SHAKESPEARE’S RITES


There is no ground more dangerously delightful. Shakespeare has exercised a magnetic strength in the nearly four hundred years since his death in 1616. Even a brief list of the attracted – Pope, Theobald, Coleridge, Tennyson, A. C. Bradley, Freud, Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Orwell – shows how uniform is his pull, like a wave of the sea, over different ages. When T. S. Eliot, who exercised caution of the master in his criticism, but was a bolder borrower in his poems, posited in 1927 that ‘the last few years have witnessed a number of recrudescences of Shakespeare’, one might have thought that crudescences had been in abeyance, and Shakespeare had somehow got some respite from the assay.

‘He was not of an age, but for all time’, wrote Ben Jonson. Time has been true to his words, as all times since have had their Shakespeare. Eliot wrote, in the age of the authorship debates, of the ‘disintegration of Shakespeare’ against which E. K. Chambers protested; and in what Eliot termed the age of the Senecan Shakespeare, one luckily and happily underwritten by the monumental historical scholarship of Fleay, Greg, Chambers, and William Lawrence. Our own, though bounded by better historical fences, has produced yet another type, one marked by the expansiveness of its claims: Harold Bloom’s Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human (1998), and Stephen Greenblatt’s Will in the World (2004). One might have thought the years would have taught us to tread more softly. For, like his Cleopatra, Shakespeare’s dangers are nearly equal to his attractions: he has a way of holding the
mirror quite close to the critical face. Eliot’s caution was prudent: master beware master.

It is good, then, almost an event, to have a much more modest book on Shakespeare appear, one which seeks to bring his age alive by means neither grand nor artificial, and to set his plays in a context without cementing them there: admiring of its ground but aware of its boundaries. Daniel Swift’s work begins with a supposition that the worlds of religion and drama in the age of Shakespeare were more than coterminous neighbours, and he therefore seeks to situate Shakespeare back in a milieu which merged debates about matters of belief with stage entertainment.

Swift’s central claim is tripartite: that the Book of Common Prayer (1549, 1559, 1662) was ‘the central religious text of this powerfully religious age’; that ‘the hidden history’ of the Book of Common Prayer is ‘a history of passionately contested revision and of manic sensitivity to a verb or turn of phrase’; and that, as Shakespeare was ‘immersed in and constantly receptive to the currents of contemporary debate, both limited and freed by the intellectual assumptions of his culture’, ‘the Book of Common Prayer is his great forgotten source’. A new source for Shakespeare, one hidden in plain sight, is no small matter, yet this critical flourish is mitigated with scholarly tip-toe: Swift admits that after Macbeth, which he tentatively dates to 1605 (acknowledging that ‘all chronologies of the plays are uncertain’), Shakespeare ‘put aside the Book of Common Prayer’, and ‘he does not return again to these explorations’.

The persuasions of Swift’s argument turn on his skilful historical scholarship, which lends some cumulative plausibility to his assertion that Shakespeare absorbed the ‘most influential literary work’ of his time, a book ‘cheaper and more widespread than the Bible’. Yet it is difficult to find traceable allusions to the Prayer Book in the plays, and it is therefore greatly to his credit that Swift builds his argument and analysis predominantly around larger relations between the two:

The prayer book struggled, throughout this period, with its twin and rival, the commercial theatre. Plays were the other great common work of the age, both written collaboratively and performed before crowds. It was against the theatre that the Book of Common Prayer sought to define itself.
This is a large, though not excessive, claim, giving one to wonder whether he intends these as fraternal or identical twins. Though both drama and religion use words, can they be said to share the same medium? Ezra Pound finely distinguished drama from literature on just this basis: ‘whereas the medium of poetry is WORDS, the medium of drama is people moving about on a stage and using words’. As strange as it may be to even propose a medium of religion, one senses that Pound’s description would not fit: a stage invites suspension of disbelief, rather than the affirmation of belief which a pulpit proposes; and men of faith, unlike actors, are more servants than masters of words; for words, under God, are themselves pressed into service. This is a slippery business for language, perhaps especially so in Shakespeare’s age, abundant with textual recovery, diligent linguistic scholarship, and prolific translation. To recover this atmosphere is to discover why battles over the language of the Prayer Book – Swift calls our attention to ‘the keywords that were hated and fought’ – were replete with a significance beyond immediate victory, as Hamlet contemplates when he scrutinises men of action:

