said to reenact natural creation. This is a stance most clearly articulated in the romances. Marina, in Gower's words, "composes / Nature's own shape of bud, bird, branch, or berry" in her needlework – "That even her art sisters the natural roses."² Even in the romances, art is essentially lifeless. In order to be brought alive, it is in need of the spectator's imaginative collaboration. In one sense, the creator of a sculpture showing chaste Dian bathing, as described by Iachimo, may seem to have surpassed nature; but in others he clearly lags behind her:

Never saw I figures
 So likely to report themselves. The cutter
 Was as another nature, dumb: outwent her,
 Motion and breath left out.³

The same is true of Julio Romano, who, "had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work, would beguile nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape." Emphasized here is that the artist lacked the essential qualities – eternity and the power to give life – which could make him nature's equal. Art, even from his hands, can be no more than life's deathlike "mockery," a term which Shakespeare, along with similar ones like "counterfeit" and "feigning," seems to prefer to the mimetic terminology of either naturalistic or idealistic imitation. "Prepare / To see the life as lively mock'd as ever / Still sleep mock'd death," announces Paulina before unveiling Julio Romano's sculpture.⁴

Shakespeare's continuing, even increased, insistence on the essential lifelessness of art is, of course, by no means his ultimate word on the matter. It simply underscores the stance of a poet who, aware of the limitations of his art, tries to reenact rather than to outdo nature. What is talked about as Julio Romano's sculpture of the dead Hermione, after all, turns out to be the live Hermione. What Shakespeare, through Polixenes, seems to suggest as his own is "an art / That nature makes," not one that presumes to "tutor" nature.⁵ But all this takes us far ahead into

issues which, more appropriately and in greater detail, will be discussed in a later chapter.

For the time being, a more simple answer to the question of Shakespeare's possible response to being called the poet of nature will have to suffice. This can be found in the extent or lack of the poet's concern with the technicalities and theories surrounding his craftsmanship. Did Shakespeare display an interest in or at least an awareness of such matters as prosody, imagery, poetic structure, and genre theory? How, in all this, does he compare with his immediate contemporaries? Of what range, specificity, and complexity is his aesthetic vocabulary if held up against the same background? To answer questions such as these will also provide us with an introductory survey of Shakespeare's implied poetics in general.

THE PEDANT'S CREATIVITY

One of his most comprehensive early statements on the poet's craft and creativity is put into the mouth of Holofernes. As such it reflects the presumptions of the pedant, and not, of course, the attitudes of the poet. At the same time, Holofernes' words give us valuable evidence as to Shakespeare's familiarity with current poetic theories of his time:

This is a gift that I have, simple, simple; a foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions. These are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourish'd in the womb of *pia mater*, and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion. But the gift is good in those in whom it is acute, and I am thankful for it.⁶

Compared with others of "Nature's gifts," such as the "gift of tongue" and "heavenly gift of prophecy,"⁷ Holofernes' gift involves the most complex mental activities. Predictably, the pedant describes this functioning of his talent in the terms of traditional facultative psychology.⁸ The entire brain is enclosed by a membrane or *pia mater*, a term Shakespeare elsewhere tends to use as a synonym for intelligence in general.⁹ It is divided into several portions or ventricles, each of which houses a specific mental faculty such as commonsense, imagination or memory. There were exceptions like Charron and Huarte who opposed

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this rigid compartmentalizing of the cerebral faculties. But Shakespeare, here and elsewhere, seems to favor localization. Lady Macbeth speaks of the "receipt of reason" (I, 7). Holofernes mentions the "ventricle of memory," usually thought to be the hindmost portion of the brain. This, to him, is the source of all the "forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions" that go into the making of poetry.

