Platonism and bathos in Shakespeare and other early modern drama

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"Platonism and bathos in Shakespeare and other early modern drama" by Gabriel Egan

Imitations: Play, repertory, venue

It has long been noticed that the events of Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet and those of the play of Pyramis and Thisbe in his A Midsummer Night's Dream are alike, and that the former treats seriously what is farcical in the latter. Roger Prior showed that a single source, either George Gascoigne's The Poesies (Gascoigne 1575) or his Whole Works (Gascoigne 1587), was used for both plays, and in particular the description of a masque to celebrate the marriage in 1572 of two children of Anthony Browne, 1st Viscount Montague (Prior 2000). As well as verbal parallels there are collocations of ideas and images, such as strangers daring to enter a feast (as in Romeo and Juliet 1.5) and phrases about the anticipation of the wedding (as used by Theseus and Hippolyta in A Midsummer Night's Dream 1.1), Shakespeare appears to have moved to a poem called 'The Refusal' on the facing page of Gascoigne's The Poesies and mined it for the rivalry of Demetrius and Lysander (1.1) and of Hermia and Helena (3.2). The Gascoigne link gives us additional reason to consider Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night's Dream as paired plays and to attend to Shakespeare's telling of one story two ways, one tragical and one comical.

The story of Pyramis and Thisbe comes from the Roman poet Ovid's Metamorphoses that Shakespeare read in Arthur Golding's English translation that went through seven editions between 1567 and 1612 (STC 18956-62), and it is not surprising that such a well-known Ovidian contemporary as Gascoigne should be amongst Shakespeare's simultaneous reading as he wrote A Midsummer Night's Dream. Of course, Shakespeare did not need Golding's translation of Ovid, for he read the Latin text for himself (Taylor 2000, 1-4) and probably kept both versions open in front of him as he wrote A Midsummer Night's Dream. The evidence for this is that Golding's phrases occur in the Hermia/Helena story and yet the "Ninny's tomb" (3.1.91) gag seems to come directly from Ovid's Latin: "ad busta Ninil" (Rudd 2000, 116). Moreover, the Hermia/Helena phrases come from the Pyramis and Thisbe material in Golding, so for Shakespeare the high and low characters within A Midsummer Night's Dream are related; indeed the farcical lovers and the serious ones share a common language (Rudd 2000, 118-20). The two books open in front of Shakespeare were also the same story in different forms, one the language of his Stratford grammar school education and serious art and scholarship, the other the demotic language in which he wrote for the London stage. Enemies of the new theatre industry complained that it reduced elevated themes to mundanity, and as the industry developed in the 1580s this falling off, it seemed to them, accelerated with a new generation of writers. When Shakespeare came to London in the late 1580s or early 1590s the chief dramatists were university educated men: John Lyly, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, George Peele, Thomas Nashe, and Thomas Lodge. Shakespeare, by comparison, was less thoroughly educated, and some of the university men thought they could detect a whiff of intellectual decay across the theatre industry.

A sense that modern versions fail to meet the perfection of the ancient originals pervades early modern drama's engagements with classical culture, but A Midsummer Night's Dream playfully locates that anxiety in the classical world itself: a bad impersonation of Pyramis is given at the Athenian court of
mythical Theseus by an actor who believes himself capable of playing Hercules (1.2.24-5). The prologue's explanation of the bad luck governing Romeo and Juliet's love invokes a cosmological and providential model of the world which the play renders unnecessary by showing the mere stupidity which occasions the disaster. In a modern production the degree to which the cosmological cause is suppressed in favour of quotidian causes is often an index of the director's attitude towards the materialist trend in Shakespeare studies. It is possible to make Platonic sense of the over-abundance of causal explanations in the play: the local mistakes (the withheld letter, the compressed time-scheme) are instances of the essential cosmological flaw. Informing the drama of the period's imitations of classical ideals, and especially its uses of bathos, is a response to Philip Sidney's self-conscious reversal of the Platonist model, a reversal which makes the 'beautiful lie' more true than reality.

The entire plot of Pyramus and Thisbe, as it occurs in A Midsummer Night's Dream, is a bathetic version of the story of the Athenian lovers and, much more closely, of the Veronese lovers in Arthur Brooke's Romeus and Juliet (Bandello [1562]). Yet the power relations that structured the occasion of the mechanicals performance, it has been claimed by James H. Kavanagh, were essentially the same as those that structured the outer play too. The problem faced by the mechanicals is that faced by Shakespeare's fellows as they said to themselves: "... for us to assert an effective ability to manipulate their sense of reality, for us to disrupt their lived relation to the real, would be an unacceptable usurpation of ideological power, possibly punishable by death; we must temper out dramatic practice, restrain its effect, and inscribe in it the marks of our own submission" (Kavanagh 1985, 154). In this reading, the fact that the nobles laugh at these fears only confirms the actual ideological conditions that forced the mechanicals to lay bear the constructedness of their entertainment. If this seems like a back-to-front argument--surely the laughter signals that the fears are groundless, that the nobles are willing to suspend disbelief freely and that the artisans failure to realise this is comic--it is probably supposed to be: Kavanagh's essay is about ideology in Shakespeare and is called "Shakespeare in Ideology".