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\text{Witness this army, of such mass and charge,}
\text{Led by a delicate and tender prince,}
\text{Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff’d,}
\text{Makes mouths at the invisible event,}
\text{Exposing what is mortal and unsure}
\text{To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,}
\text{Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great,}
\text{Is not to stir without great argument,}
\text{But greatly to find quarrel in a straw,}
\text{When honour’s at the stake.}
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(IV. iv)

Swift’s diligent investigations give his suggestion of a theatrical and religious intertwining and competition an intriguing credibility, which the central analysis of his book aptly abets. Concentrating on the way in which the Prayer Book is a kind of background against which Shakespeare’s plays might be presented, his argument is itself a kind of performance, putting several of Shakespeare’s plays into a setting at once old and new, and
letting us see how and what they mean there. He emphasises in particular Shakespeare’s use and reimagining of rites, which were instructed through the Book of Common Prayer but whose performance was forbidden on the stage, though they were a central part of the life of his age: of marriage in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, Much Ado About Nothing, All’s Well That Ends Well, Romeo and Juliet, and As You Like It; of communion and burial in Hamlet and Macbeth; and of baptism in Macbeth.

This requires a considerable literary historical reconstruction, as Swift admits. ‘I am trying here’, he tells us, ‘through repetition, to renew a now-lost cultural knowledge: to trace the bounces of an echo and to show how deeply familiar, even conventional, both this phrase and the practice once were’. This, as he traces back the steps of Macbeth II. ii. 56-7: ‘Thou sure and firm-set earth, / Hear not my steps, which way they walk’. ‘The phrase’, Swift tells us, ‘is scriptural. It is Jeremiah 7:23, when God orders, “walk ye in all the ways I have commanded you”. He cites the same image from Jeremiah 10: 23, Ecclesiastes 11: 9, Deuteronomy 5: 33, and Psalms 1: 1, 143: 8, and 128: 1.

The first citation is particularly telling, and Swift might have made even more of it. He is modest in noting that the spiritual teaching of the lines leads us to ‘the proper behaviour of a Christian within marriage’, and ‘Macbeth is a play built upon the tension of a marriage’. Unless we know the scripture, he tells us, Macbeth’s address to the earth is ‘apparently illogical’, quoting as slightly preposterous a 1788 suggestion that ‘Macbeth was treading on a boarded floor … which made a cracking noise’. Yet the play proffers another possibility, perfectly sensible, which Swift’s initial comparison encourages: Macbeth is indeed a man walking backwards, turned against the natural way in his path to the murder of Duncan, a horrible imagining that moves his heart to beat ‘against the use of nature’ (I. iv). What Macbeth does undoes him, as he well knows it will, when he turns against his own nature as a fearless man of honour: ‘I dare do all that may become a man / Who dares do more, is none’ (I. vi).

Keeping his pace, Swift carefully walks us through the rite of marriage, and its dangerous and rich presence in the plays. Noting that ‘marriage is a metaphor’ in the Prayer Book (as the
book puts it, ‘signifying unto us the mystical union, betwixt Christ and his Church’), with the ring serving as ‘a token and a pledge’ of the ‘vow and covenant’, he discusses a staged version of this exchange, together with the central question of spoken consent, in *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, where Julia and Proteus exchange rings. By ‘one version of early modern law’, Swift notes, they ‘are now half-married’, for ‘consent expressed in the present tense formed an indissoluble bond; if the contract was conditional, sexual consummation made it binding’. Such a law is suggestive of the way in which these rites formed serious speech acts, what J. L. Austin, in *How To Do Things with Words* (1980), might call a ‘perlocutionary act’, or ‘what we achieve by saying something’ (p. 109). Austin isolates the performative partly with the criterion that ‘the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action’, and gives an utterance of consent in the course of the marriage ceremony as an example (p. 5). How would an enacted ceremony then be described?

