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I · *The arrow in Nessus: Elizabethan clues and modern detectives*

Did you ever hear of a sleepwalker carrying a light?

Shakespeare's plays continue to fascinate – and puzzle – the modern reader. Actors, directors, editors, critics, and teachers all wrestle with the words that have come down to us in the quartos and the Folio, seeking clues to pluck out the heart of Hamlet's mystery or answer Lear's question: 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' But anyone familiar with the wide range of interpreters and interpretations can attest that the solutions advanced or even the questions asked reveal as much about the modern detective as about the Elizabethan dramatist. Like Orlando bearing old Adam on his back, we too bring luggage with us to any reading of Elizabethan plays; or, to use Bernard Beckerman's image, when we pick up a book containing the printed words of a Shakespeare play we simultaneously put on a pair of spectacles 'compacted of preconceptions about what constitutes drama and how it produces its effects.'[1] To the modern reader, the luggage or spectacles of an earlier age may appear ridiculous. Thus, we can chuckle at Nahum Tate's decision 'to rectify what was wanting in the regularity and probability of the tale'[2] in *King Lear* by adding a love affair between Edgar and Cordelia and a happy ending, or we can look askance at Dryden's 'improvement' of *Troilus and Cressida* 'to remove that heap of rubbish under which many excellent thoughts lay wholly buried.'[3] But to recognize the assumptions and predispositions that control (and sometimes distort) *our* view of Elizabethan drama is far more difficult, even at times impossible, especially in our age of demystification in which the responses of the reader or the formulations of the theorist often take precedence over the 'intentions' of the author.

For an especially astute critique of the modern literary detective dealing with Shakespearean clues, consider James Thurber's 'The Macbeth Murder Mystery.'[4] At an English hotel, Thurber's narrator encounters an American lady addicted to murder mysteries

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at bedtime who discovers to her horror that inadvertently she has purchased *Macbeth*. Stuck with the bard, she grudgingly reads the tragedy and, as an experienced sleuth, becomes firmly convinced that Macduff rather than Macbeth is the murderer of Duncan. In her reasoning lies Thurber's insight. First, Macbeth could not be the murderer because: 'It would spoil everything if you could figure out right away who did it. Shakespeare was too smart for that.' Banquo was a suspect until he too was killed ('That was good right in there, that part'). Macbeth's suspicious behavior in the banquet scene is attributed to his attempt to 'shield' Lady Macbeth, but she too must be innocent because, in the sleep-walking scene, she carries a taper. Says the American lady: 'Well, people who walk in their sleep *never carry lights*! . . . They have a second sight. Did you ever hear of a sleepwalker carrying a light?' Rather, she declares Macduff the culprit because of his hyperbolic reaction to Duncan's death, for she notes that 'he comes running downstairs and shouts, "Confusion has broke open the Lord's anointed temple" and "Sacrilegious murder has made his master-piece" and on and on like that.' Our amateur detective observes shrewdly: 'All that stuff was rehearsed . . . You wouldn't say a lot of stuff like that, offhand, would you – if you had found a body? . . . You wouldn't! Unless you had practiced it in advance. "My God, there's a body in here!" is what an innocent man would say.'

With a fine comic touch, Thurber here demonstrates how the introduction of irrelevant evidence and inappropriate questions can distort a Shakespearean scene or character or problem. Thus, his American lady brings her lore about sleep-walkers, her awareness of mystery story conventions, and her sense of realism about language and human reactions under stress to bear upon a poetic tragedy where a sleep-walker *can* carry a taper and an innocent figure, confronted with the murder of his saintly king, *can* state that 'most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple.' At such moments in an Elizabethan play, another kind of literary or theatrical logic – call it symbolic or imagistic or presentational – can take precedence over the interpretative logic or generic expectations supplied by the devotee of Agatha Christie (or Henry James or Henrik Ibsen or Sigmund Freud or A. C. Bradley).

