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Woman as Fool: Dramatic Mechanism in Shakespeare

"Don't ask what it means, ask what it does" ran the Cambridge injunction: the linguistic precept helps us to re-open the question of women's status in Shakespeare. A direct assault on meaning, via an assessment of female character as portrayed in the plays, is evidently primitive. A more refined version of the old-style approach through character is to regard stage women as embodying or suggesting certain contemporary controversies.¹ However suggestive and rewarding, this approach does court the ontological trap of assuming "women" to be invariably equivalent to "female character in a play." Clearly, on many occasions we (and the audience) can assume a close correspondence between *woman* and the fictive image. After all, a basic point in having female characters on stage is that they remind the audience of women off-stage. So a female character, addressing herself to matters of directly sexual interest—marriage, the importunacies of City gallants, the legal position of Elizabethan women—evokes a strong audience reaction through the allusion to contemporary life. But that is not the sole, or even necessarily a major, reason for the dramatic existence of women. The needs of stagecraft go beyond straight reportage of women, as perceived by the dramatist. It would be tediously pedantic to insist on referring to "female character" throughout this essay; but I emphasize that "woman" is purely a convention of discourse. I want here to view the matter as a dramatic mechanism. That is, I suggest that we ask: what, in the context of the total play, is Shakespeare using women for?

A part, undoubtedly, of a proper response is to resist the question. One can maintain that at all times Shakespeare is depicting human beings, not deploying a set of cardboards as agents. And I agree that it would be absurd to speak of "using" Cleopatra, or Juliet, or Rosalind. The female character is totally assimilated into the play's design, is subject and mechanism combined. Still, we start from the

iron premise that Shakespeare is at all times a dramatist, whose objectives are subdued to the needs of each dramatic enterprise. That enterprise will create its own dramatic laws, its own problems and solutions. A design concerned with high politics, and therefore with men, may need women simply to throw light on the domestic side of their menfolk. Lady Percy, Portia, and Calpurnia exist because of Hotspur, Brutus, and Caesar. A design concentrated upon a major relationship—*The Taming of the Shrew*, *Antony and Cleopatra*—needs the woman for exactly the same reason as it needs the man: you need two people to make a relationship. A design composed around a central figure, but recognizing the most important of the radial relationships, must calculate Lady Macbeth in relation to her husband. Stage women have diverse functions to perform, not easily subject to generalization. Nevertheless, a certain sense of the strategic utility of women does, I think, emerge in the early plays of Shakespeare. Those plays are constructed with a clear architectural line, around which the scaffolding is still visible; and for these, my question retains its point. In those early plays we recognize a design in which women have a clear function in locating, and stating the thesis of the drama.

Every play in the canon consists (as in historical context it must) in its broadest formulation, of a largely male cast, usually making a botch of affairs. Now how is this situation to be analysed and expounded? The solution requires an impulse of challenge and intelligence to be directed at the inadequacies of the central transactions. This critical intelligence can come from several quarters on stage. In the histories, the French—whose status is that of opponents and foils to the English—often supply a challenge in the cross-Channel manoeuvrings. But for obvious reasons of audience response, the French cannot be built up too far as refuters of the English. Again, the rebels in *Henry IV* supply a challenge; and for equally obvious reasons of ideology and dramatic design, Hotspur and co. are depicted as lightweights, and losers. These are local factors in a local dramatic problem. Sometimes a high-ranking subordinate supplies this impulse: the Lord Chief Justice, Kent, Enobarbus, Camillo. The two great sources of critical challenge, however, are the Fools; and women.

Intelligence without power is what they have in common. I have proposed elsewhere² that the function of clowns (and rustics, servants, plebians) in Shakespeare is to amplify the ancient role of jester: they mock authority. And in mocking it, they reveal its limitations.

This is true whether the jester figure is himself a person of intelligence (Speed, Touchstone), or, bucolically, constitutes a parodic comment on his betters (Bottom, Dogberry). The use of social inferiors to comment, directly or obliquely, on the actions of the great is a constant resource of Shakespeare's stagecraft: it runs from the Dromios of Ephesus and Syracuse, through Michael Williams' challenge to Henry V and the servants' dialogue in Act IV of *Coriolanus*, to the burlesque conspiracy of Stephano and Trinculo. It is, however, narrowly true that the terminus of the intelligent jester line is the Fool in *King Lear*.

