

New Challenges from the Lost Unity: Shakespeare, Performance and Difference

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Shakespeare is known to face an incongruous challenge as he fails in his attempt to represent a unity of action and language in his plays. However, some contemporary literary theoreticians have criticised the prevailing existence of monolithic unity in Shakespearean plays. This criticism arises mostly from the notion of performative identity, which has its origins in J. L. Austin's speech act theory. Thus, the question of unity in Shakespeare poses at least two challenges: 1) the literary challenge that Shakespeare faces as he failingly struggles to represent unity onstage; 2) a theoretical challenge to contemporary approaches, which, grounded on performative identity, have not yet satisfactorily dealt with unity in Shakespeare's text. I will here examine Shakespeare's attempt and failure to represent unity onstage and, also, how the lack of unity in his plays undermines the efforts of seeing a monolithic unity in his text.

My aim is to give further evidence to the lack of unity in Shakespearean plays and to demonstrate how the non-existence (or, even, the impossibility) of such unity challenges performative identity theory and speech act theory. Methodologically, I have preferred to cross selected examples from the Shakespeariana—mostly from *Titus Andronicus*¹ (*Tit.* henceforth), in which this subject-matter is manifest – with current theoretical topics chosen amongst representative studies.

¹ All Shakespeare's quotations are from the *Complete Works* edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968) and indicated by act, scene and line accordingly.

1. Shakespeare challenged

Before being a theoretical problem, the lack of an unattainable unity upon the stage was an aesthetic challenge to Shakespeare himself, who unsuccessfully sought it in dramatic artistry and poetic language. Shown onstage in its multiple developments, Shakespeare's attempt is one of uniting language and the human body in a representational effort thus described by Terry Eagleton:

Shakespeare's utopian solution to the conflicts which beset him—an organic unity of body and language—is by definition unattainable. For the body can never be fully present in discourse: it is part of the very nature of a sign to 'absent' its referent . . . A 'linguistic body' would thus seem something of a contradiction in terms: the solid, unified entity we call a body is fissured, rendered non-identical with itself, by the language which is its very breath. (97, 101)

Once it is only ideally possible while hinted throughout the staging of the plays, the unity is unreachable, hence lost, as it is gazed at in its remote dramatic possibilities. It can be in effect illustrated from socio-cultural and political frames where it is most visible; namely, in the "interrelations of language, desire, law, money and the body" (Eagleton ix), as seen, for instance, when, in *Measure for Measure*, Isabella is "prepared to exchange Claudio's head for an intact hymen" (50). Lear's tearing up of his own clothes is also an indication for this lost unity, since in it "Shakespeare deconstructs this binary opposition," Eagleton explains, between Nature and Culture, "showing how each term inheres in the other" in a cultural environment where "[t]he reconciliation of Nature and culture is, inseparably, a uniting of the body and language. For the body, however much a social product, is also a biological given, and language is Shakespeare's primary symbol of the culture which surpasses and transforms its limits" (Eagleton 90-92).

Further evidence has been given by Danson and by Tricomi in two separate analyses of *Tit.*, in which they sustain the idea of the Shakespearean quest for some sort of unity that unveils the "struggle to turn the language of words into the language of action" (Danson 51), and also a blatant effort "to unite language and action in an endeavour to render the events of the tragedy more real and painful" (Tricomi 32). All of this joins in the

conclusion that Shakespearean characters' interference with each other's bodies puts in the same plane words and action in some sort of literalness. The word cannot replace the thing, but the struggle for this in part becomes an attempted unity drawing heavily on ultimate poetic language, for "[t]he more intense their emotions, the more intricately florid the diction of Shakespeare's characters tends to grow" (Eagleton 40), which makes of Shakespeare's language "material power, an active intervention into the world at least as real as a blow on the head" (Eagleton 9).