To see such interpretative logic in conflict on stage, consider a moment from the Oregon Shakespearean Festival production of

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King Lear in 1976. Here, in a rendition of III. iv, Denis Arndt as Lear took upon himself the role of a lecturer with Poor Tom as his visual aid ('consider him well') in order to raise an essential question ('is man no more than this?') by placing particular emphasis upon nakedness ('uncovered body,' 'the thing itself,' 'unaccommodated man,' 'a poor, bare, forked animal'). At the same time, Ron Woods as Tom was building his characterization upon his iterated line 'Tom's acold' and was therefore shivering, 'playing cold,' grasping at anything that would provide warmth. As a result, at one performance the two actors engaged in a strenuous struggle for Tom's blanket (his only possession other than a loin-cloth), with Lear trying to pull it off in order to display a naked or nearly naked figure (to establish his thesis) while Tom, with equal vigor, sought to pull the blanket around him (to gain warmth). Tom won – perhaps at the expense of the larger implications of Lear's speech.

Note that the two actors were responding to two different sets of signals that then led them in two different directions. Woods, as a modern actor conditioned by the logic of naturalism, was reaching out for appropriate stage business to resolve the question: how would a nearly naked man obviously suffering from the cold 'behave' in a storm? In contrast, Arndt was drawing upon previous speeches about naked wretches in the pitiless storm and was therefore treating Tom as a theatrical expression of images crucial to this part of the play ('is man no more than this?,' can 'man' be reduced to this?). The two different kinds of interpretative logic (physiological-naturalistic versus imagistic-symbolic) are not necessarily incompatible but were at odds in this wrestling match where Poor Tom as stage image linked to the particular coordinates of this scene did not mesh comfortably with Poor Tom as a 'man' or 'character' responding to blasts of cold. The actor's choice, moreover, to play 'cold' rather than 'nakedness' may be a subtler version of what I am terming the *logic* of Thurber's American lady, who 'knows' that in 'the real world' sleep-walkers do not carry candles and thanes who discover dead bodies do not react in highly imagistic blank verse.

To see such a logic of interpretation in action in yet a third arena, let me turn now to two problems involving stage directions – one omitted, the other inserted. First, at the moment that Romeo threatens to commit suicide in III. iii the second or 'good'

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quarto of 1599 (presumably the version closest to Shakespeare's draft) provides no stage direction, but the first or 'bad' quarto of 1597 (presumably based upon an actor's memory of some production) reads: '*He offers to stab himself, and Nurse snatches the dagger away*' (G1v). Some modern editors incorporate the signal from Q–1 into their texts (usually putting it in square brackets to show it is not to be found in Q–2), but in his recent New Arden edition Brian Gibbons rejects the Nurse's intervention as 'neither necessary or defensible.' Rather, for this editor 'this piece of business looks like a gratuitous and distracting bid on the part of the actor in the unauthorized version to claim extra attention to himself when the audience should be concentrating on Romeo and the Friar.'[5] Given his sense of what 'the audience should be concentrating on,' Gibbons therefore relegates the Nurse's intervention to his textual notes and footnotes. No distractions here.

Like Poor Tom 'playing cold' or the American lady reading *Macbeth* as a murder mystery, this editor is invoking a logic of interpretation that then determines for him what evidence shall be included or excluded, what is deemed 'necessary' or 'defensible' as opposed to 'gratuitous' or 'distracting.' Since many readers concentrate upon the text rather than the notes, such an editorial decision (especially in this prestigious series) can have a greater impact upon future interpreters than an equivalent choice by an actor or critic. Granted, if an Arden editor omits such a signal, it has not ceased to exist: other editors will make different decisions; some readers take the notes into account; other readers go back to facsimiles of the earliest texts. But this editor's decision (noted with approval by at least one reviewer)[6] has made it easier for future interpreters of this scene to ignore the Q–1 stage direction – indeed, has made it more likely many will not know of its existence.