In The Genius of Shakespeare Jonathan Bate argue for the effect of Christopher Marlowe in particular upon the early career of Shakespeare, and that Shakespeare dealt with his admiration first by imitating Marlowe's characters and style, then parodying them, and finally writing his own versions of them that in effect gave Marlowe an after-life (Bate 1997, 101-32). For Bate these stages occurred successively, but, as this essay will argue, imitation and parody ran through the entire culture of early modern theatre in which Shakespeare worked. The new London theatre industry that emerged in the second half of the sixteenth century built for itself new performance venues unlike any other buildings of the time: wooden open-air amphitheatres in the Roman style. Before the construction of the first permanent theatre spaces in London in the 1560s and 1570s, the large yards of the inns of the city of London were used for dramatic performance. The yards, designed for the unloading of wagons, were enclosed on three or four sides and had galleries around their edges that provided access to the upper rooms available for nightly rental. With the addition of a portable stage, an inn-yard made an effective theatre with space for spectators standing around the stage and under or within the galleries. The first recorded performances were at the Saracen's Head, Islington, and the Boar's Head, Aldgate in 1557 (Brownstein 1971b; Brownstein 1971a). E. K. Chambers thought that the Red Lion was such an inn-playhouse, but new evidence shows that, despite the unlikely-sounding name, this was a farm converted to a playhouse in 1567 (Loengard 1983). The stage and galleries were constructed in the garden of the farm by John Brayne, James Burbage's brother-in-law. The galleries were a single storey and the stage was 40 feet by 30 feet by 5 feet high with an attached turret--purpose unknown--reaching some 30 feet above the ground. The entire structure was cheap (under £20 compared to the Theatre's £700), rested on the ground without foundations, and there is no evidence that
it lasted beyond the summer of 1567; the contract with the carpenter was to end with the successful conclusion of "the play which is called the story of Sampson" (Berry 1989, 134).

The familial connection between Brayne and Burbage makes it tempting to consider the Red Lion as a prototype for the first substantial open-air playhouse, the Theatre built in 1576 by Burbage in the Shoreditch district just north-east of the city and hence beyond the jurisdiction of the city authorities. A typical corollary to this has been, 'and hence beyond the reach of anti-theatricalists', but the early-twentieth century theatrical history model of a puritan city harrying the players and a fun-loving court protecting them has recently been revised. Margot Heinemann showed that puritans were not simply anti-theatrical and many anti-theatricalists were not puritans (Heinemann 1980). Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean showed that we can no longer imagine that theatre companies were merely a representative component of humanism's break from religious ideology; the Queen's men formation, for example, was a result of motives "not so much humanist as royalist and Protestant" (McMillin & MacLean 1998, 34). The relationship between court and city regarding the theatre industry is better understood as a dialectic than a mere struggle, and one largely responsible for the rapid growth of the joint-stock playing companies, at least until Charles 1's succession in 1625, whereafter the players were increasingly aligned solely with the court. The Theatre was the model for the open-air playhouses of the new industry that Shakespeare entered, and it was essentially copied in Philip Henslowe's Rose theatre (1587) and Francis Langley's Swan (1595), and its particularities were effectively reborn when it was transplanted to Bankside to form the Globe in 1599 and again when a second Globe was built on the foundations of the first after a fire in 1613.

In 1596 a Dutch humanist scholar, Johannes de Witt, visited the Swan and drew a picture of it that his friend and fellow classicist Aernout van Buchell copied; this copy is extant. De Witt's sketch is the only surviving interior view of an open-air playhouse of the period and it shows a virtually round amphitheatre of between 16 and 24 sides with a stage projecting into the yard surmounted by a stage cover supported on two pillars. External views of the Swan also appear in a number of pictures of London, including a 1627 map of the Paris Garden Manor which appears to show the Swan having a single exterior staircase (Foakes 1985, 24-25). None of the external views of the Swan is a reliable guide to its dimensions, but the Hope playhouse contract specified that it should be "of suche large compass, fforme, widenes, and height as the Plaie house called the Swan" (Greg 1907, 20). Wenceslaus Hollar's sketch of the second Globe shows the Hope to be about 100 feet across, and we may assume the Swan was about the same (Orrell 1983, 101). De Witt described the Swan as the largest of the London playhouses of its day and wrote that it was made out of an aggregate of flint stones ("ex coacervato lapide pyrritide"), a detail we must doubt given the construction practices of the day (Southern & Hodges 1952, 57). The large wooden columns supporting the stage cover were painted like marble so cleverly as "to deceive the most inquiring eye", and perhaps the external rendering too was deceptive. The described interior marbelization, the circular shape, and the use of classical columns with ornate bases and capitals put the Swan in a neo-classicist tradition of design emerging at the end of the sixteenth century, despite the apparent Tudor bareness of the sketch.

