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## Reclaiming Shakespearean Freedom



What *good* is Shakespeare? The proliferation and specialisation of Shakespeare studies tend to have the unfortunate effect that we neglect the big question of why we bother with him at all. One of the great merits of Jonathan Bate's elegant and important book *The Genius of Shakespeare* was that it faced up to this question, but Bate's book is about twenty years old now, and we need to renew its effort.<sup>1</sup> After the World Shakespeare Festival that was central to the Cultural Olympiad of 2012, and the four-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday celebrations of 2014, as well as 2016's four-hundredth anniversary of the playwright's death, there is a real and frankly reasonable danger of everybody without a vested interest in the playwright simply getting sick of him. And there's no logical reason why that sickness shouldn't prove terminal, why Shakespeare shouldn't finally begin to die off in human culture. *If* Shakespeare matters – and I mean *still* matters – then in this context especially, we need a less academic reason than the 'aspectuality' and 'performativity' which Bate defines as salient qualities of Shakespeare's genius.<sup>2</sup> Bate is pointing to important truths – about Shakespeare's ambivalence, about his philosophical as well as aesthetic commitment to the realisation of character in action. But we now need a more direct and powerful way of expressing the poetry and reality of what Shakespeare has, in the past, given human life; in the wake of the 2012, 2014 and 2016 celebrations of Shakespeare, we need a better reason why we should continue to lavish such disproportionate attention on this long-dead Warwickshire poet-playwright. This book argues that Shakespeare means freedom. That is why the plays matter, and not just aesthetically but also in terms of the impact they historically have had and can continue to have on personal and political life in the world.

Of course Shakespeare's achievement – the beauty of his language and dramatic embodiment of life, the breadth of his insight – cannot be reduced to freedom, or to anything else for that matter; but in these pages, I will argue that in and through that breadth and beauty freedom nevertheless emerges as a supreme Shakespearean value, one which has played an important part in the history of culture and which we need to reclaim now. But what is freedom, and what does it mean to invoke it as a surpassing value in Shakespeare? It's impossible to formulate a satisfactory answer quickly. For in the plays as in life, freedom is richly various; if that's one reason for its complex appeal and poetry, it also makes it hard to get hold of. We might instinctively *know* what it means, but it's difficult to conceptualise and *say* what it means. Shakespeare's plays crystallise a number of different kinds of freedom dramatically, and that can give us a first steer on what it is and why it matters in general.

One central kind of freedom, in the Western tradition, is the *freedom to be yourself*. Such existential freedom is more comprehensive and profound than the freedom to *do what you like*, though that certainly contributes to it. As the famed creator of some of the world's most vital and substantial characters, Shakespeare affords excellent examples of this existential freedom. Take Falstaff, for instance. The very fatness of the fat knight expresses his condition of superabundant liberty, as becomes apparent the moment we meet him. Falstaff's first words in Shakespeare frame a question you'd think was innocent enough, 'Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?' But instead of saying five past three, for example, Hal lays bare Falstaff's freedom from such distractions. 'Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping-houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta,' he says, 'I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of day' (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.1–10).<sup>3</sup> Time, in this utterance, stands for duty, industry, self-control. Hal's Salvador-Dalí-like metamorphosis of its elements and appurtenances into the pleasures of drinking, eating and sex announces Falstaff's emancipation from such constraint. And yet, this speech does more than afford memorable images of Falstaff's freedom; it *participates* in that freedom in a crescendo of imagined indulgences – from drink, to food, to sex; from the tongues of bawds (a foretaste of tongues of whores), to 'leaping-houses' (whose name anticipates energetic release), to that 'fair hot wench in flame-coloured

taffeta' (a phrase leaning towards luxurious climax). That such an irresistible creature has morphed out of 'the blessed sun himself' has a blasphemous implication; in the theatre, 'blessed sun' could be heard as 'blessed *son*'. This is a speech which doesn't just transgress against conventional religion but begins to remake it in the image of Falstaff's subversive and sensuous freedom, with the crucified messiah transmuting into a red-hot prostitute.