With the Fools come, in natural alliance, women. This is a structural formation, but sometimes becomes an on-stage pairing. Costard gets on well with the Ladies of the Court, and the Princess is especially gracious to him at the pageant of Worthies; Touchstone accompanies Celia and Rosalind into exile; Viola and Feste strike up a guarded understanding (III, i). The immediate mechanics of stage presentation are not worth pursuing here, though it is important to note that women and Fools are never, prior to *King Lear*, in major contention. There is a natural affinity, but not an identity between the perspective of each group. Generally, a Fool is well placed to point out that his master is behaving stupidly (Speed on Valentine) or that the values of the entire society are deficient (Touchstone on the "sport" of wrestling at Duke Frederick's court). But the women argue, more cogently, from a single point of reference: themselves.

That is why the clearest instances of woman-as-intelligence come in the early comedies, and why it is unnecessary to linger long over them. The plot is courtship, and the issue is acceptance. The women are, so to speak, necessarily women; their sexual situation is the plot. The mechanism is detailed, once and for all, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, where four women confront four male wooers, and arrive eventually at the terms on which the sexual settlement is made. Certain points emerge with great clarity from this exemplary play. First, the individuals are manifestly units in a sexual group. Individual characteristics are observable in all eight—even with Dumaine and Maria there is something for the actor and actress to seize on—still, we recognize what is in essence a male v. female joust. Second, the female group expresses the Intelligence of the play. It is important to note that this has nothing to do with individual intelligence. Berowne is highly intelligent, not less so than Rosalind, but his cleverness is a mask for folly. The play endorses the final negotiating position of the women, that the male oaths must be tested against a year's probation.

And this Intelligence takes on often the mode of a philosophical enquiry. The women, in the masque encounter especially, appear as philosophy dons analysing and refuting the erroneous propositions of sophomores.

Love's Labour's Lost is a demonstration play, and its lessons are applicable to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The dramaturgic limitation is that the women, in expressing Intelligence, express also a direct self-interest. Of greater resonance are the occasions when the Intelligence is not identical with a simple concern with self. I instance two of the early histories: *Henry VI, Part One*, and *Richard III*.

I Henry VI is not a primitive play, but a play about primitives. The impulse of the dramatist is not merely to chronicle the English decline in France—mournfully, though with intellectual neutrality—but to identify the causality of the affair. The root of the matter is the dissension and mental limitations of the English nobles; and this is pointed out through the choric commentaries of the Messenger, Exeter, the Mayor of London, and others. There is however a subtler critique of the English governing group. It is presented, first, through the Talbot—Countess of Auvergne interlude, the “peaceful comic sport” as Burgundy calls it (II, ii, 45).

It is the first instance in Shakespeare of the “stalking horse” technique, which I suppose most of us know best as a standard Shavian resource. In this, the dramatist presents a persuasive and logical argument through the mouth of a character whom the audience is conditioned to detest. (Cf. Shylock and Undershaft the arms manufacturer in *Major Barbara*.) The Countess of Auvergne is French; and bent on treachery towards Talbot, whom generations of commentators used to assume to be the “hero” of *I Henry VI*.³ Prepare, then, to hiss a Gallic Judith. Her charge against Talbot, though, sounds unpleasantly convincing:

That hast by tyranny these many years
Wasted our country, slain our citizens
And sent our sons and husbands captivate.

(II, iii, 40-2)

It is perfectly true. What is the case for the English being in France, a presence that history had decisively resolved by the time of this play? It is never argued, merely asserted.⁴

These are his substance, sinews, arms and strength,
With which he yoketh your rebellious necks,

Razeth your cities, and subverts your towns,
And a moment makes them desolate.