It would be a curious thing to know if such early modern legalities surrounding the performance of rites would have applied to actors themselves. Swift remarks, paraphrasing Anne Barton, that ‘marriage is a dramatic performance: the spousal is a piece of minor theatre’. But this explanation does not quite account for the double enactment of such staged promises: a speech-act on the stage might be what Austin describes as an ‘unhappy performative’ or a ‘void utterance’ (pp. 10, 14), since the words of the rite voiced by an actor on the stage would not have the same force of intention as those voiced off it, as for any actor intention is either absent or otherwise than the statement purports. Did the Church and legal authorities prohibit rite performance on stage in part for this very reason, thinking, in that knotty way that theologians sometimes did and do think, that such enactments were actments after all?

The questions raised by the remainder of Swift’s analysis, as he describes Shakespeare’s turn from rite mockery to a consideration of ‘the formal structures of sincere bonds’, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, are equally fascinating. ‘The rite is unfinished’, he tells us, ‘until consummation’. So a speech-act must be followed by the act, the mystical union made flesh; Swift notes that ‘sex makes marriage’. One only wishes that he here had turned his perspicuity a little
more strongly towards that strange masterpiece, *Measure for Measure*, where Claudio claims much the same:

> Thus stands it with me: upon a true contract
> I got possession of Julietta’s bed.
> You know the lady, she is fast my wife,
> Save that we do the denunciation lack
> Of outward order; this we came not to,
> Only for propagation of a dow’r
> Remaining in the coffer of her friends.

(I. ii)

Or, as the Puritan divine William Perkins, quoted by Swift, articulates: ‘where there hath been a carnal use of each others body, it is always pre-supposed, that a mutual consent, as touching Marriage, hath gone before’. What ought one then to think of the Elizabethan bed trick, also supremely present in *Measure for Measure*? Swift touches on the play and quotes Claudio’s explanation above, in illustrating how the order of events matters in the process of the rite: ‘Angelo has consented to marry Mariana but deferred the rite itself; as a parallel movement, Claudio and Juliet have sworn their consent and consummated their love, but are not married. As Claudio describes …’. But as Claudio describes, they are married: ‘upon a true contract’, ‘she is fast my wife’; moreover, the Duke poses to Mariana an argument for the bed trick very like: ‘He is your husband on a pre-contract’ (IV. i), although he later claims that ceremony rectifies their pre-consummation: ‘Consenting to the safeguard of your honour, / I thought your marriage fit’ (V. i).

Did such questions perplex even the Elizabethans? Swift notes that ‘Angelo never expresses his consent to marry Mariana, but in accepting his guilt – his final words, “I was, my lord” – he accepts the marriage’. But Angelo’s answer – coming from a man who has requested ‘sequent death’ – responds in the past tense to the Duke’s perpetual question, ‘Wast thou e’er contracted to this woman?’ (V. i). And tenses matter in an age in which marriage of *verba de praesenti*, or consent in the present tense, was recognised. Why not then might Angelo’s ‘I was’ be heard as a protest, not quite silent, at the punishment the Duke intends to inflict by effecting a marriage so deeply unconsensual? Angelo is likely to feel the
sharp point of insult added to injury, having just stated that their contract was broken off,

Partly for that her promised proportion
Came short of composition; but in chief
For that her reputation was disvalued,
In levity.

(V. i)

She is not his equal in reputation, he claims; but the effect of the Duke’s plotting has been to reduce him to someone unworthy of her. Whatever the Duke may say about Mariana’s honour, this imposed marriage smacks of a punishment levied against Angelo to shame him further. The Prayer Book ritual, even with its symbolical underpinnings, seems lessened in the light of the Duke’s deplorable manipulation of men’s minds and laws, and Mariana’s magnanimous humanity in the face of them.

Swift’s even richer argument unfolds, however, in the context he brings to Macbeth by restoring to that play a background of the communal and baptismal rites. Macbeth is a play doused in blood, and behind it he describes a Christianity that is equally blood-soaked in some of its central rites.