Holofernes' account of the creative process leaves out an important preliminary. For the forms and figures which the poet calls up from his memory when writing were originally formed by different agencies of the brain. In this way, the memory is not the source but simply "the Register and Storehouse of all the Idea's and Images first perceiv'd by the Senses, and then collected and seal'd up by the Imagination."¹⁰ Nor do images and ideas simply flow from the memory. Instead, they have to be activated by other mental agencies before they will be released into the creative process. According to Robert Burton, "Memory lays up all the species which the senses have brought in, and records them as a good register that they may be forthcoming when they are called for by phantasy and reason."¹¹

But such omission serves the purpose of characterization. For what spills from Holofernes' brain when composing poetry are the ideas and figures of his reading rather than those of his personal experience. Like Launcelot Gobbo, he has "planted in his memory / An army of good words."¹² Hence his verses seem to draw on a very "alms-basket of words." The poem given as an example of his poetic gift is perhaps the most ludicrous in all of Shakespeare. Holofernes announces it as "an extemporal epitaph on the death of the deer" killed by the Princess. But there is little of the spontaneity that, naively, we might associate with such a title. Of course, we are warned that Holofernes' extemporizing will be harnessed to some alliteration which, in the poet's view, "argues facility."¹³ But in fact almost every word in Holofernes' extemporal epitaph is pre-programmed by formal devices. These range from rhymed iambic heptameter to intricate schemes such as proparalepsis or the adding of a syllable to a word:¹⁴

The preyful princess pierc'd and prick'd a pretty pleasing
 pricket.

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Some say a sore; but not a sore till now made sore with
 shooting.
 The dogs did yell; put el to sore, then sorel jumps from
 thicket –
 Or pricket sore, or else sorel; the people fall a-hooting.
 If sore be sore, then L to sore makes fifty sores o' sorel.
 Of one sore I an hundred make by adding but one more L.¹⁵

Here, then, we have Holofernes' much-advertised ideas and figures as "begot in the ventricle of memory, nourish'd in the womb of pia mater, and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion." To call this "extemporal epitaph" a *reductio ad absurdum* of Holofernes' poetics is putting it mildly. At the same time, Elizabethan spectators may well have found simply parodistic what a modern audience finds ludicrous. Those familiar with the critical writings of the time, in fact, were perhaps reminded of an exercise which Puttenham proposes in his *Arte of English Poesie*. This "dittie written extempore" according to specific rules is much like Holofernes' "extemporal epitaph." Though improvised, it is predetermined by the number of its lines, by its metrical arrangement, by its rhyme scheme, and by its opening line. Those who successfully complete the exercise will give proof of all the qualities which Holofernes values so highly. They will display the accomplishments of "great arte" – a powerful memory, the copiousness of their discourse, and, needless to say, their foolish extravagant spirit:

If ye shall perceiue the maker do keepe the measures and rime as ye haue appointed him, and besides do make his dittie sensible and ensuant to the first verse in good reason, then may ye say he is his crafts maister. For, if he were not of a plentiful discourse, he could not vpon the sudden shape an entire dittie vpon your imperfect theame or proposition in one verse. And, if he were not copious in his language, he could not haue such store of wordes at commaundement as should supply your records. And, if he were not of a maruelous good memory, he could not obserue the rime and measures after the distances of your limitation, keeping with all grauitie and good sense in the whole dittie.¹⁶

Despite all this, not all of the poetic theorizing Holofernes stands for is parodied. No doubt, Shakespeare agreed with the schoolmaster's praise of Ovid, one of the playwright's favourite poets. Equally to the point is Holofernes' critique of Berowne's

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sonnet. While showing mechanical correctness of meter, the poem indeed lacks the true essence of poetry. "Here," the pedant comments, "are only numbers ratified; but, for the elegancy, facility, and golden cadence of poesy, caret. Ovidius Naso was the man. And why, indeed 'Naso' but for smelling out the odoriferous flowers of fancy, the jerks of invention."¹⁷

THE ARTS OF LANGUAGE

If such critical acumen strikes us as limited, there is little of greater perspicacity expressed by Shakespeare in his poems or put into the mouths of his characters elsewhere. Rosaline, half agreeing with Holofernes, finds that the numbers of Berowne's poem are true, but only for the sake of cracking a joke at his hyperbolic praises of her beauty:

Nay, I have verses too, I thank Berowne;
 The numbers true, and, were the numb'ring too,
 I were the fairest goddess on the ground.¹⁸

Somewhat more specific is Rosalind's criticism of Orlando's poem in *As You Like It*:

Celia: Didst thou hear these verses?
Rosalind: O, yes, I heard them all, and more too; for some of them had in them more feet than the verses would bear.
Celia: That's no matter; the feet might bear the verses.
Rosalind: Ay, but the feet were lame, and could not bear themselves without the verse, and therefore stood lamely in the verse. (III,2)¹⁹