(II, iii, 63-6)

says Talbot, pointing to his soldiers. For the moment, the argument is conclusive. Might is right, and Talbot has it. And what happens when Talbot runs out of soldiers? The play leaves the question hanging in the air. One scarcely needs superhuman perception to detect it. Talbot encounters, in Act IV, the fate that is latent in his response to the Countess of Auvergne. The real challenge to the representative Englishman is, why should the English be fighting in France? And it is posed, obliquely, by a woman.

Still more interesting is Shakespeare's exploitation of Pucelle. She conforms in the main to audience preconceptions—treacherous, a witch, the Dauphin's trull. All the greater, therefore, is the explosive force of the surprise Shakespeare detonates in IV, vii. To Lucy's

But where's the great Alcides of the field,
Valiant Lord Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury,
Created, for his rare success in arms,
Great Earl of Washford, Waterford, and Valence;
Lord Talbot of Goodrig and Urchinfield,
Lord Strange of Blackmere, Lord Verdon of Alton,
Lord Cromwell of Wingfield, Lord Furnival of Sheffield,
The Thrice-victorious Lord of Falconbridge,
Knight of the noble Order of Saint George,
Worthy Saint Michael, and the Golden Fleece,
Great marshal to Henry the Sixth
Of all his wars within the realm of France?

Pucelle replies

Here's a silly stately style indeed!
The Turk, that two and fifty kingdoms hath,
Writes not so tedious a style as this.
Him that thou magnifi'st with all these titles
Stinking and fly-blown lies here at our feet.

(IV, vii, 60-76)

It is a theatrical coup, a bouleversement of the ceremonial style upheld and represented by the English "hero." That was illusion; this, says Pucelle, is the reality. So early in Shakespeare's career does the dramatist show his hand and characteristic method. But the demolition is even more complete than it looks. Pucelle's reply is addressed to Lucy, who is the latest in the series of choric messengers to

chide the English nobles for their shortcomings. In IV, iv he brings Somerset the news of Talbot's fall, and laments the "private discord" that has prevented co-operation between the English forces. It is a repetition of the homily delivered by the Messenger in I, i, "That here you maintain several factions" (71). Lucy, then, faithfully maintains the choric party line. Surely, choruses are not mocked? Surely a chorus reveals at least a main strand in the playwright's argument? And then, if not earlier, we realize that Shakespeare is *not* standing behind the multiple chorus. Their line, a collective wringing of hands, is that if the English would only pull themselves together and stop quarrelling they might yet hold on to France. Which, naturally, is fair enough, up to a point, but leaves untouched the deeper causes of the English ruin. Shakespeare indicates, through Pucelle, that their obsession with the ceremonial style reveals an inner myopia; and that is the true source of their downfall.⁵ Thereafter Shakespeare hastens to cover his tracks, and the black humour of Pucelle's multiple-paternity order scene (V, iv) is her final impression on the audience. But she, and the Countess, have incarnated the Intelligence that orders this chronicle.

Richard III has four speaking parts for women: the three Queens—Margaret, Elizabeth, Anne—and the Duchess of York, Richard's mother. They constitute a single dramatic unit, though not a team comparable to the Princess of France's retinue. This unit is the chorus. The women are the element of continuity in the Civil Wars: they suffer, but survive—as no man does. They are, if you like, the faded reminder of the world of ceremony that was the England of *I Henry VI*; even Richard finds it useful to maintain the fiction of public reverence:

Madam, my mother, I do cry you mercy,
I did not see your grace. Humbly on my knee
I crave your blessing.

(II, ii, 104-6)

Whatever happens to their menfolk, the women remain to furnish alliances, to breed, to embellish palaces. Their expressive action is generally limited to anathema, lamentation, and foreboding, to explaining what it is like to be married to Richard or mother to politically-dangerous children. They, much more than the (almost) silent citizenry, are the England of *Richard III*. They are the race memory of the nation; they are what the play *knows*.