First, Communion. While traditional Catholic theology professes the miracle of transubstantiation in the Communion rite, the ‘actual bread and wine transformed into the body and the blood of Christ’, and ‘the reformed English Church denied full sacramental presence, the 1549 prayer book attempted some conciliation with the theology of the traditional rite’. Swift posits that this ‘awkward meeting of two different theologies might suggest not the achievement of community but the point of its rupture’. From this rupture, he intriguingly suggests an excommunication of Macbeth himself, who, ‘after the murder of Duncan’, ‘is exiled from the community of shared experience’. He cites here, as a ‘drama of isolation’, the beautiful lines in which Macbeth finds himself unable to speak the word:

I could not say, ‘Amen,’
When they did say ‘God bless us.’

(II. ii)
In a lovely piece of critical scholarship, he compares this moment with John Jewel in his Challenge Sermon, speaking of a ‘common language and a known tongue’: ‘And thus the death of Christ and his passion is set forth in such sort as the poor people can have no comfort or fruit thereby: nor give thanks unto God, nor say, Amen’. And Andrew Willett in 1600: ‘the people cannot be edified by a language which they understand not: nor yet can say Amen to strange prayers’. This is heady stuff, showing how the strangeness of *Macbeth*, so often expressed in a curious twists of language, culminates in a hell of soliloquising: our word is our bond, and Macbeth’s are broken when he jumps the life to come.

Swift does further service by calling our attention to another ghostly presence in the play, that of baptism, whose natural element is a sea of blood. ‘Public baptism begins with the Red Sea. The figure is included in all versions of the prayer book.’ Here is the notion that, far from being cleansed of sin by water, as we might think, the rite demands rather that we are born through blood, and to bathe in that blood sets us free. Swift again quotes Jewett, on the transformation of water in the rite: ‘Through the power of God’s working the water is turned into blood. They that be washed in it receive the remission of their sins: their robes are made clean in the blood of the lamb’.

This baptismal blood runs ‘just beneath the surface’ of *Macbeth*, and Swift finds it awash in Macbeth’s reference to another sea:

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Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green one red.
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(II. ii)

Macbeth is not redeemed but damned by his blood bath. Lady Macbeth, whose early, fruitless, hope is that ‘a little water clears us of this deed’, is quite right to see it at last as a ‘damned spot’, the latter a word Swift also links back to the bloody baptismal rite. Like Christ’s blood, the play’s is mystical, and eternal; it cannot be washed away. ‘The play tells the story’, Swift says, ‘of a broken rite’. As George Herbert proposed in ‘The Water Course’ (1633),
Who gives to man as he sees fit

the opposing ends of eternity stand nearer in relation than we think.

Although Swift does not extend his analysis in this direction, it is compelling to consider what such rites might betray about the religion behind them. ‘Blood will have blood’ (III. iv), Macbeth declares, alluding to Genesis 9: 6. Why, then, should not a man who was praised on the battlefield when he would ‘memorise another Golgotha’, kill off that field with equal, eternal glory? Why should not he who cannot beget yet get? Swift admits that the play ‘flirts with ritual’, but when he notes that ‘this is something like parody’, he stops short and shy, hesitating on the edge of a suggestion that Macbeth’s use of ritual, so long lost to our perception, contains a serious criticism of Christianity’s killings.

Swift book finally bears out T. S. Eliot’s maxim that ‘scholarship, even in its humblest forms, has its rights’. For he has given us to know – through diligent research, and cautious and carefully provocative criticism – that Shakespeare, too, had his.

The Commonwealth School, Boston  JENNIFER FORMICHELLI
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COMPLICATING JONSON


Among words Ben Jonson is known to have coined – or at least to have endorsed through early use – are playwright, poetaster, and afterlife. Each member of this trinity conveys a different aspect of Jonson’s reputation. There is his emphasis on craft (the ‘wright’ in ‘playwright’), his scorn of literary poseurs, and his shrewd eye on posterity. Ian Donaldson, even with the best historical research at his disposal, cannot eradicate these stereotypes, though he does manage to explain their provenance. Better still, Jonson’s biographer ranges them alongside other crude formulations that