Only one more open-air amphitheatre was erected before the general theatre closure of 1642, the Hope of 1613-14 on the site of the old Beargarden that the builder Gilbert Katherens was instructed by Henslowe to first demolish. As well as the construction contract for the Hope, several pictures of it survive in the form of preliminary sketches and a final engraving by Wenceslaus Hollar made in 1641. Famously, the engraving has two of its label reversed, so the the Hope is labelled the Globe and the Globe is labelled "the bearbaiting h[ouse]" (Foakes 1985, 29-31, 36-8). The open-air amphitheatres were the only round (or virtually
round) buildings in London, and were the first purpose-built theatres for a thousand years. Their antecedent was not the Greek amphitheatre, which had a shallow bowl shape and one tier of seating sweeping upwards, but the Roman amphitheatre as exemplified in the Colosseum, which stacked one deck of galleries on top of another. James Burbage named his playhouse of 1576 the Theatre presumably to make explicit its dependence on the classical model, as its round shape and stacked galleries implied. Foreign visitors got the point and repeatedly referred to the London theatres looking like Roman amphitheatres (Orrell 1988, 45, 60, 162), and were impressed by the faux-marble interior decoration. Eyewitness Johannes De Witt described the painted wooden interior of the Swan as cunningly deceptive and, as C. Walter Hodges pointed out, De Witt's evidence shows that the London amphitheatre was essentially a Renaissance rather than a Tudor design (Southern & Hodges 1952). De Witt's description of the stage posts' "marmoreum colorem" (coating of marble colouring), their entasis, and their ornate bases and capitals, all point to classical and continental influence upon the indigenous building tradition. But De Witt's description of the Swan as made out of flint stones is in conflict with our knowledge that playhouses were timber-framed buildings, although it is possible that an in-fill of flint was used between the timbers. Possibly De Witt was misled into thinking the building was made of flint because its exterior was plastered over and painted to look like stone. The contract for the Fortune theatre specifies that "all the saide fframe and the Staiarecases thereof to be sufficyently enclosed wth oute wth lathe lyme & haire" (Foakes & Rickert 1961, 308), and to judge from the sketches and engraving of Hollar, the second Globe had such a coating too.

The theatrical venues, then, were of themselves a harking back to a lost European culture that might be revived but which would exist again in synthesis with native Tudor materials and practices. To that extent, we should not be too wary of the term 'Renaissance', which begs no fewer questions than the historians' preferred term 'early modern', which, Douglas Bruster observed, is really "its structural equivalent". Indeed the apparently even more fuddy-duddy alternative 'The Age of Shakespeare' has at least the advantage of "signaling who pays the piper of our academic tune" in the sense of identifying the man without whose work the period would be much less studied (Bruster 2000, 184, 186). But were the theatres a falling-off from the high standards of the past? Some university men wrote as though they were, or at least they would be if other, lesser writers with lower standards were permitted to debase it. This is the thrust of Greene's Groatsworth of Wit, with its account of the player who has "terribly thundred on the Stage, and plaid the Scenes of the Deuill in the High way to heauen", who "was a countrey Author . . . and for seuen yeers space was absolute Interpreter to the puppets" (Greene 1592, E1r). If the company of such men can bring down the university educated poet Roberto of the story, what disasters must befall the theatre when "an vpstart Crow, beautified with our feathers", a mere player, "supposes he is as well to bombast out a blanke verse" as the best poets? Such a Jack-of-all-trades ("Iohannes fac totum") could not be a gentleman, as Bate observed (Greene 1592, F1v; Bate 1997, 15).