And this cognitive function is the true role of the Intelligence in *Richard III*. The women are memory and perception. It all leads to the remarkable episode in IV, iv, when Queen Elizabeth becomes the Prosecutor who translates Richard's conscience into words. The scene is much under-rated by critics who find it a rather tedious inversion of the wooing scene. In fact, it is the necessary preparation for the Bosworth soliloquy in which Richard's conscience finds, at last, open expression; and it varies the technique of I, iv, in which the murderers become conscience and judge to Clarence. Queen Elizabeth has shown from the beginning (I, iii, 13) that she is not deceived by Richard. Here, she takes on the manner of the philosophy don, which we noted as a feature of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Extended quotation is unnecessary, but the brilliant stichomythia of IV, iv, 343-62 is typical; as is this:

- K. Rich.* Now, by my George, my Garter, and my crown—
Q. Eliz. Profan'd, dishonor'd, and the third usurp'd.
K. Rich. I swear—
Q. Eliz. By nothing, for this is no oath:
 Thy George, profan'd, hath lost his lordly honor;
 Thy Garter, blemish'd, pawn'd his knightly virtue;
 Thy crown, usurp'd, disgrac'd his kingly glory.
 If something thou wouldst swear to be believ'd,
 Swear then by something that thou hast not wrong'd.
K. Rich. Then by myself—
Q. Eliz. Thyself is self-misus'd.
K. Rich. Now by the world—
Q. Eliz. 'Tis full of thy foul wrongs.
K. Rich. My father's death—
Q. Eliz. Thy life hath it dishonor'd.
K. Rich. Why then, by God—
Q. Eliz. God's wrong is most of all.
 (IV, iv, 366-77)

It is a total refutation of the moral imbecility announced by Richard in the play's opening lines, "I am determined to prove a villain." More than that, the scene is a reversal of his particular folly. Richard's grand conceit was the perception of self as a triumphant actor. And now the Star has become the straight man: the woman, foil in the earlier wooing scene, has taken over the Star role.⁶

With *Richard III* and with *I Henry VI* we detect, at strategic points, the women expressing the consciousness of the play. The dramatic mechanism supplies variations on the technique centrally discernible in *Love's Labour's Lost*. After these experiments, matters become less clear-cut; and the technique is not obviously suited to a

dramatic enterprise in which women form part of the central subject-matter of the drama. There is, however, one play of Shakespeare's maturity in which, as it seems to me, the earlier method is revived, refined, and given final expression: *King Lear*.

The opening scene gives us the geometry of relationships in the piece; they all radiate from Lear. He is bent on an act of public and private theatre, the ordering and rewarding of the major radial relationships. It is a quasi-masque, the monodrama of the beneficent Monarch. In essence, it is a deeply repellent spectacle: an old man making his will, and determined to extract the last milligramme of satisfaction as his daughters jump through the hoop for the last time. To arrive at an exact assessment for those relationships we need, I think, to investigate the "You/thou" usage, than which few notations on the linguistic score are given less attention today. A glance at the theory is worth the detour.

I take the authoritative statement to be Randolph Quirk's, and he phrases it thus:

It is often said that the old singular and plural are used in Shakespeare as they are used in Chaucer: and this is quite untrue; it is often said that in 1600 *you* was polite, formal usage but *thou* was familiar or insulting. This is a gross oversimplification: cf. McIntosh, Mulholland. The modern linguistic concept of contrast operating through *marked* and unmarked members can give us a truer picture. *You* is usually the stylistically unmarked form: it is not so much 'polite' as 'not impolite'; it is not so much 'formal' as 'not informal.' It is for this reason that *thou* can operate in such a wide variety of contrasts with it.⁷

"Thou/you" is not an index of permanent categories, a statement of relationships always frozen into one or other form. It is a sign of living change, of mood and contrast, as people measure the degree of intimacy or distance from each other by the election of *thou* or *you*. Now Quirk uses the opening of *King Lear* as his main illustration:

Kent, Gloucester, Edmund and Lear all use *you* in speaking to each other: as we should expect. Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia address their father as *you*—again, as we should expect. Lear addresses Goneril and Regan as *thou*, and again—from father to daughter—this is what we should expect. Against this background of perfect decorum and the fully expected, it should no doubt come as a surprise to us that Lear addresses Cordelia at first as *you*: 'what can you say to draw/ A third more opulent than your sister?' (I, i, 84f). So also 93f. It seems unlikely that these uses of *you(r)* are without significance in indicating a special feeling that Lear has for the girl he calls 'our joy,' who has been, as France says, 'Lear's

best object,' the argument of his praise, the balm of his age, the best, the dearest (*ibid.* 214-6). When, however, he is shocked by what he takes to be her lack of love, he uses *thou*—not now the *thou* of father to daughter, but the *thou* of anger: 'But goes thy heart with this?' 'Thy truth, then, be thy dower!' (104, 107) . . .) This is what is meant by saying the importance lies in *active contrast*.⁸

I draw a different conclusion from Professor Quirk concerning the force of *thou* in the all-important opening exchanges. The evidence does admit of another construction. It is true, as he says, that Lear addresses Goneril and Regan as *thou*; but only *after* they have undergone the ritual of gratitude. ("We make thee lady . . . To thee and thine hereditary ever . . ." 66, 79). The singular pronominal form does not occur before. We have the address to the three daughters ("Tell me, my daughters . . . Which of you shall we say doth love us most?"), and the separate addresses to Goneril and Regan are brief commands to "speak." Cordelia is alone in encountering the more elaborate preamble, and this contains the singular "you,": "What can you say. . . ." As I read it, the address to Cordelia, taken in conjunction with the previous addresses to Goneril and Regan, supplies a clear diagram of Lear's system. His daughters are *you* before submission; *thou* after. The *you* is provisional, a not-closing of a partially open state; the *thou* is final, a grunt of satisfaction at compliance.

All this is a revelation of folly, since the realities of love and intimacy do not correspond with this crude objectification. But the folly now becomes an absurdity, and it is Cordelia's function to point it out. He asks, "what can you say to draw/ A third more opulent than your sisters?"

Before we consider the reply, let us consider the question and its background. Kent and Gloucester have already let it be known that the division is fixed, and so far as Albany and Cornwall are concerned it is finely balanced, "for equalities are so weighed, that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety" (5-7). We are not told how Cordelia's portion rates against the others; but it is comparable, since Regan receives an "ample third" (80), and a third plus a third leaves a third. But that is not what Lear's words convey. "Which of you shall we say doth love us most" is followed by "That we our largest bounty may extend/ Where nature doth with merit challenge?" How can this be done? If Goneril's portion is fixed, how can the others be variable? If she is outbid by her younger sisters, how can her third be retroactively diminished? Conversely, how can the later speakers increase by the excellence of their performances the

size of their portions? Lear's stated wishes, therefore, are not merely the stigmata of a domestic tyrant. They are a logical absurdity that a child could detect: a silliness.

It comes down, then, to the trigger-question that touches off the tragic action: "what can you say to draw/ A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak." What does it mean? "Draw" first: of the 11 senses Onions distinguishes, he assigns to the line the dual possibility, "to receive (money), to win a stake."⁹ "Receive" seems a little innocent here: the sense of *drawing a prize* seems a stronger implication. Can we, then, infer a subdued metaphor which identifies the whole transaction as a lottery or game? Or does *draw* revert to its primary idea of "pulling," of bringing something to oneself against some kind of resistance? No aspect of these metaphoric impulses bears examination, in human terms. Then, "a third more opulent." We can just, I think, defend the phrase as containing a notion that is not absurd. It could mean "a territorial third of the kingdom, which however is richer in resources, possesses more fertile land, than the other two thirds." But the major drift (and this is certainly in line with Lear's earlier announcement (of 48-53) is, what can you say to get a better portion than your sisters?