Falstaff is of course delighted by this. 'Indeed you come near me now, Hal,' he murmurs (1.2.11), before continuing the game with his own, differently alluring fantasy: 'when thou art king,' he says, 'let not us that are squires of the night's body be called thieves of the day's beauty. Let us be "Diana's foresters", "gentlemen of the shade", "minions of the moon"' (1.2.20–3). Such wistful phrasing has a cool and elegant dignity clearly meant to counterpoint Hal's hot whore. And it's an excellent joke of course – one where the fat knight reveals by cold juxtaposition Hal's warm imaginative involvement in his own supposed excesses, and even as he does so stakes hilarious claim to a stately composure that is patently quite beyond him. But it's not just a joke. It also intimates, however teasingly, a transvaluation of values, whereby Falstaff recasts unbridled freedom in such a way as asserts its potential for beauty and dignity.

In this conversation between Falstaff and Hal, we see how fertile freedom is, how Falstaff's unbridled life stimulates Hal's wit, which in turn provokes Falstaff's epiphany. Harry calls Falstaff 'fat-witted' (1.2.2). He means hung over, half-asleep; but he also, surely, means to acknowledge, stimulate and point out to the audience the expansive largeness of Falstaff's mind. When, in both parts of *Henry IV*, Falstaff takes up his own 'great belly' as a theme for comic celebration, he further encourages us to see his fatness as but the outward and visible sign of an uncontainable spirit of freedom (2 *Henry IV*, 1.2.133–4). 'Well, the truth is, Sir John,' says the Lord Chief Justice, 'you live in great infamy'; with his hands on his vast girth, Falstaff answers, 'He that buckles himself in my belt cannot live in less' (2 *Henry IV*, 1.2.125–7). Falstaff cannot be contained by ordinary decorums, nor can he even be confined by the play's end. More than any of Shakespeare's characters, he steps from play to play. And he steps through history too; that is why it's so easy to imagine him, even now, spilling out of his trousers while delightfully destabilising any given civic occasion, office

function, family wedding. In Falstaff, we touch something essential: the unrestrained subversive freedom of Shakespeare's own imagination.

Falstaff not only nails the freedom to be yourself; he magnificently exemplifies its value. But freedom can also take an almost opposite form, that of *the freedom to be different*. The fat knight gives us the scandalous freedom of a mature person who lives his (or her) own life entirely beyond respectability, but Shakespeare equally speaks to the kind of freedom most associated in our time with adolescence or mid-life crisis. This is the freedom not of being (what you are) but *becoming* (what you might be), the freedom to cast off all that you have been till now in a sudden, insurgent desire to be otherwise. One Shakespearean character who exemplifies this self-subverting freedom is Rosalind. At the beginning of *As You Like It*, she clearly is a good girl, an obedient daughter; but this limits her freedom, which is why, when she's forced to leave home, she goes with such 'swashing', emancipated glee 'to liberty, and not to banishment' (1.3.114, 132). By assuming a male alter ego, she lays claim to a whole new self, one which sets her free not just from familial and social duty but even from her identity as a woman. For her, freedom isn't so much a charter to be and enjoy your self as the liberty to destroy your established identity in the act of stepping into a whole new existence. And this, too, is a very Shakespearean thing, exactly what any actor must do each time he (or she) throws himself (or herself) into a new part. Such freedom to be otherwise is hard-wired into the very technology of the form that Shakespeare works in.

A further, still more venturesome kind of freedom is *the freedom to enter evil*. Rosalind's and Falstaff's freedom is subversive in an enjoyable, relatively safe fashion. We experience Rosalind's new life as Ganymede as marvellous self-expansion; Falstaff, too, remains essentially delightful, because we are not encouraged to think too long or hard about those he is letting down or exploiting. And yet, Falstaff's freedom does have its cruelties – his indifference to his soldiers, the extra wound he dishes out to Hotspur's corpse. But if in Falstaff Shakespeare starts to open up the morally dubious side of freedom, elsewhere he goes much further. When at the beginning of *King Lear*, for instance, Edmund repudiates traditional constraints and beliefs – not least about his illegitimacy – he may remind us of Rosalind or Falstaff, but his is a wilfully illegitimate kind of freedom, one which spins a positively immoral vocation out of his illegitimate birth. It initiates a career of deliberate and murderous treachery, and it can't be

excused as high spirits or recuperated into any kind of decency. If this darkens Edmund's dramatic life, at the same time it lends it an extra, glamorous power. Edmund puts it in tumescent terms: 'I grow; I prosper. / Now gods, stand up for bastards!' (1.2.21–2). Wicked freedom stands revealed as erotic intensification.