The single most powerful connection between the world of university learning and the new theatre industry is Marlowe himself, whose early plays popularized the dramatic use of blank verse, the "mighty line" according to Jonson when praising Shakespeare's improvement upon it (Shakespeare 1623, piA4r). The thoroughly "lugubrious" Greene's Groatsworth of Wit, as Constance Brown Kuriyama put it (Kuriyama 2002, 113), alludes to Marlowe as the "famous gracer of Tragedians" who, despite "excellent wit" foolishly "hath said . . . There is no God" because misled by "pestilent Machivilian pollicy" (Greene 1592, E4v-F1r). In his Alphonsus, King of Aragon (Greene 1599) Greene unsuccessfully imitated Marlowe's Tamburlaine and Kuriyama saw Greene's Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay as "a transparent comic rejoinder to Marlowe's Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" (Kuriyama 2002, 113). The important point is not that Greene imitated—they all did—but that he failed. As Roslyn Lander Knutson showed, imitation was usual: ... similarities [between companies' repertories] arose from a principle of
duplication. Companies repeated the subjects and formulas that had been successful in their own offerings and in the repertories of their competitors. This principle accounts for the proliferation of offerings on a popular hero; the growth of species of plays within the framework of each genre; the multiplication of a play into two, three, or even four parts; and the emergence of a minor character from one play to become the star in a sequel. (Knutson 1991, 40)

'Imitation' is the usual translation of Aristotle's word 'mimesis', and in relation to classical works its full range of meanings is notoriously difficult to define although clearly copying of some sort comes into it (Aristotle 1968, 258-72). In The Republic, Plato used 'mimesis' in the sense of representation in his famous attack on visual and poetic art in which he claimed that because any real-world object, say a bed, is only an imitation of a perfect Idea or Form of 'bed-ness', a painting of, or a poem about, a bed necessarily is only an imitation of an imitation (Plato 1941, 10:595a-608b, pp. 314-32). Aristotelian and Platonic notions of, and differences of opinion over, the meaning of mimesis in relation to representation suffused literary and dramatic theory in the early modern period, and are central to Philip Sidney's landmark 'refiguring' of the terms of the debate, his Defence of Poetry, as we shall see. But it is worth noting at this point that simple copying of another's company's repertory--their plays' heroes, themes, and titles--was the standard practice of an early modern playing company.

Greene's Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay certainly has something in common with Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, but (pace Kuriyama) the direction of the copying is not clear. Although it has always been recognized that Shakespeare borrowed widely to make his plays this knowledge has strangely been suppressed in scholarly exploration of particular parallels between the works of Shakespeare and those of his contemporaries. If there is a parallel, it has been assumed, then Shakespeare must be the donor not the borrower. Thus Baldwin Maxwell argued that the anonymous Thomas Lord Cromwell must be later than Shakespeare's Henry 5 because it too has "crude and awkward" choruses reminiscent of the Shakespearian model and because of the incident in which "... Bedford's messenger brings Cromwell the note of warning and unsuccessfully urges him to read it at once as 'it doth concerne you neare,' a situation which closely parallels and may perhaps have been suggested by Artemidorus' proffered and rejected schedule in Julius Caesar, III, i" (Maxwell 1956, 103). That Artemidorus's rejected schedule might be the echo not the original apparently did not occur to Maxwell. Similarly Maxwell found what he took to be an echo of Capulet's "alack, my child is dead, / And with my child my joys are buried" (Romeo and Juliet 4.4.90-1) in the anonymous play The London Prodigal: "shee is dead and in her graue, my cares are buried" (Anonymous 1605a, G1v). R. A. Foakes tried to date Thomas Middleton's The Revenger's Tragedy from its similarities with Middleton's A Mad World, my Masters; The Phoenix; and Blurt, Master Constable, Marston's Antonio's Revenge and The Fawn, and Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear (Tourneur 1966, lxvi-lxix), a necessarily hopeless task since none can reveal the direction of the debt.

Notions of private property in relation to speech and writing have changed fundamentally since the early modern period, and, as Margreta de Grazia observed, quotations marks came to be used not to record sententiae--important sayings that anyone might repeat--but combinations of words that belonged to the person who uttered them, which is a notion of ownership of one's labour derived from John Locke (De Grazia 1991, 214-20). Such reversals in meaning grow out of the contradictory senses of words concerning mimesis in the early modern period, such as 'copy' being "The original writing, work of art, etc., from which a copy is made" (OED copy n. 8a), and 'original' being "The fact of arising or being derived from something" (OED original n. 1a) and at the same time "The thing (or person) from which something else arises or proceeds" (OED original n. 2a). The Stationers' Company that regulated the early modern printing industry of London
maintained a register of 'copy' to establish precedence in publishing rights, but without our modern sense of 'copyright': a book might be prevented because it dealt with the same subject as one already registered although written by a different author (Blayney 1997, 398-99). Thus the publisher of Shakespeare's King Lear (Shakespeare 1608) must have come to terms with the owner of the anonymous King Leir already in print (Anonymous 1605b). Entry in the Stationers' Register defended not a writer's ownership of his words but a publisher's right of precedence to exploit a particular topic, so the early moderns would not have shared our surprise to find a writer copying another's phrases. The degree to which Shakespeare did this was shown by Stanley Wells (Wells 2002, 147-48) with an example from the account in Henry 5 of the French crown's descent by the female line:

Hugh Capet also--who usurped the crown
Of Charles the Duke of Lorraine, sole heir male
Of the true line and stock of Charles the Great--
To fume his title with some shows of truth,
Though in pure truth it was corrupt and naught,
Conveyed himself as heir to th' Lady Lingard,
Daughter to Charlemain, who was the son
To Louis the Emperor, and Louis the son
Of Charles the Great.
(Shakespeare Henry 5 1.2.69-77)

It is clear that Shakespeare had open in front of him the third volume of the 1587 edition of Holinshed's Chronicles and more or less copied the following:

Hugh Capet also, who usurped the crowne vpon Charles duke of Loraine, the sole heire male of the line and stocke of Charles the great, to make his title seeme true, and appeare good, though in deed it was starke naught, conueied himselfe as heire to the ladie Lingard, daughter to king Charlemaine, sonne to Lewes the emperour, that was son to Charles the great. (Holinshed 1587, Ggg1v)

To a modern mind used to the idea that Shakespeare took his plots from elsewhere but cloaked them in his own words, this shows little of the renowned Shakespearian invention, but that word 'invention' itself allowed for discovery not creation: "The action of coming upon or finding" (OED invention n. 1). In classical rhetoric, invention in this sense of discovery and not "making up out of nothing" (Vickers 1970, 62) was the essential step in composition.

Copying, then, was built into the theatre industry's venues (copies of Roman archetypes) and its companies' repertories (imitating one another's successes) and what Andrew Gurr called its "software" (Gurr 1989, 1), the playscripts themselves that borrowed stories and their forms of expression. As a rhetorical term for the descent from the elevated to the commonplace, bathos was coined by Alexander Pope in the eighteenth century (OED bathos n. 2), but in the imitative culture of early modern theatre it was all around in examples of the classical brought down to the Tudor. For Robert Greene, it existed in the very fact that university men were reduced to writing for the London stages. His Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay was performed at the Rose on Bankside on 19 February 1592 (Foakes & Rickert 1961, 16), and in it Edward 3's fool Rafe Simnel imitates the prince of Wales and bursts into the University of Cambridge Senate House where three learned doctors are making plans for the king's visit. They are not fooled by Rafe's imitation of the prince:

Raphe Doctors whose doting nightcaps are not capable of my ingenious dignitie, know that I am Edward Plantagenet, whom if you displease, will make a shippe that shall hold all your colleges, and so carry away the Niniuersitie with a fayre wind, to the Bankside in Southwarke, how sayst thou Ned Warraine, shall I not do it? (Greene 1594, D4r)
Rafe's threat is absurd and the doctors have him carried away to prison. But the
colleges had come to Bankside in the metaphorical sense of university men such
as Greene writing this material; this bathos precedes and illuminates the main
plot's concern with the prince's descent into love with a keeper of
Fressingfield's daughter.

Early modern literary theory and performance

The doubleness of meaning available in early modern conceptions of
'original', 'invention', and 'copy' were put to theoretical use in Philip
Sidney's Defence of Poetry, which in its crucial section directly attacks
Plato's sense of poetry as a copy of a copy. No "Art delivered vnto mankind",
not astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, music, philosophy, law, historiography,
grammar, rhetoric, logic, or medicine "hath not the workes of nature for his
principall object" (Sidney 1595, B4v), with one exception:

Only the Poet disdeining to be tied to any such subjectio<n>, lifted vp with
the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect into an other nature: in
making things either better than nature bringeth foorth, or quite a new,
formes such as neuer were in nature: as the Heroes, / Demigods, Cyclops,
Chymeras, Furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not
enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely raunging within
the Zodiack of his owne wit. Nature neuer set foorth the earth in so rich
Tapistry as dierse Poets haue done, neither with pleasanta riuers, fruitfull
trees, sweete smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too much loued
earth more louely: her world is brasen, the Poets only deliuer a golden.
(Sidney 1595, B4v-C1r)

The poet bypasses the quotidian copies of Ideas that are all around us in Nature
and connects with the Ideas themselves, and in the case of Psalms of David the
work is "heauenlie poesie, wherin almost he sheweth himselfe a passionate louer
of that vnspeakable and everlasting bewtie, to be seene by the eyes of the mind,
onely cleared by faith?" (Sidney 1595, B4r).

