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Shakespeare & the Superhuman

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Introduction

We are excited to introduce this, our second issue, which looks at the superhuman in relation to Shakespeare. To pinpoint what it means to be ‘human’ is effort enough. Much of our concept of humanity arguably comes from Shakespeare. A web search of Open Source Shakespeare finds that the word ‘human’ and its derivatives (inhuman, humane, humanity) occurring 54 times in his works (to contextualize this against other living beings, ‘mouse’ and its derivatives occur 22 times, while ‘dog’ is found 199 times).¹ Among these, one can see the ‘human’ differentiated in several ways: from beast (touch’d with human gentleness and love; the point of human skill; I would change my humanity with a baboon); from spirit (mine would, sir, were they human); from devil (the milk of human kindness); from divine (As if that whatsoever god who leads him | Were slyly crept into his human powers). The instance which could be called most definitive, however, is that which defines the ‘human’ as all-inclusive, a common denominating sensibility among us, in the lines of a royal character who could have claimed superhumanity: ‘I think the king is but a man, as I am: the violet smells to him as it doth to me: the element shows to him as it doth to me; all his senses have but human conditions: his ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man’ (4.1.93-96).

Recently these lines were spoken as freshly as ever by Jamie Parker at the Globe, who played *Henry V*’s young King of England as very relatably human, an everyman—shedding tears of joy or sorrow at regular intervals throughout the play; jumping into the breach not with superman-heroics but with a boyish enthusiasm for war. His was a down-to-earth humanity which resonates in these days, when a continuing fascination for superheroes attempts to be met by artificial media creations: arbitrarily anointed celebrities—royals, athletes, artists, et al—built up (later often knocked down) as pedestal-dwelling superhumans.

Planning this issue during the London 2012 Olympics felt especially timely. ‘Meet The Superhumans’ announces an ad in the London Tube (and no, it was not a reference to England’s parachuting, age-defying Royal Bond Girl). The accompanying photograph features a lineup of Paralympian athletes, with the tagline, ‘forget everything you thought you knew about humans’. ‘Super’ clearly implies more than human, i.e., extraordinary, but where does one start to define the quality which makes them ‘superhuman’? Some possess bionic limbs—is it to rely on bionic or genetic extensions or enhancements? Others have no limbs at all—is it to have an extraordinary mind or strength of spirit? All are achievers—is it reflected in the deeds that accompany a ‘more than human’ quality?

The concurrent exhibit ‘Superhuman: Exploring Human Enhancement from 600 BCE to 2050’ at London’s Wellcome Collection (19 July-16 October 2012) defined the ‘superhuman’ as relating to ‘human enhancement’. The Introduction in the accompanying booklet mentions that popular perceptions of this might include a ‘comic-book superpower’ and ‘a pill that will make us smarter or extend our lifespan’, and states that beyond these, the exhibition was focused through the lens of human experience and on a wider range of

¹ *Open Source Shakespeare* (George Mason University 2013) <www.opensourceshakespeare.org> [accessed 16 October 2012].
< <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138873> > [accessed 11 January 2013].

technologies to enhance humanity: physically, medically, and even morally.² The Superhuman exhibits featured the humorous (fake noses, fertility-enhancing prosthetics) as well as the more serious: poll results showing that one in ten Cambridge University students use cognitive-enhancing medication; the concept of ‘transhumanism’, a new cultural movement that advocates the advancement of human capabilities through the application of technology and cybernetic implants. The booklet concludes that in the global age, there is a social and moral imperative for humans to evolve: ‘it is inevitable that we will either be enhanced or die out.’³ Is being a regular human no longer enough?

Enter Shakespeare, master humanist. This issue on *Shakespeare and the Superhuman* again received an exciting mix of submissions, selected by blind peer review; these explore Shakespeare and the superhuman from different angles—philosophical, theological, historical, gender-centric, omnipotent, supernatural, comic. The issue opens with Anna Blackwell’s insightful examination of revenge as a force that is superhuman in exceeding human control, one of tragic violence that leaches out one’s humanity. She starts by looking at Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the early modern English conceptualisation of revenge, with shifts in religious doctrine regarding the supernatural and life after death. She then moves to discussing the implications of this on the creative relationship between revenge and the supernatural within the recent popular entertainment phenomenon: the revenge tragedy as superhero blockbuster, with its escapist boundless capability for revenge. Finally, she links this to modern-day war, with revenge seen as national necessity, and presents the superhuman as a terrible yet abstract warning for the society that cannot moderate itself.

Laura Seymour follows on from this in also linking the superhuman to *Hamlet*. She discusses the portrayal of humanity onstage with regards to Hamlet’s advice to the players and to early acting manuals that idealized ‘human nature’ as presented in the impassioned Shakespearean character. Her interesting account of Thomas Betterton and Henry Siddons details how their acting manuals insist that actors must demonstrate a superhuman control over their bodies and emotions, yet represent human passion as more eloquent than that of a real human. Seymour interrogates the superhuman as artificial, asking whether to hold ‘the Mirrour up to Nature’ means doing just that, or distorting it to fit an imaginary standard?