Grounded on Eagleton's, Danson's and Tricomi's, another analysis of the lost unity in Shakespeare, exclusive of *Tit.*, has been carried out in Ramalho (2006), and some of these conclusions are here useful. In that play "the limits of dramatic conventions and, unexpectedly, silence and physical mutilation are united in a performance that does not separate words from action. Characters begin to be silenced through the severing of body parts related to speech (heads and tongue) and to writing (hands)," which makes a line like Aaron's "Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, / Blood and revenge are hammering in my head" (2.3 38-39), suggestive of a recurring rhetorical effect, be physically realised (Ramalho 85-86). Thus, when Titus offers to Aaron "lend me thy hand, and I will give thee mine" (3.1 186), his hand is actually severed and given away as it shows how to a degree language can become action.

The unreachable unity attempted at through violence leads the play to a flux of enactment at any rate dissolving in performance the restraints of fixed identities, as observed when Titus's daughter Lavinia enters the stage without her tongue, handless and raped. To the horror of the other characters fearing the deadly silence physically imposed on her, she expresses her condition both verbally – by pointing out the words telling the Philomela myth in an open copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – and non-verbally – through her meaningful body.² Thus,

² This view is supported by E. Waith's (18-30) assertion that when they find difficulty in expression in both *Tit.* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (one of the sources of the play, a copy of which taken onstage), characters victimised by violence are unable to express their suffering in words and are transformed into animal or plants (Ovid) and mutilated bodies (Shakespeare).

like the subject of a Renaissance anamorphic painting, which can be seen from one point of view as a vital, dynamic figure, and from another point of view as a decaying corpse, Lavinia is indeed a ‘changing piece’, a cipher and repository of meaning continually reinterpreted through the observations and voices of others. (Cunningham 70)

These multiple aspects embodied by Lavinia can be deemed a primary onstage instance of performative identity as first conceived by Judith Butler’s borrowing from Austin’s theory, or, in a nutshell of her own: “Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler 13).³ In *Tit.*, the thing named and the thing destroyed are body parts made into props, epitomised in Titus’s detached hand held amidst Lavinia’s stumps (“Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thine arms.” [3.1 279-82]—“teeth” curiously stands for “arms” in the Folio), besides Lavinia’s own body silenced through violence, while body parts related to speech (e.g. tongue) are made into dead natural parts. Lavinia is not necessarily anything pre-determined that would exist invariably as such, but symbolises ways of being – or, in Greek as devised in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (1448a 1), ethoi, meaning characters and behaviour, i.e. social/cultural manners of subjectivity – ever changing at the glance of her fellow characters. Lavinia does not display an “essential” monolithic identity, but simultaneous aspects of a multifaceted identity fleeting in the lines of the text that builds it.

A less dramatic instance of the diversity in performing identities in Shakespeare is Rosalind in *As You Like It*. As widely known, like all of her gender on the Elizabethan stage, Rosalind is a female character played by a boy-actor, who disguises herself as the boy Ganymede (“no worse a name than Jove’s own page” [1.3 633]). This multiple identity performance,

³ Under Wittgenstein’s influence on Austin’s philosophy of language, his speech act theory became public in his 1962 book *How to Do Things with Words*, which also triggered the first edition of John Searle’s *Speech Acts* three years later. No matter how tight classifications have been – not sadly – overcome by either their inner limitations or the rise of poststructuralism, Austin’s theory (despite the strict division of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts) remains useful (see Daniel Vanderveken and Susumu Kubo’s ‘Introduction’).

fragmentary in itself, is indicative of the most authentic notion of the otherness made clearer when Rosalind is followed by Celia in taking up a manly figure fittingly named Aliena – after the Latin word for “strange” and “other” – whereby she proves to be, more than a stranger, an Other. Thus, “But what will you be called,” asks Rosaline, to which Celia answers: “Something that hath a reference to my state. / No longer Celia, but Aliena” (I. iii 122-25). As a result, both friends’ cases lead to a three-ness of the girl played by a boy who plays another boy in a multiple representational game of onstage identities.