The reader may well ask: why all the fuss? In what sense can the Nurse's intervention be seen as meaningful or consistent or 'Shakespearean'? In response to Gibbons, one scholar has noted that, later in the play, we learn 'that Romeo carried his dagger scabbarded on his back,' so, given proper positioning on stage, the Nurse could readily have prevented his access to the weapon, perhaps with 'a genteel hammerlock.'[7] For me, the Q–1 version makes excellent sense in imagistic or symbolic terms. After Mercutio's death, Romeo had cried out: 'O sweet Juliet, / Thy

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beauty hath made me effeminate / And in my temper soft'ned valor's steel!' (III. i. 111–13). Then, after Romeo's aborted attempt at suicide, the Friar's long moralization starts:

> Hold thy desperate hand.
> Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art;
> Thy tears are womanish, thy wild acts denote
> The unreasonable fury of a beast.
> Unseemly woman in a seeming man!
> And ill-beseeming beast in seeming both! (III. iii. 108–13)

The spectator who sees Romeo's self-destructive violence interrupted by the Nurse and then hears the Friar's terms (e.g. 'Art thou a man?'; 'Thy tears are womanish'; 'Unseemly woman in a seeming man') is thus confronted with the question: what kind of man *is* Romeo at this point in the play? Like other moments of stage violence (to be discussed in chapter six), the woman's intervention here may set up a powerful and meaningful stage image at the heart of the tragedy. What may seem by one logic of interpretation 'gratuitous and distracting' or 'out of character' or 'unbelievable' may, by a somewhat different logic, appear imagistically or symbolically consistent or meaningful. Indeed, how *would* a dramatist in the mid 1590s (the age of *The Faerie Queene*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *Titus Andronicus*) have acted out on stage the 'womanish' behavior of his protagonist?

For a second example, consider the context of one of the most famous moments in Shakespeare, Macbeth's 'to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow.' The scene starts with the entrance of Macbeth, Seyton, and soldiers. Seven lines later a stage direction calls for '*a cry within of women*' (v. v. 7. s.d.); Macbeth asks 'What is that noise?' and Seyton responds: 'It is the cry of women, my good lord.' After a powerful short speech ('I have supped full with horrors') Macbeth asks again: 'Wherefore was that cry?' to which Seyton responds: 'The Queen, my lord, is dead' (ll. 15–16), a revelation that elicits the famous speech. The Folio, however, provides no exit and re-entry for Seyton between his two lines, so the only authoritative text gives us no indication how he finds out that the queen is dead. Few editors (or directors or critics) can abide such an untidy situation (especially since the original texts *are* erratic about indicating exits and entrances), so the Pelican, Riverside, Signet, and New Arden editions (to cite only four) include an exit for Seyton after his first line and an entrance before

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his second (with the insert usually, but not always, enclosed in square brackets). A director may have Seyton exit or may have him send off a lesser functionary who then returns or may have Seyton walk to a stage door, confer with someone off-stage, and return to Macbeth. As Gibbons might argue, the focus here is upon Macbeth, not Seyton, so the editor must decide what is 'necessary' and what is 'distracting.' If we are to understand that Lady Macbeth has died at the moment of the cry (which would then rule out Seyton knowing of her death at the outset of the scene), the announcer of the news presumably must have some means of learning the news. Therefore, our prevailing logic of interpretation calls for an exit or some other visible means of getting the news on stage.

Without further evidence, we will never know whether or not such an interpretation is correct.[8] Regardless, given the widely shared assumptions about what is 'necessary' to make such a scene 'plausible,' editors undoubtedly will continue to insert the two additional stage directions, a self-fulfilling action that in turn validates the interpretation and keeps us comfortable. But how valid *is* this logic of interpretation? Can we imagine the scene as presented in the Folio? Macbeth would ask his first question ('What is that noise?') and get the answer ('It is the cry of women'). No one leaves the stage; Seyton remains by his side. After his ruminations about fears and horrors, Macbeth asks again: 'Wherefore was that cry?' and Seyton responds: 'The Queen, my lord, is dead.' In this rendition, the audience cannot help seeing that Seyton (to be pronounced *Satan*?) has no normal (earthly?) way of knowing what he knows. But he *does* know. Macbeth may be too preoccupied to notice the anomaly, but, if staged this way, the spectator cannot help being jarred. Indeed, the anomaly then becomes a major part of the context for the nihilistic comments that follow. Such a staging (which adds nothing but rather takes the Folio at face value) strikes me as eerie, powerful, perhaps quite unnerving. A focus upon *how* Seyton knows of the death almost inevitably leads to the addition of stage business that can provide a practical explanation for that 'how,' but such literal-mindedness may, in fact, end up masking a truly distinctive Jacobean effect linked to a mystery behind that 'how.' After all, how do Enobarbus and Iras die in *Antony and Cleopatra*? How does Henry VI know of the murder of his son in

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3 Henry VI, v. vi? Or, much closer to home, how do the witches know what they know in this play? In this, Seyton's last specified appearance, are we being encouraged to grasp larger meanings in his name? Most important, where does one draw the line between 'editing' and 'interpreting' such a moment?