And the answer is, nothing. If the predetermined third is of a higher quality than the other two thirds, saying will not change it. If the implication is of territorial extent, saying can only change it at the expense of the other two, whose portions are already publicly fixed. When, therefore, Cordelia breaks silence with Nothing, she voices the impulse of severest logic. Of course there are many emotions latent in that *nothing*, and the actress can comprehend them all. The word expresses Cordelia's mounting irritation at the performances of Lear, Goneril, and Regan, and a desire to separate herself from her appalling family. It is an impulse to punish the old man, to spoil his show. It is a reminder to him that he is making a fool of himself. It is a simple loss of temper. It is even, if you like, a failure of the intelligence, since it leads to a consequence that the most righteous of daughters would not will. But if it is humanly unintelligent, it is the Intelligence of the drama that speaks. *Nothing* is the most truthful statement in the play; and it falls to a female character to announce, and to reiterate, the iron logic of the commentary.

That is the argument: Folly exposed and rebuked by Intelligence. Naturally, the agent of Intelligence has to pay her price. But Lear and Cordelia make their own accommodation, and in their final dialogue Lear freely bestows on her the "thou" of love and intimacy, "When

thou dost ask me blessing . . ." (V, iii, 10).¹⁰ It is not necessary for me to labour the structural connection of Cordelia with the Fool. *King Lear* is the agony of a single consciousness, spread across five acts; and two people, above all others, impinge upon that consciousness. It is Cordelia who says *nothing*, and the Fool who instructs Lear that "nothing can be made out of nothing" (I, iv, 132-3). We could think of the dramatic process not as a change of "perspective" (that rather bland, neutral, point-of-view term) but as "triangulation," the infantryman's metaphor for identifying a target. The consciousness at the centre of the drama is made aware of itself and its folly through two defining agents.

And my poor fool is hang'd. At last, we are in a position to read a famous crux. My readers will be familiar with the pages of notes that the Variorum lavishes upon *fool*. We know that *fool* does not identify literally the Fool, that it is a term of endearment, that it refers primarily to Cordelia. It is possible that the same actor doubled the parts of Cordelia and the Fool, and thus physically conflated the possibilities in the word. And Juliet Dusinberre is surely right in saying that "His Fool and his daughter share the same area of his consciousness."¹¹ But all this, in my view, skirts round the status of *fool*. Its primary force is of metaphor. "My poor fool" is Cordelia; that is, she who had acted as Fool in challenging the imbecilities of authority. It is the terminal statement, refined to a single word, of a major resource in Shakespeare's stagecraft. Woman, the teller of truth, fuses with the Fool as representative of the Intelligence: in drama, understood.

NOTES

Citations are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans *et al.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

1. See especially Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (London and New York: Macmillan and Harper & Row, 1975).
2. See the Introduction to my *Shakespeare's Comedies: Explorations in Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).
3. Talbot was cut completely from the celebrated Hall/Barton adaptation staged as *The Wars of the Roses* by the RSC (1963). He was not missed.
4. The best account of the play that I know is Sigurd Burckhardt's, in *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). "The mode of *I Henry VI* seeks, in fact compels the seeking of, the fullest self-assertion at every moment; it is impatient of indirection, refuses to sacrifice immediate effects for long-range gains . . . it always 'goes for broke' ". (p. 54)

5. "The disorder in the world of *Henry VI* is not so much a rupture, a break in the chain of ordered being; it is a disease, an infection endemic in the all-too-pure, all-too-ceremonial lily that makes the noble flower smell far worse than weeds." *Ibid.*, p. 75.
6. So accustomed is the reader to the theatrical domination of Richard that one may not realize what an opportunity this episode (cut from Olivier's film) is to the actress. The RSC production of 1963, later made into a TV version, permanently demonstrates how the actress can dominate the scene. And this is so, because in IV, iv Queen Elizabeth becomes the moral centre of the drama.
7. Randolph Quirk, "Shakespeare and the English Language," in *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Kenneth Muir and S. Schoenbaum (Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 70.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
9. See C.T. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary*. Second Edition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1919).
10. This is, of course, the polar opposite of the "thou" of anger, which Lear adopts in the passage beginning "But goes thy heart with this? . . . thy truth then be thy dow'r!" (I, i, 105, 108). As G.L. Brook remarks, "There is no contradiction between the friendly and hostile uses of *thou*." G.L. Brook, *The Language of Shakespeare* (London: André Deutsch, 1976), p. 74.
11. Dusinberre, *op. cit.*, p. 114.