In Edmund, self-assertive freedom takes a turn for the worse, but freedom is equally found in Shakespeare in forms of life which are opposite to self-aggrandisement. Rosalind's 'swashing' liberation may be one of the glories of *As You Like It*, but Oliver's attempts at self-assertion in the same play are not at all successful. It is only when he is saved by the younger brother he has been jealously trying to put down that he is liberated – liberated *from self* into a life of love. Looking back on his earlier, unregenerate life, he ventures, beautifully:

'Twas I, but 'tis not I. I do not shame  
 To tell you what I was, since my conversion  
 So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am.

(4.3.134–6)

Falstaff finds freedom in being what he is, whereas Rosalind finds it in becoming what she's not. Edmund forges a glamorous kind of freedom in wicked self-assertion, but Oliver tastes sweet freedom only when he's shocked out of self-interest. Freedom in Shakespeare is unpredictable, and the fact that we don't ever quite know where or when it might transpire makes an important contribution to the interest and appeal of the plays, both for the characters and the audiences.

I propose that Shakespeare can help us see freedom less as a substantial thing or concept and more as a specific and welcoming disposition towards life. For the plays suggest that the forms of freedom are as various as life is; they suggest freedom can be found wherever life is affirmed. As often as not in Shakespeare, freedom is a thrilling surprise, a kind of secular blessing or grace. You might expect to discover or secure it in triumph, but Antony and Cleopatra find it instead in death, 'which shackles accidents and bolts up change', and failure, which enables their splendid exit from the cramping conditions of culture and mortality (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.6). As we shall see in the course of this book, the same might be said for Hamlet.

Freedom in Shakespeare is an open question. We have only just begun to respond to its presence in the plays, but I hope I have done enough to demonstrate that it requires a wide-angled approach. I want this book to do justice to the difficult and differentiated breadth of Shakespearean freedom, not to narrow the lens a priori and make it sharper or neater. It is the complexity of freedom, including its moral complexity, that makes it interesting, alluring, sometimes tragic. In what follows, I will try to incorporate as much as I can of what freedom is in the plays, as well as something of what Shakespearean freedom becomes through the modern epoch, and what it might do for contemporary life and culture.

But I am leaving an important thing out. I have suggested that freedom of the most intense and existential kind is the freedom of being or becoming yourself. I have also suggested that freedom is self-sovereignty, self-possession and sheer enjoyment of life, that it is a welcoming and affirmative disposition towards life, wherever that is found. But so far I have been dealing only with examples of individual freedom, and freedom has an important collective aspect. Self-sovereignty and enjoyment of life work, I think, for national and larger political as well as subjective freedoms; they help explain something of the excitement and warmth of feeling which nationalism or broader identifications such as Zionism, Christendom or Pan-Slavism can involve. At the end of this chapter and elsewhere in the book, we will see that nationalism has often derived a powerful impetus from Shakespearean freedom. But there are tensions between subjective, familial, national and larger political identifications as alternative spheres of freedom, and these are tensions which sometimes tear apart the lives of individuals, families and nations. We don't have to look far for Shakespearean evidence. It is clear that Juliet transgresses against and compromises the Capulets' sense of themselves by falling for their enemy's son, and it's clear that this entails agonising consequences for her as well as them. *Coriolanus* presents a more complex case. The hero here becomes convinced that Rome is falling short of its own proper *Romanitas*, leaving him alone as the embodiment of its properly 'free contempt' for the mere needs and dispositions of the plebs (2.3.189). That is why when the city banishes him, Coriolanus feels able to say back to Rome, 'I banish you' (3.3.127). But what complicates this further is that Rome has banished Coriolanus at the behest of the people, who are agitating for a new, more democratic kind of freedom in a new kind of

Rome. The way they see it, Coriolanus doesn't stand for the freedom of the city at all but rather for the exclusive, unjust and outrageous freedom of his class.