What are we actually told about the nature of metrical language? That some of Orlando's lines have more feet in them than are required by the measure? That the feet he uses are so lame that they have to find their support in the line? It all says little more than what is implied in single phrases like "the very false gallop of verses"²⁰ and "the even road of a blank verse."²¹

While others were discussing the nature of metrical speech as opposed to prose, Shakespeare, to all evidence, displayed little interest in such theorizing.²² To Chapman, for instance, poetry and prose are as far apart as the matters they are intended to communicate:

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... Truth, with Poesie grac't, is fairer farre,
 More proper, mouing, chaste, and regular,
 Then when she runnes away with vntruss't Prose;
 Proportion, that doth orderly dispose
 Her vertuous treasure, and is Queene of Graces;
 In Poesie, decking her with choicest Phrases,
 Figures and numbers: when loose Prose puts on
 Plaine letter-habits; makes her trot, vpon
 Dull earthly businesse.²³

Nothing comparable is to be found in Shakespeare. Hamlet complains that he is "ill at these numbers" and has "not art to reckon [his] groans" (II, 2). Henry V claims that he has "no strength in measure" (V, 2) and Will that his "gracious numbers are decay'd." Longaville, noting that his "stubborn lines lack power to move," may even tear up his poem on stage, and decide to "write in prose."²⁴ But none of these comments reveals a deeper understanding of the nature of metrical language.

The playwright also lacked a detailed terminological interest along these lines. The word hexameter, which has been called "an obsession of the Elizabethan mind,"²⁵ is not even mentioned; nor are such concepts as iambic or trochaic. If other technical terms are used, it is mostly in order to parody the characters who employ them. "Come, more; another stanza: call you 'em stanzos?" sighs the melancholy Jaques.²⁶ "Let me hear a staff, a stanze, a verse," exclaims Holofernes; and after Nathaniel has recited Berowne's sonnet, he adds: "You find not the apostrophas, and so miss the accent: let me supervise the canzonet."²⁷ Quince suggests that the prologue introducing Pyramus shall be written in eight and six. But Bottom would prefer it in eight and eight. When the prologue finally appears, we realize that it is written in neither measure, but in the usual ten and ten.²⁸

As with meter, so with rhyme. While the opponents and apologists of the device waged a critical war lasting several decades, Shakespeare at best made fun of specific kinds of rhyming.²⁹ To Benedick, such categories are the very hallmarks of his poetic impotence; "Marry, I cannot show it in rhyme; I have tried; I can find out no rhyme to 'lady' but 'baby' – an innocent rhyme; for 'scorn,' 'horn' – a hard rhyme; for 'school,' 'fool' – a babbling rhyme; very ominous endings. No, I was not born

under a rhyming planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms."³⁰ "Speak but one rhyme and I am satisfied; / Cry but 'Ay me!' pronounce but 'love' and 'dove'," mocks Mercutio.³¹ When Rosalind reads some of Orlando's verses, Touchstone comments that the poet's rhymes follow each other like dairy women walking in single file. "I'll rhyme you so eight years together, dinners, and suppers and sleeping hours, excepted. It is the right butter-women's rank to market."³² Other, more intriguing, references to the poet's own "barren" or "poor" rhyme, as found in the Sonnets, apply not so much to specific rhyme schemes as to the poems in general.³³

More widespread and serious than Shakespeare's theoretical concern with prosody, was his interest in poetic diction and rhetoric. Best-known here, of course, are the poet's protests against affectation. The garrulous Polonius is reminded to provide "More matter, with less art."³⁴ Berowne, while inveighing against "Three-pil'd hyperboles" and "Figures pedantical," claims: "Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief."³⁵ Shakespeare himself voices analogous concerns in the Sonnets. While claiming to speak "In true plain words by [a] true-telling friend," he accuses his rival poets for using whatever "strained touches rhetoric can lend" (82) and for

Making a couplement of proud compare
 With sun and moon, with earth and sea's rich gems,
 With April's first-born flowers, and all things rare
 That heaven's air in this huge rondure hems. (21)

We all know, of course, that Shakespeare is not above using such hyperbole and other devices himself. More than that, he often displays a distinct awareness of such techniques in talking about comparisons, conceits, devices, epithets, figures, flowers of fancy, hyperboles, metaphors and similes. Most striking perhaps is his concern with poetic comparison. To be sure, here again a lot is sheer good humor or parody. Particularly adept at comparison are Falstaff and Prince Hal.