Besides further evidence, conclusive in itself, of the lack of unity in Shakespeare’s plays, this is also proof of the actual power of language to interfere with reality. According to speech act theory, in a particular context, an utterance like “close the door” would have an actual impact on reality, for it triggers the action it calls for, thereby rearranging the environment in which the utterance is made, being itself the performance of an act, as Petruccio’s blunt request in *Taming of the Shrew*: “And kiss me, Kate” (2.1 320). When tragic to the extreme, such instances can make of an utterance like “I’ll stop your mouth” (*Tit.* 2.3 184) cross the boundaries of the action of gagging someone and reach, not without clumsy absurdness, (e.g. Lavinia’s) tongue severing.

2. Shakespeare’s new challenges to theory

The connection between Shakespeare’s plays and theory is a widely talked about subject within and outside academic circles, and no newness lies either on stating that theory has always profited from Shakespearean plays. Recalling their relation to fashionable contemporary criticism and theory turns out to be valuable for my present scope. As Eagleton explains:

Though conclusive evidence is hard to come by, it is difficult to read Shakespeare without feeling that he was almost certainly familiar with the writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, and Derrida. Perhaps this is simply to say that though there are many ways in which we have thankfully left this conservative patriarch behind, there are other ways in which we have yet to catch up with him. (ix-x)

Of these influential names, Freud has triggered many psychoanalytic analyses, mostly of *Hamlet*, in the twentieth century in the wake of Ernest

Jones' *Hamlet and Oedipus*, while Nietzschean philosophy, as read by Derrida and Foucault, has been established as one foundational tenet of poststructuralism. In turn, the foundations of both poststructuralism and postmodernism, their borrowing from Nietzsche included, have been at the chore of an ongoing critique published both in the *Cambridge Quarterly* and in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, which are rather helpful to the present study.

David Parker's essay is close to Eagleton's association of Shakespeare with Nietzsche. Indeed, by considering "[Frederic] Jameson's rather limited understanding of Nietzsche's project in relation to ethics and morality," Parker assumes that "the postmodernist politics of difference in Anglo-American literary studies" can be confronted with the need of revisionism (299, 304). Thus, according to Parker, it is precisely by reading otherness that Jameson's interpretation becomes far-fetched and feeble, particularly if read against a philosophical background (299).⁴

Another of these essays is David Roberts' article "Sleeping Beauties: Shakespeare, Sleep and the Stage," in which the author proceeds with an examination of a postmodern exhibition in London by the artist Cornelia Parker – in which displayed items in glass cases were suddenly followed by a real actress truly asleep – so as to show the effects of a sleeping person seen live and not returning the visitors' gazes. Roberts proves this to be comparable to several of Shakespeare's characters, such as Lady Macbeth, Richard III, Titania, and Lear, in their different relations, whose sleep is watched both on and off-stage. Tracing back features now called postmodern to their early modern roots, he examines Shakespeare's ability in building what

⁴ Parker deems as 'doubtful' the presence of Nietzsche where he is called for as 'the foundational philosopher of the new', and remains more important to poststructuralism than Derrida, Foucault or Lyotard (Parker 299). Jameson's shortage of Nietzschean quotations (Parker 303) belongs to his misreading of concepts such as good and evil, feeble before Nietzsche's 'yes-saying' (*Ja-Sagen*, for which, see Müller-Lauter 248-301), which '... illustrates ... the close link between ethical and aesthetic values for those of us who have not been too heavily socialized into evaluative relativism by the politics of difference' (314). See Jenkins (212-238), for performative identity in Nietzsche, Soyinka (140-160), for a provoking reading of his philosophy, and Ramalho (81-94) for associating Nietzsche with Shakespeare.

after Plutarch was known as “speaking pictures,” particularly important to the scopophilic tendency in the seventh century, that is, the quite up-to-date love for beholding, or, in his words “of looking in and into things” (Roberts 236).

Particularly relevant to the speech act and performative theories, Roberts pinpoints resemblances between sleep as a stage strategy in Shakespearean plays and the aforementioned postmodern exhibition where the sleeping one becomes the object to the eye of the beholder. He sustains that “Shakespeare’s speaking pictures depict their sleeping subjects, not just by staging them but by speaking of them” (238), which links intrinsically the word to the depiction of the linguistic body. In fact, “the complexity of Shakespeare’s ideological dilemmas,” Eagleton explains, “arise from the fact that they do not take the form of ‘simple’ contradictions, in which each term is the polar opposite of the other; on the contrary, in ‘deconstructive’ fashion, each term seems confusingly to inhere in its antagonist” (97-101).