That my two examples of editorial logic have to do with stage directions is no coincidence. Every Shakespeare play has its share of much discussed problems involving which *words* were intended by the author. Thus, in his third soliloquy at the end of Act II, does Hamlet compare himself to a 'scullion' (a kitchen wench) or a 'stallion' (a male prostitute) or (perhaps looking forward to Cleopatra's 'salad days') a 'scallion' (the delectable reading from the 'bad' quarto)? Even in a play like *Macbeth* which survives in one rather than three versions many such decisions must be made. But the editor's rigor in decisions about the prose and poetry is rarely matched by an equally careful treatment of stage directions. Rather, like many critics and teachers, editors regularly envisage Elizabethan plays as literary texts rather than theatrical playscripts, with predictable results. Those readers (e.g., theatrical professionals) who do read the plays as scripts often end up viewing the original effects through invisible barriers set up (often unwittingly) by the modern editor. Thus, the actor or director, although bringing valuable know-how to the reading of Elizabethan playscripts, is nonetheless conditioned both by the logic of the editor and the prevailing assumptions of much twentieth-century theatre (as with Poor Tom playing cold) with significant results for contemporary productions (as I will argue at length in my chapters on lighting, locale, and violence). The Nurse's intervention or Seyton's missing exit may puzzle or provoke the theatrical professional as much as the editor or critic.

Herein, then, lies the many-headed problem to which this study is addressed. Let me clarify my working assumptions. To avoid the trap epitomized by the American lady's wrenching of *Macbeth* or the tug-of-war at the Oregon *King Lear*, the modern interpreter should make every possible effort to sidestep inappropriate assumptions, conventions, or expectations. A major part of this effort involves conceiving of the plays as staged events and consequently viewing the surviving documents as theatrical scripts rather than literary texts (thereby drawing upon the

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province of the theatrical professional) but with the understanding that the logic of the staging then (as with the Nurse's intervention as a 'womanish' side of Romeo or Seyton's possible continued presence) may differ significantly from the logic of staging or 'realism' now (thereby drawing upon the province of the critic or historian). Any inferences or conclusions, moreover, should be based upon the original evidence (thereby drawing upon the province of the editor), but that includes the original stage directions, not the adjustments made by editors and other scholars who may not be sympathetic to theatre then or now.

To some readers, my assumptions or precepts may sound straightforward, even self-evident, but, in fact, they create many problems (some of which I will address in this study) and considerable controversy. Critics, editors, theatrical professionals, stage historians, teachers – all constituent parts of the enormous 'Shakespeare industry,' all confident that they know perfectly well what they are doing – often show minimal patience with or tolerance for alternative views. Attempts to build bridges are not always welcomed. My claims, moreover, posit a large role for the historian of drama who should be providing firm evidence about the original staging and conventions, a role that has not always been carried out successfully, both because of the nature of the evidence and, at times, some questionable assumptions on the part of the practitioners. So Shakespeare studies move (and will continue to move) merrily along – on parallel tracks to infinity.

But if we *start* with the assumption that there is much we will never know (e.g., what the stage at the Globe actually looked like to a spectator), we may be able to ascertain what *can* be discovered or recovered. Hence my second chapter will be devoted to a fresh look at the basic building block for any detailed investigation of Elizabethan playscripts and theatrical practice – the stage direction. But before delving into those materials, let me first confront some general problems – again, with little hope of any definitive solutions.