Prince: I'll be no longer guilty of this sin; this sanguine coward, this bed-presser, this horse-back-breaker, this huge hill of flesh –
Falstaff: 'Sblood, you starveling, you eel-skin, you dried neat's-tongue, you bull's pizzle, you stock-fish – O for breath to utter what is like

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thee! – you tailor's yard, you sheath, you bow-case, you vile standing tuck!

The Prince, after this, promises to wait until Falstaff has tired himself "in base comparisons";³⁶ Falstaff, after a similar exchange, compliments Hal for his "most unsavoury similes" calling him "the most comparative, rascalliest, sweet young prince."³⁷

Whether things are thus matched "in comparisons with dirt"³⁸ or praised to the sky, comparison is most frequently used for hyperbole. Romeo, in the Nurse's view, is "past compare" (II, 5). Adonis, to Venus, is "sweet above compare."³⁹ "I am compar'd to twenty thousand fairs," mocks Rosaline after reading Berowne's verses.⁴⁰ Demetrius, after waking in the presence of Helen, exclaims: "To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne? / Crystal is muddy."⁴¹ We know that one of Shakespeare's most famous sonnets (18) raises a similar question and arrives at an analogous answer. Troilus proposes the ultimate in such comparative hyperbole to the future poets that will remember his story:

when their rhymes,
 Full of protest, of oath, and big compare,
 Want similes, truth tir'd with iteration –
 As true as steel, as plantage to the moon,
 As sun to day, as turtle to her mate,
 As iron to adamant, as earth to th' centre –
 Yet, after all comparisons of truth,
 As truth's authentic author to be cited,
 'As true as Troilus' shall crown up the verse
 And sanctify the numbers. (III, 2)

We learn most about the possibilities which Shakespeare associated with comparison, whenever the figure becomes part of a poetics documented in the very process of poetic creativity. The best-known example occurs in Sonnet 18. Here Shakespeare asks himself if he should compare his friend to a summer's day, and in his answer ends up pointing at the "eternal summer" captured in the *monumentum aere perennius* of the very lines raising that question. Another sonnet shows how comparison, if usurped by the "madness of discourse," which from time to time haunts the poet, can turn into a tool of insidious self-deception:

No more be griev'd at that which thou hast done:
 Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud;
 Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
 And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.
 All men make faults, and even I in this,
 Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
 Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,
 Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are. (35)

How such "false compare" (130) figures within the sonnet sequence as a whole will be discussed at a later point. There also we shall look at Richard II's prison soliloquy beginning "I have been studying how I may compare / This prison where I live unto the world" (V, 5). In evolving various comparisons, the King, as we shall see, provides us with a running commentary on the way in which a poet, according to Theseus' well-known words, gives "a local habitation and a name"⁴² to the ill-defined thoughts of the original creative impulse.

Only second to Shakespeare's concern with poetic comparison is his interest in the conceit. This word, of course, stands for various other concepts such as understanding and imagination as much as for the strictly artistic device. Even as such it applies to the fine arts as much as to poetry. The figures woven into a napkin are called "conceited characters."⁴³ The painter of the sack of Troy described in *The Rape of Lucrece* is labeled "conceited" for creating a powerful effect of pathetic fallacy whereby the clouds overhanging Ilium seem to kiss the city's turrets (1371). In the same poem, the word "conceit" also serves to describe the technique of creating the effect of optical illusion:

For much imaginary work was there;
 Conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind,
 That for Achilles' image stood his spear,
 Grip'd in an armed hand; himself, behind
 Was left unseen, save to the eye of mind:
 A hand, a foot, a face, a leg, a head,
 Stood for the whole to be imagined. (1422-8)

Linguistic just as much as artistic conceits are characterized by their *pars pro toto* ingenuity. Sometimes merely enigmatic, they can also be downright deceptive. Basset, in *1 Henry VI*, is said to "set a gloss upon his bold intent" "with forged quaint conceit"