This critique is important in providing the following arguments with essential aspects of the contemporary state of affairs in literary studies whereby I contextualise the present investigation of Shakespeare’s lost unity and its defiance to theory as being problematic in itself.⁵ The quest for a representational unity on the verge of a totalitarian (or “master,” if fashionable jargon is to be employed) monolithic unity of language (speech) and thing (body) is lost in Shakespeare, and its theoretical consequences can be now focused on in relation to Catherine Belsey’s *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*. She

⁵ In another of the aforementioned studies, Paul Crowther (362) argues against “a fashionable cultural relativism that is sceptical about the objectivity of aesthetic and canonical values” promulgated by “that transdisciplinary *mélange* sometimes called ‘theory’ . . . inspired in general terms by Foucault,” the origins of which are in “discursive practices . . . presented as a general way of understanding *all* cultural products. Every activity—including artifice and representation—is cleansed of its concreteness and/or physicality and repackaged as a mode of meaning or signification,” from which a “consumerist” viewpoint springs in interpreting the literary artwork (Crowther 365) – an example of my own being the overuse of business lingo (e.g. “negotiation”) in criticism practiced since last century’s end.

maintains that the performance of identity on early modern stage foregrounds, in linguistic usage, a broader flux of contextual reality, especially observed in soliloquies, for

when the soliloquy is all in the first person, when the subject defined there is continuous and non-fragmentary, the occurrence of “I” in speech is predicated on a gap between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the utterance, the subject who is defined in the speech. Since the subject of the enunciation always exceeds the subject of the utterance, the “I” cannot be fully present in what it says of itself. It is this gap which opens the possibility of glimpsing an identity behind what is said, a silent self anterior to the utterance. (Belsey 48-49)

This gap is indeed observed in cultural shape-shifters, so to speak, like Rosalind/Ganymede and Celia/Aliena as they speak in the first person, when the “I” of each one of them is additionally split into, at least, the simultaneous three shown above. What results from this is that the subject of the speech in this utterance is linguistically apart from the subject of the enunciation, the three-ness of such a character of course being, therefore, all but “continuous and non-fragmentary” (Belsey 48).

Belsey’s views assume non-fragmentation where Shakespeare shows it coming about on the edges of representation, and, likewise, what she sustains regarding utterance and silence alongside identity is by its own definition undermined by her own notions of a silent self existing before the word uttered or an identity behind what is said. As observed in *Tit.*, silence is not to be found before or after speech, but within the word that carries it in its physical realisation through ultimate speech acts making a body (Lavinia’s) unable to articulate language orally for its lack of tongue. Moreover, Judith Butler’s following arguments come as further counter-evidence to Belsey’s findings:

the materiality of bodies is simply and only a linguistic effect which is reducible to a set of signifiers. Such as distinction overlooks the materiality of the signifier itself. Such an account also fails to understand materiality as that which is bound up with signification from the start; to think through the indissolubility of materiality and signification is no easy matter. To posit by way of language a materiality outside of language is still to posit that materiality, and the materiality so posited will retain that positing as its constitutive condition. (Butler 30)

The discursive materiality that certainly goes far beyond signifiers can be made into representation, even if only transiently and in part, in the violence that unites language and body by silencing/mutilating them together and at the same time. Shakespeare's lost unity broadens Butler's questioning, for it stages the impossibility of a body that is linguistic by nearly realising it in performing language with clear effects on the body. Entailing the association of body, language, identity, and performance, this eventually leads to a crossing of these Shakespearean topics with the poststructuralist view, if any, of the body underlying contemporary theory and criticism:

it is difficult to know ... who or what is designated by the term 'poststructuralism', and perhaps even more difficult to know what to retrieve under the sign of 'the body'. And yet these two signifiers have for some feminists and critical theorists seemed fundamentally antagonistic. One hears warnings like the following: If everything is discourse, what happens to the body? If everything is text, what about violence and bodily injury? Does anything matter in or for poststructuralism? (Butler 28)