Why "almost"? Perhaps because the Psalms are still poetry, still
representation not the thing itself. Or because Sidney feels that his argument
is pulling towards the assertion that man's creativity is like God's, a claim
that might sound profane. Having asserted that poets deliver a golden world,
Sidney abruptly breaks off ("But let those things alone and goe to man . . ."),
but his argument still draws him to compare human creativity to divine
creativity (renamed Nature). Rather than liken the two kinds of creativity, he
performs a manouevre that we should recognize as deconstructing the difference
between them:

Neither let this be iestingly co<n>ceiued, because the works of the one
[Nature] be essenciall, the other [man] in imitation or fiction: for euerie
vnderstanding, knoweth the skill of ech Artificer standeth in that Idea, or
fore conceit of the worke, and not in the worke itselfe. And that the Poet
hath that Idea, is manifest, by deliuering them foorth in such excellencie as
he had imagined them: which deliuering foorth, also is not wholly imaginatiue,
as we are wont to say by the<n> that build Castles in the aire: but so farre
substancialley it worketh, not onely to make a Cyrus, which had bene but a
particular excellency as nature might haue done, but to bestow a Cyrus vpon
the world to make many Cyrusses, if they will learne aright, why and how that
maker made him. (Sidney 1595, C1r)

Sidney accepts that poetry is "an Art of Imitation . . . mimhsis [mimesis], that
is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth to speake
Metaphorically" (Sidney 1595, C1v) but rather than construct a lineage of
descending, decreasing authenticity (Plato's Idea -> Instance -> Poetic-Copy)
Sidney insists that representation is already present in the relationship
between Idea and Instance, between the divine maker and the world he has created. Created in the divine maker's likeness, man's poetic creations stand to him as God's creations stand to God. By inserting mimesis into the relationship between Platonic Idea and its manifestation, Sidney disables the objection that poets are only copiers with the insistence that reality is only a copy and hence poets are makers of reality.

Sidney's argument is deconstruction in the quite strict sense that Jacques Derrida meant by this term: the revealing of the constructedness of things that on the face of it seem to occur naturally. The key text in this regard is "Section 4: From/Of the Supplement to the Source: The Theory of Writing" in Of Grammatology (Derrida 1976, 269-316) in which Derrida situated his ideas within the context of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's and William Warburton's views on language. In Warburton's account, the language of speech derived from the gestural language of action, the latter being primary, while Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw two different sources: mere 'need' produced gestural signifying while passion "wrung forth the first words" (Derrida 1976, 273). For Rousseau, signification itself was corrupted at source because figurative language preceded literal language. This counter-intuitive claim needs explanation, and Derrida offered the example of an early human coming across another human and in her terror seeing the potential enemy as someone much larger than herself, for which she invented the signifier 'giant'. Once this had happened enough times the fear wore off and the early human invented the literal 'human' for any other individual and reserved the earlier, fear-laden, term 'giant' for metaphorical use. While still fearful of others, 'giant' represented not what was seen (which was just another human) but the feeling of fear about what was seen, the passion inherent in the signified. But this signified itself was not singular: it represented not only the thing seen but the passionate feeling about the thing seen, so metaphoricity had already entered into the sign at the level of the signified, which was itself a signifier of the passion. The idea 'giant' literally represented the representor of the passion, but only metaphorically represented the 'human' and only metaphorically represented the feeling: "it is the sign of a sign... It represents the affect literally only through representing a false representer"; a speaker or writer "can reproduce and calculate this operation" and so produce figurative speech or writing (Derrida 1976, 277). Thus metaphoricity exists at the heart of the sign so there are no literals: "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (Derrida 1976, 158), the text has no 'outside' because the inside/outside distinction is false. In the popular modern phrasing, metaphor is always already at work and there can be no pure representation free of it.

When an actor-in-character stepped onto the early modern stage, he represented someone who formerly existed or who was invented by the dramatist. He ought not to represent someone alive, and certainly not someone important. As Andrew Gurr observed, the King's men miscalculated disastrously in performing in December 1604 a play about the Gower conspiracy of 1600 against James 6 of Scotland (as he was then), for as John Chamberlain wrote the point was not so much "whether the matter or manner be not well handled" but that being represented at all should not happen to "princes... in theyre life time" (Gurr 1996, 290). It did not require a dramatist to bathetically mock his character, for the very act of representation was a debasement that important people had to be protected from. Ordinary people had no such protection, of course, and the poor women of Pendle who were accused of witchcraft in 1634 had more to fear from dramatic representation than mere humiliation: while still in jail awaiting a final verdict, the King's men performed at the Globe a dramatization of their case, The Witches of Lancashire, that 'exposed' the foolishness of anyone who doubted their guilt (Brome & Heywood 2002, xiii-xv). In this class distinction we can see the power relations of early modern theatre, and it is instructive that in his account of the destruction of the Globe by fire during a performance of Shakespeare's All is True (Henry 8) in 1613, Henry Wotton worries that the greater the verisimilitude, the greater the
The King's players had a new play . . . which was set forth with many extraordinary circumstances of pomp and majesty, even to the matting of the stage; the Knights of the Order with their Georges and garters, the Guards with their embroidered coats, and the like: sufficient in truth within a while to make greatness very familiar, if not ridiculous. (Chambers 1923, 419)