Kathryne Walsh next approaches the topic from the angle of Shakespeare’s omnipotent characters, with a focus on the soothsayers in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. She differentiates these as superhuman from those supernatural, occult or divine in Shakespeare’s other tragedies, by the fact that they are in themselves inherently human. Walsh perceptively points out that their otherworldly messages must be channelled, received and interpreted by humans, and that their divine predictions exist not in a void, but rather can be viewed as a two way street—leading to success if properly received and to ruin if misperceived. She examines the human frailty inherent in superhumanity, looking at characters whose status or pride causes them to see themselves as exempt from mere human seers’ sooth, resulting in tragedy.

² *Superhuman*. (London: Wellcome Collection, 2012).

³ John Harris. ‘On our obligation to enhance.’ *Superhuman*.

The supernatural is also the focus of Danielle Woolley's creative piece on witchcraft and the superhuman feminine, tracing these themes in *Macbeth* and *1 Henry VI* against the backdrop of early modern patriarchal anxieties over female power. She examines the discrepancy between the concepts of the feminine and the supreme, arguing that an unnatural and indeed supernatural unsexing was necessary for characters such as Joan and Lady Macbeth to succeed in a male-dominated society (even as Joan La Pucelle is lauded in comparison to Venus, ultimate divine female icon of love). Woolley concludes that this irreversible erasure of the feminine to promote the heroines' masculinity, associated with and aided by 'abhorrent' witchcraft, becomes their ultimate undoing.

If Woolley writes of patriarchal pressure to unsex the heroine through witchcraft, Drahos dexterously argues Shakespeare's attempt to assuage the same patriarchal anxiety, by presenting an ambiguously gendered *Venus and Adonis*. Drahos examines Shakespeare's poetry as a humanising and eroticising of Queen Elizabeth I, a superhuman figure in her virginity and self-control, who grew so great as to span an age in her monarchical semi-divinity, her matriarchal dominance over a patriarchal realm. If Blackwell explored superheroes like Spider-man, Drahos describes Shakespeare's deflation of the Elizabethan 'superman', with further reference to the contemporary Elizabethan epyllion and the Ditchley Portrait, and to Spenser's and Ovid's Adonis. He finally posits that in promoting instability of moral and societal norms, Shakespeare humanises the superhuman structure of the monarchy.

While others may debate whether our notion of superheroes is Shakespearean, John Curtis' delightful piece is a comic take on a personal superhero-interpretation of the character of Touchstone, as performed last summer with the Shakespeare Institute Players. He interweaves personal with practical observations on performing the clown in *As You Like It*, together with an account of sources for his own inspiration in costume, props, delivery and posturing. He also examines Touchstone as a Shakespearean invention, getting to the heart of a wise fool. As a word of warning, this humorous piece, complete with graphic illustrations in the form of production photographs, is preferably read in an environment devoid of those easily alarmed by loud noises, such as hotel proprietors or librarians.

The last piece rounds out the issue with an editorial review of V. K. Prakash's adaptation of *Hamlet* as a Malayalam martial arts film. In looking at Indian myth, the review muses on where the line is drawn between the super and the human. It examines whether painting Hamlet as invincible and active, rather than fallible and passive, alters our notion of the prince as hero. Is the superhuman in our perception, like Miranda's, of each further human excellence as a brave new world? Is to be superhuman to jump from the outer limits of space, or is it simply to be, as Prospero decides, ultimately very human? In all of this, there emerges a sense that Shakespeare in his many avatars, whether as modern-day action figure or sweet Swan of Avon, can be called superhuman in his immortal appeal, a voice which lives on around and inside of us.

The Editors – Thea Buckley (issue editor), Paul Hamilton (assistant editor), Giulia I. Sandelewski (peer review)

“More Than Just a Man”. Revenge and the Superhuman: *Hamlet* and the Superhero Blockbuster

Anna Blackwell

Claudius famously asserts in *Hamlet* that ‘Revenge should have no bounds’ (4.7.104), arguing that in the pursuit of revenge all restraint should be abandoned.⁴ René Girard echoes his assertion, that revenge ‘surpasses limits in space and time’, creating inexhaustible circles of violence, encompassing whole generations.⁵ There was an enormous preoccupation with revenge within Renaissance England, including its implications for morality, religion and legality, whether practiced in private feud or state-administered justice. The revenge narrative fascinated the early modern mind creatively, with a cluster of dramatic works characterising a period of over fifty years. Their protagonists ranged from the morality play-influenced, exemplaristic hero-revenger, such as Hieronimo, to the sensational villain-revenger, such as Shirley’s eponymous Cardinal. Institutionally, revenge compelled and terrorised in equal measures: the moral denunciation of blood-revenge preceded the implementation of a system of state justice, but it also continued after this, increasing in vehemence.⁶ The old Mosaic laws which legitimized the private taking of revenge were either manipulated to represent the new force of state justice, or ignored entirely. Instead, the rallying cry used by moralists was ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’.⁷