Tit. allows some answers to these questions by means of bodies maimed onstage by language, since words achieve injuring material power enough to be realised violently notwithstanding its dramatic, i.e. artificial, status. The palpable aspect of this turns out to be the representation of bodies unable to talk with their severed parts made into props, the cultural materiality of it being one of exchange value observed, for instance, when Titus trades his hand for the heads of two of his killed sons: "For that good hand thou sent'st the Emperor. / Here are the heads of thy two noble sons, / And here's thy hand in scorn to thee sent back" (3.1 233-36). This also goes against Belsey's linearity alongside Butler's agreement with it, as follows:

The body posited as prior to the sign, [sic] is always posited or signified as prior. This signification produces as an effect of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which precedes its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might ever argue

performative, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that is then claims to find prior to any and all signification. (Butler 28)

The body is not before or after the sign in *Tit.*, but confusingly performed together with it on the brink of full representation, which, being impossible, shows itself in the simultaneity of its multiple, yet partial, occurrences. All of this is ultimately representational, for artistry and aesthetic elements – otherwise called dramatic mimesis – are what allow the incapable bodies to come into existence through violence. It is, therefore, mimetic, representational and performative notwithstanding its incompleteness, for the unity is only deceitfully forthcoming for its full realisation remains impossible, which makes of it a forever-lost unity. R. Weiman's following assertions manage to relate representation with performance and difference:

Shakespeare's theater appears to sustain a multiplicity of social and cultural functions in the light of which principles of homogeneity, 'closure', and authority in representation are constantly undermined and subverted. If 'representation' is said to homogenize textual production, stabilize hierarchies and privileges (and so void the text of contradictions and interrogations), the, indeed, dramatic representations of Shakespeare may well be shown not to exhaust their mimetic potential under these modes of closure and plenitude. On the contrary, although the specular reading or viewing of the plays can of course fix the reader or viewer in the plenitude of some false consciousness, there is ample evidence that, over and beyond its stabilizing functions, Shakespearean mimesis comprehends a self-conscious subversion of authority in representation. (276-77)

This shed light on the broader manifestations that Shakespeare's lost unity underlies in a cultural environment thriving with diversity, otherness, heterogeneity and, above all, ceaseless questioning amid the textual, dramatic and performance elements of his plays. A manifest break in the monolithic unity of gender, sex, and race towards a diversified and multiple view of reality in its flux, in which the external characteristics of a given individual are performed while he or she socially enacts his or her veiled human essence.

The fashionable response to that has been attributed to the creation of multiplicity and difference in its appropriation of Shakespearean plays,

instead of the fragmentary features that have always been an inner part of them. Theory is newly challenged therefore in more practical ways than those shown above in their troubling performative and identity approaches, such as Belsey's and Butler's. In contemporary (mostly filmic, but also theatrical) adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, critics have treacherously tended to look for viewpoints developed by a director's re-readings of them to which they oppose the Shakespearean plots themselves as some sort of old-fashioned environment of inequality.

Thus, "situating the play in its prefeminist critique," argues Marianne Novy in one of her studies of Shakespeare, "opens up space for the director and her actors, as well as for spectators, to perform a cultural materialist, or materialist feminist critique" (15), whereby they are useful "to interrogate structures of hierarchy, especially those concerning gender and class relations, in a prevailing masculine culture" (15). The uses a play can have to director and actors who put it onstage are obviously manifold and open to their wishes, besides boundless in their possibilities, and Shakespeare's diversity of plots and characters is quite favourable to that. Novy's words make clear the tendency to assume that contemporary minority views can make use of Shakespeare to make themselves visible through his plays, rather than just highlighting aspects recurring in the Shakespearean texts themselves, which are diverse and fragmentary.