It should be pointed out, in fairness, that the claim that representation was itself debasing was not confined to theatrical performance. In 1616 Jonson stopped writing plays after the failure of his The Devil Is An Ass, and he did not resume until 1625. During this period he devoted himself to writing court masques for which Inigo Jones provided the spectacle. It was a partnership that ended acrimoniously in 1631 with a semi-public war of words, and Jonson made a withering attack upon his former friend's work on the visual element of the court masque. 'Mythology . . . painted on slit deal' and 'ye mere perspectiue of an Inch board' were among the terms with which Jonson's 'Expostulacion wth Inigo Jones' deflated the desire to represent grand themes in wood and canvas (Jonson 1947, 403-04).

The humiliating descent, then, was that of representation itself and when dramatists used bathos they gilded the lily. In Bartholomew Fair Jonson presented a puppet show based on Marlowe's translation of Hero and Leander that begins:

ON Hellespont guiltie of True-loues blood
In view and opposit two citties stood,
Seaborders disioin'd by Neptunes might:
The one Abydos, the other Sestos hight.
(Marlowe 1598, A4r)

To make it clear that it is Marlowe's version in particular, and not the Ovidian source, that is to be mocked, Jonson has the presenter of the puppets, Leatherhead (=Lantern), explain that Littlewit has adapted the printed text "to a more familiar straine for our people":

LAN[TERN] . . . that is too learned, and poetickall for our audience; what doe they know what Hellespont is? Guilty of true loues blood? or what Abidos is? or the other Sestos hight? (Jonson 1631, L2r)

Like Sidney, Jonson was aware of and wrote about the theoretical limitations of representation, and one of his playful devices for drawing attention to the constructed of authorship was the bravura display of metatheatrical such as occurs in the Induction to Bartholomew Fair. An actor pretending to be the stage-keeper confides with the audience:

But for the whole Play, will you ha' the truth on't? (I am looking, lest the Poet heare me, or his man, Master Broome, behind the Arras) it is like to be a very conceited scuruy one, in plaine English. (Jonson 1631, A4r)

Behind the voice that seems to come unscripted from a usually invisible, pre-theatrical, functionary of the venue (whose job is to sweep the stage before the actors enter) is the controlling voice of Jonson, mocking our complacency in assuming that what happens inside a theatre could be anything but a construction.

The building in which this took place, Philip Henslowe's Hope, was a radical break in playhouse design, for it replaced a bear-baiting arena and was specifically designed to accommodate performing animals and humans. It used to be argued that open-air amphitheatre playhouse design evolved from the design of animal baiting arenas when someone had the bright idea of putting the booth
stage of a group of travelling players inside one of Southwark's animal baiting rings (Hosley 1975, 121-28) but Oscar Brownstein demolished this theory by showing the unsuitability of an animal baiting ring for the purposes of theatrical presentation (Brownstein 1979). The Hope was in fact the first dual-purpose arena, and so did not carry the neoclassical associations of the Theatre, Globe, Rose, and Swan that so clearly drew on continental taste. John Stockwood called the Theatre in Shoreditch a "gorgeous Playing place" (Stockwood 1578, J7v), and scholarship on Elizabethan interior decoration suggests that all the playhouses were beautifully decorated (Ronayne 1997). The animal rings came from another tradition altogether than only merged with the theatrical when the Hope was built to rival the newly resurrected Globe in 1613-14.