A particularly disturbing feature of any study of staging and stage practice is that, quite simply, we have no way of knowing how much we do not know. When a word unknown to modern philologians survives in a Shakespeare play (e.g., the 'prenzie' Angelo, Caliban's 'scamels'), the critic or actor at least is aware of a gap in our knowledge (or a textual crux) and can consult learned

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notes in editions or journals. Similarly, we know we are missing something when we hear Pistol twice call out 'have we not Hiren here?' (2 *Henry IV*, II. iv. 145, 158–9), apparently a famous line from a lost play, as well known then as 'To be or not to be' now. Again, when Hamlet tells Rosencrantz: 'Ay, sir, but "while the grass grows" – the proverb is something musty' (III. ii. 329–30) or when Lady Macbeth castigates her back-sliding husband for 'letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would," / Like the poor cat i'th'adage' (I. vii. 44–5), we know that Shakespeare is expecting us to fill in the blanks with a proverb well known then albeit obscure today ('while the grass grows, the horse starves'; 'the cat would eat fish yet dare not wet its feet'). A reader without access to notes or Tilley's dictionary of proverbs[9] may have some difficulty making full sense out of these moments, but no alert reader will be unaware that something beyond the words themselves is being invoked or assumed, something presumably accessible to most of the original audience.

But when one turns to the stage practice and theatrical conventions of the past, especially in the plays of Shakespeare (which seem to speak to us so readily across the wide gap of time), the historian or director or critic or editor can never be sure when we are talking the same language, when we are sharing the same assumptions. To be sure, few readers today have difficulty with soliloquies, asides, disguises, eavesdropping scenes, even perhaps alarums and excursions (i.e., regular and recognizable features of Elizabethan plays), but even these well-known practices can cause problems for some sensibilities. Thus, several scholars have challenged modern 'realistic' assumptions about the aside. In his seminal study of the Globe plays, Bernard Beckerman notes that 'many asides give the actor neither time nor motivation for creating verisimilitude.' We often assume that, to deliver an aside, a Richard III or Hamlet or Othello must be distanced from the other figures on stage, but, drawing upon examples from *Pericles* and *Othello*, Beckerman argues that 'the Globe players, in the staging of asides, did not think in terms of creating an illusion of actuality but of relating the crucial elements of the narrative to each other.'[10] Or, as Ernest L. Rhodes has noted, 'the important thing was not the distance but the signal for the "aside," regardless of whether it was given by a movement on the stage, a gesture, by a special tone of the voice, or by all of these.'[11] The modern

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sensibility may expect some visible separation between the speaker and potential listeners, but if the deliverer of the aside is quite close to the other actors, the emphasis may fall not upon his deceptive speaking but rather upon their faulty listening, an effect demonstrably present in many moral interludes and used adroitly for sardonic comic purposes repeatedly in *Volpone*. Is, then, the gap between aside speaker and listener 'real' or conventional or symbolic?

To confront this and other such questions one must first arrive at a working definition of 'theatrical convention,' so let me turn to the useful discussion of that term by Raymond Williams.[12] A convention, for Williams, 'is simply the terms upon which author, performers and audience agree to meet, so that the performance may be carried on.' Such agreement, he notes, 'is by no means always a formal or definite process' but rather 'is largely customary, and often indeed it is virtually unconscious'; this consent, moreover, 'must usually *precede* the performance, so that what is to be done may be accepted without damaging friction.' Those attuned to a set of conventions (e.g., 'that the speech and action should as closely as possible appear to be those of everyday life') often do not recognize their conventions as such, rather equating their familiar procedures with 'what a play is like' or 'the sort of thing a play tries to do,' yet, as Williams notes, what could be more illogical than seeing actors who supposedly 'represent people behaving naturally, and usually privately,' standing in front of 'a large audience, while all the time maintaining the illusion that, as characters, these persons are unaware of the audience's presence.' Similarly, an actor 'can speak to us, acknowledging his most private thoughts, and we will agree that while we hear him from the back of the gallery, he cannot be heard by a man a few feet away from him, or waiting in the wings.' Although in the cold light of day we might question these and other effects, in the theatre 'we do not challenge them. We accept; we agree; these are the conventions.'

Consider the many cinematic conventions to which we give such unthinking consent. To audiences today, cinema may represent the epitome of realism, yet if we can, for a moment, examine our own assumptions, what is 'real' about sitting in a darkened auditorium, watching figures larger than life (especially in 'close-ups') projected onto a flat screen and seen through camera angles

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