Following this trend, critics and even ordinary viewers often debate about a particular director's choice in turning Shylock less "evil," as though it were only a choice due to adaptations of the text, whereas it indeed lies within the Shakespearean balance of (ine)qualities. For instance, Antonio has devilish traits in his tenacity to make Shylock give up his religion, whereas the Jew shows his humane side, averse to financial gain, by preferring, in act 3, scene 1 (112-15), a cheap ring ("my turquoise"), an erstwhile token of love, to a "wilderness of monkeys" financially profitable to colonists eyes. In both cases, performance, even at its freest, finds in Shakespearean characters' performative identity a conflicting diversity.

The feminism of which Novy's study is a sample is close to queer theory as both tend to see a binary condition in Shakespearean plays. It is at this aspect that Bruce R. Smith aims as he addresses his critique of theory by stating that, "in fixing attention on the semiotic process of meaning-making, queer theory runs the risk of turning women into the

disembodied absences they often occupy in early modern texts” (97).⁶ Lavinia is obviously far from being “disembodied” in her embodiment of physical suffering from realized linguistic violence, while Rosalind and Celia are actually thrice present, just to name some counterposition to Smith’s assertion.

A failed alternative attempt to come to terms with this theoretical conflict is recognising the error of presuming a monolithic unity in Shakespeare, which is in itself a desirable first move towards better readings of the plays. Jerry Brotton’s arguments are quite illustrative of that as he brings about the warn to “critics of the early modern period, in cautioning against accepting the view that the historical logic implied within colonialist discourse is a monolithic entity which comes to shape all subjective and political relationships developed in the activities of travel and commercial expansion from the late fifteenth century onwards” (25). Yet, his piece of writing helps to contextualize arguments in contemporary criticism and, as many of the like, turns out to be nothing more than work in endless progress, or, maybe, a more or less promising agenda short of conclusive evidence, not unlike Annia Loomba’s recognition of potentialities for difference in Shakespeare (164-91).

3. Conclusion

There is a fragmentary element inherent to Shakespeare’s plays. It is mostly visible as parts of a broken ideal unity shown in characters’ conflicts as they fall short of unifying their language (dialogue) and action (plot). Shakespeare himself struggles to deal with the impossibility of such unity between word and things as he attempts to represent it onstage. By doing so, he sets drama as a privileged artistic means of re-enacting the whole (the unreachable unity, which is therefore a lost unity) through its

⁶ Yet, semiotics varies from Eagleton’s “exercise in political semiotics, which tries to locate the relevant history in the very letter of the text” (ix) to K. Elan’s (140-63) notion of pictorial translations of the body, regardless of Shakespeare’s lost unity of body and language.

remaining parts: language and action, which were ideally one and now have become apart.

By applying Butler's identity performance theory, along with elements of Austin's speech act theory which backs it up, these contours of the lost unity entail a second framing that foreshadows fragmentary identities and a constant flux of differences, as observed in Lavinia, Rosalind and Celia, just to name a few. Read against theory, the lost unity leads to problems whose twofold causes can be attributed: 1) to theoretical approaches that deal with unity in Shakespeare by ignoring difference in his text, which happens even to theoreticians (e.g. Novy) concerned with otherness; 2) to theories simply falling short of providing conclusive evidence or satisfactory explanation (e.g. Brotton and Loomba) for the lack of a monolithic unity in Shakespearean plays. Thus, artistically hinted at by Shakespearean characters, the lost unity and its germane performance of difference have defied theory either in studies of aesthetics (Tricomi's, Danson's, Ramalho's) or in studies of the political features of the literary artwork (Eagleton's).

Contemporary theories of language (Austin's) and literature (Butler's and Belsey's) are equally challenged, now with fresh viewpoints and new difficulties, by the simultaneous multiplicity of Shakespearean difference in performance, a great deal of which is due to the non-existence of a monolithic unit in his writing. The present study is conclusive in demonstrating how the Shakespearean challenge of the lost unity defies different theoretical approaches, and how contemporary approaches are newly challenged regarding the performance of differences which, existing since Shakespeare's age, remains puzzling.

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