Henslowe's site formerly showed only animal torture, but now it could show plays too, so one might argue that the tone of the area was raised by the theatricalists. Certainly, by the second decade of the century players were far from the travelling vagabonds they once were: the leading companies had royal patronage and Edward Alleyn founded the College of God's Gift in Dulwich in 1619 to signal his, and his profession's, new social status. But for Jonson, the Hope theatre venue for his new play Bartholomew Fair was an example of drama being dragged down to the level of bear-pit. Such a bathetic descent, however, could be appropriate if the subject matter were lowered to the same level, and hence the scrivener of his Induction observes that, in a perverse way, a sort of decorum has been observed: the venue is as "duryt as Smithfield [the place represented], and as stinking euery whit" (Jonson 1631, A6r). Jonson's reflections on the world of playmaking are apparent in the puppet play that the anti-theatricalist Zeal-of-the-Land Busy fails to prove is profane: the accusation of cross-dressing does not stick because they have no gender-assigning genitals. The puppets, then, are free of accusations of immorality that might be cast at human players, and yet curiously Jonson chose to include them in "The Persons of the Play" (Jonson 1631, A3v) as though they were human characters, even though Leatherhead claims to be "the mouth of 'hem all" (Jonson 1631, L1v). Leatherhead is exactly the kind of "Interpreter to the puppets" that Greene's Groatworth of Wit warned its readers about, and his performance of Hero and Leander set on Bankside and enacted on Bankside shows that Jonson--MA'd by Oxford and Cambridge but never their student--could invert such fears to show off the extraordinary breadth of his cultural compass.

Conclusion: Beyond Shakespeare

For many readers and theatre-goers at the start of the twenty-first century, Shakespeare, not Jonson, is the epitome of high culture, available to be bathetically reworked in advertising campaigns and in such consciously low-brow debunkings as 'The Compleat Works of Willm Shkspr (abridged)' by the Reduced Shakespeare Company (Lanier 2002, 102-04). Shakespeare's rise in cultural status was most obviously meteoric in the century or so between the Restoration of 1660 and David Garrick's Stratford Jubilee of 1769, as Michael Dobson showed (Dobson 1992). However, the rise began before the Civil War and is discernible in the monumentalizing of Shakespeare in the 1623 Folio edition and in others' responses to his plays. Of the latter, a clear and early example is John Fletcher's play The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed (first performed in 1611) that continues the story of Petruccio from Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew into his second marriage after Katherine's death.

Drawing upon Aristophanes's story of a sex strike by Grecian women, Lysistrata, Fletcher's play moves the action to a recognizable London (from Shakespeare's Padua) and gives its Bianca a vision of feminist utopia as an alternative to mere grudging accommodation between the warring sexes:

Ilium shall burn, and I, as did Aeneas,
will on my back, spite of the Myrmidons,
Carry this warlike Lady, and through Seas
Unknown, and unbeliev'd, seek out a Land,
Were like a race of noble Amazons,
We'le root our selves, and to our endlesse glory
Live, and despise base men.
(Fletcher & Beaumont 1647, Nnnnn4v)

This alludes to Virgil's Aeneid just as Shakespeare in The Taming of the Shrew alluded to Ovid's Heroides (Epistle of the Heroines), but for Fletcher the descent to the familiar can be a way of turning ideals into practical reality. As Margaret Maurer justly commented, "The land across the water where women can enjoy such independence is England, or perhaps more precisely, an English playhouse" (Maurer 2001, 198).

Fletcher's play does not end on such a separatist note (the epilogue refers to teaching "due equality") but its widely-recognized undermining of the politics of Shakespeare's conservative play--typical recent responses are David M. Bergeron's (Bergeron 1996) and Fiona McNeill's (McNeill 1999)--suggests that imitation need be no kind of falling off. In a sense Fletcher himself was a repetition: he replaced Shakespeare as the King's men's chief dramatist in the 1610s and 1620s. Yet his career was no mere imitation: unlike his strong precursor he tended to write in collaboration with others (Shakespeare only dabbled in collaboration) and he wrote for companies other than the King's men.

The many commendatory poems at the beginning of the 1647 edition of Fletcher's plays (presented, rather inaccurately, as the works of Fletcher and Francis Beaumont) repeatedly described Fletcher as the equal of Shakespeare and Jonson and, in certain respects, the surpasser (Fletcher & Beaumont 1647, alv-glv). Leaving aside the subtle details of Bergeron's and McNeill's fine readings, we can see Fletcher surpassing Shakespeare in how he ends the story of Petruccio and his wife: instead of peace arising from the wife submitting to her husband, Fletcher explores the possibilities for separatism and concludes with sexual equality. As well as Shakespeare's play, Fletcher drew upon Jonson's play Epicoene that has the subtitle The Silent Woman, which is supposed to be a witty and paradoxical expression of what can never be found, like A Chaste Maid in Cheapside and An Honest Whore or, more recently in Graham Greene's hands, a Quiet American. Fletcher's notion of imitation-as-repetition, however, is not merely bathetic descent but real subversion, and hence his subtitle, The Tamer Tamed, indicates a transformation that is, paradoxically for a copy that bathetically mocks its original, also a transcendence.

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