All of Shakespeare's characters have to fight for their freedom through and sometimes against the larger freedoms of family, class, nation and so on; but beyond or perhaps below this, the basic sociality of Shakespeare's art – the fact that even his most splendid characters can only secure their freedom by interacting with others – lends Shakespearean drama an inherent political suggestiveness. How might such freedom be extended – even shared out equally – among the *dramatis personae*? What sorts of interaction, on and off stage, tend to promote the freedoms which Shakespeare dramatises? Some kinds of freedom (Oliver's) are clearly compatible with the free flourishing of others, but others (Edmund's) are actually forged by deliberately violating them. An *excessively* generalised freedom – which we might think of in contemporary terms of 'political correctness' – is likely to diminish the quality of freedom as a feeling for and identification with life. And if that's the case, as a society we need to know what scope, moral or otherwise, there is for the singular, amoral and even immoral freedom of the individual in relation to the politics of freedom in general.

This book will argue that freedom in Shakespeare is always a struggle for freedom. Freedom in Shakespeare is also a struggle between characters and from play to play over what freedom *means*. And it is a struggle that is played out time and again in the life and lives, and progressive political movements, which Shakespeare has stimulated or inspired. This struggle will never be over. Unlike Wagner, Shakespeare makes no attempt to give us an overarching myth. He offers only a series of plays. One comes to an end; another begins. There is no final, definitive synthesis. And in spite of the links and resonances between them, each play retains its own separate integrity. *The Tempest* cannot wholly absorb *King Lear*, or for that matter *Troilus and Cressida*, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare expresses the unavoidable and unending power of contingency. Even after Shakespeare – even after the four-hundredth anniversary of his death – life goes on. My hope in this book is that reclaiming Shakespearean freedom might at the same time encourage a creative and hopeful orientation to its ever-new possibilities, without evading the moral complexities and pitfalls that entails.

The time is ripe, I believe, for a bold new argument in favour of Shakespearean freedom. In recent years, there have been striking intimations of a new recognition of it in mainstream literary and popular culture, but these hopeful signs have been snuffed out by a crippling diffidence about the good of the arts in general, and of Shakespeare in particular – as we shall now see.

### 1 What Good Are the Arts?

John Carey raised that big question in his book of the same title in 2005, and the book's popular success suggests a new appetite for it.<sup>4</sup> If, on the one hand, this conveys a hunger in contemporary culture for aesthetic meaning and value, on the other, it probably confesses a creeping suspicion that the arts aren't really any good at all. Carey offers some uncomfortable and, I will suggest, ultimately unsatisfactory conclusions. But, at the same time, he leads us towards the case for Shakespeare I want to make in these pages, as well as demonstrating the difficulties which in our time we appear to have in making it.

What, asks Carey, is a work of art? 'My answer,' he writes, is 'A work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for that one person.'<sup>5</sup> The trouble is that this gives no grounds on which to build the case for aesthetic value or appreciation. Is art morally improving then? Carey doubts it, citing the French dandy anarchist poet Laurent Tailhade (a friend of Wilfred Owen) who, when a bomb was thrown into the French parliament in 1893, said that the victims didn't matter so long as the gesture was beautiful. Carey points to Hans and Shulamith Kreidler's scientific assessment of the *Psychology of the Arts*, which concluded that 'the widely shared belief that art can instruct the public, and help to attain a better state of affairs, lacks any factual backing.'<sup>6</sup> And he gives short shrift to the mystical account whereby art facilitates in the beholder states of transcendent oneness with the Universe. This, he scoffs, is simply a fanciful invention of the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, where people do report being ravished by art into states of ecstasy, it tends to make them selfish and disengaged rather than better people, he suggests, pointing to a 1960s survey by Marghanita Laski.<sup>8</sup> To nail the point that art appreciation doesn't necessarily make you a better person, Carey then turns to Frederic Spotts's book



*Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, which puts paid to the comforting fiction that Hitler had no taste by showing how the worst moral monster of the twentieth century was simultaneously the greatest art collector of all time.<sup>9</sup>

But if he gives up on the arts in general, Carey still wants to make a case for the importance of literature, and of Shakespeare especially. He claims that ‘literature gives you ideas to think with’, but painting can also do that – think of cubism, and of the fact that much contemporary art is deliberately ‘conceptual’.<sup>10</sup> Carey lauds Shakespeare’s ‘superior indistinctness’, for being ‘vivid and nebulous’.<sup>11</sup> But Beethoven is no less superior and vivid and, given the non-linguistic nature of his medium, he is more indistinct and nebulous (or, if we want to put it more positively, more suggestive, less tied to denotative meaning). As the last sally of his book, Carey writes, ‘If I had to choose one single Shakespearean thought to cling to when all else fails, it would not be from any of the great plays or major characters but from Parolles in *All’s Well that Ends Well*.’ The Shakespearean thought that Carey has in mind is the one Parolles utters after being utterly humiliated and ruined: ‘simply the thing I am / Shall make me live’ (4.4.310–11). The very last sentence of *What Good Are the Arts?* reads as follows: ‘That thought may be useful for all of us in the end, and it is a different thought for each of us, because each of us must read “the thing I am” in a different way.’<sup>12</sup> It’s hardly a knock-down endorsement of Shakespeare’s value, or of the good of the arts in general.

But what is interesting about it is the sheer tentativeness with which it intimates an argument about Shakespearean freedom which it somehow isn’t ready or able to own. Carey appreciates Shakespeare’s almost musical combination of vividness and openness to interpretation. ‘Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live’: the fact that he adopts this as his own last word on the question of aesthetic value suggests an irreducible freedom to be oneself is not just the hallmark of Shakespeare’s achievement but the good of the arts in general. And Carey’s gloss on the phrase – ‘each of us must read “the thing I am” in a different way’ – imputes a comparable freedom to Shakespeare’s readers. All told, he implicitly evokes a Shakespeare who portrays free individuals and submits them to the free judgement of individuals whose freedom their freedom reflects and affirms, but he can’t quite bring himself to say this. And we find this same powerful but

disabblingly abashed desire to affirm Shakespearean freedom in mainstream popular culture as well.

## 2 London 2012

Perhaps the most weirdly compelling and certainly the most public invocation of Shakespeare in our time occurred when Kenneth Branagh opened the Cultural Olympiad of 2012 watched by an estimated global TV audience of some 900 million.<sup>13</sup> Costumed in top hat and fake whiskers as the pioneering Victorian engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Branagh nonetheless spoke these words: ‘Be not afeard. This isle is full of noises, / Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.’ Since you’re reading this book, you probably know that they originate from Caliban in *The Tempest* (3.2.135–6), and that they’re nothing to do with the famous engineer. But one wonders what the watching millions who *didn’t* know their Shakespearean provenance made of them.

*The isle is full of noises?!*

And even if you were one of the relative few, in the stadium or tuning in at home, who got the reference, you were likely to be bemused. As the first and most imposingly spoken words in the whole Olympic Opening Ceremony, they were meant to function as a kind of headline or even moral for the games, which moreover had a ‘Caliban’s Dream’ theme song. And the enormous ‘Olympic Bell’ – struck by Team GB cyclist Bradley Wiggins to announce the stage was set for Branagh – was inscribed: ‘LONDON 2012 / BE NOT AFEARD; / THE ISLE IS FULL OF NOISES’. In *The Tempest*, Caliban is the solitary indigenous inhabitant of an obscure island seemingly not much bigger than an indoor theatre, as well as, in Erin Sullivan’s phrase, ‘one of the most politically disenfranchised and dispossessed characters in all of Shakespeare’s plays’.<sup>14</sup> Why was he speaking, through Brunel, for this unprecedentedly public presentation of Britishness? How was his poignant moment of aboriginal inwardness meant to relate to Brunel’s achievements in engineering? And when Branagh positively hollered the climactic words of what was originally intended to be a quietly soothing as well as passionately inspired speech from the midst of Elgar’s swelling ‘Nimrod’ variation ‘in a manner’, as