At the same time there was a merging of religious and legal will that declared the reprehensibility of private revenge, predicting damnation for the revenger, for whom there would be a double death of both body and soul.⁸ Revenge, the Church stresses, is an act monstrous in its excess, devastating in its consequences and utterly prohibited, so essentially excessive that it is an act requiring divine authority. Though New Testament teaching locates spiritual health in the act of forgiveness, there is an unsettling degree of certainty in the holy pronouncement: ‘I will repay’. While humans may attempt to force resolution, superhuman forces within the universe move to the contrary, engineering inevitable divine retribution. It is this characterisation of revenge—boundless, superhuman and supernatural—which I intend to explore, through the evolution of the archetypal period revenge text, from *Hamlet* to the most iconic modern-day avatar of revenge: the superhero.

From Aeschylus’ Erinyes, Euripides’ Medea, and onwards, the personification of vengeance as a dramatic character has invoked ideas of the superhuman. Within *Hamlet* this figure is, of course, the Ghost. While Denmark was a historically Protestant nation and Hamlet’s Wittenberg home the location of Luther’s ninety-five *Theses*, there is a clear sense that within Shakespeare’s play violence has a retrogressive effect, forcibly pulling Elsinore

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* in *The Norton Shakespeare* 2nd edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al (New York: Norton, 2009). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

⁵ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundations of the World* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), p. 12.

⁶ Fredson Thayer Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1959), p. 12.

⁷ *New King James Bible*, Romans 12:20 <<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Romans%2012.19-21>> [accessed 11 August 2012].

⁸ Bishop Hall, ‘Second Sermon on the Impress of God,’ *Works*, ed. Phillip Wynter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1863), 5, p. 76.

away from the promise of the Reformation and returning it to the superstitious world of Catholicism. Ophelia's burial is notably Catholic, while the Ghost is that which is anathema to the new teachings of Protestantism: a purgatorial spirit. Lutheranism dissolved the institutional practices which encouraged the persistence of the dead, teaching not only that the concept of purgatory was unbiblical but also that prayers for the dead were futile. The Ghost's physical presence onstage not only visibly refutes such thinking but also gives voice and menacing articulation to the terrifying prospect of life after death, warning Hamlet, 'I could a tale unfold whose lightest word | Would harrow up thy soul' (1.5.15-6). The Ghost thus manifests the potency of a visceral connection to the afterlife; a dramatic, supernatural hinterland in which the dead may walk and communicate. The Ghost, moreover, epitomises a wider tonal variation, which the play—with its sophisticated topics of court—moves between. Marcellus', Horatio's and Barnardo's conversation after having seen the Ghost demonstrates this alternative Catholic-folkloric, supernatural world, which lingers in the periphery but comes to the fore in the play's moments of violence and terror. While Marcellus determines the time of the year through a strictly Christian calendar—'that season [...] wherein our saviour's birth is celebrated' (1.1.139-40)—this worldview only frames their existence and, despite its efforts to read a sense of order and purpose into nature, does not preclude endowing agency to a supernatural and astral phenomenon.

The inhabitants of Elsinore view the supernatural as omen; Horatio famously claims of the Ghost's visit: 'This bodes some strange eruption to our state' (1.1.68). The dead are not mute but are active conveyors of their own significance, texts to be read or to be heard: either silently telling their history, or, in the Ghost's case, vociferously invoking vengeance. The Protestant world of Elsinore and its insistence upon the impermeability of death is tested by the play repeatedly. Hamlet's iconic address to Yorick demonstrates that the body can still communicate after death. 'Here hung those lips that I have kissed', Hamlet muses, reading Yorick's face and thus prompting himself into reconstruction of the living face's actions (5.1.174). Even the grave is no longer a site of solemn reverence and abiding stillness, but one of contestation, philosophy, violence and, ironically, the living. Denmark is thus a world wavering on the edge of new religious thought but still caught up in the superstitions of the old Catholic order and dictated in its moments of uncertainty by the dangerous possibilities of the supernatural. It is with this potentiality that Hamlet aligns himself as revenger. For him, the dark violence of the supernatural, the 'witching time of night | When [...] hell itself breathes out' is something which empowers. In one of the play's most violent meditations, Hamlet states, 'Now could I drink hot blood' (3.2.358-61). This inverted image of communion depicts the revenger at the most morally nihilist: cannibalistic and demonic in the thirst for vengeance. Hamlet recognises, however, that the power that this would lend his project of revenge would unleash a trail of destruction indiscriminate in its path—a pursuit that his conscience does not permit. He will allow himself to be 'cruel', but (it is here that the distinction appears again) not 'unnatural' (4.2.365).

Personally equivocated violence borne out of the desire for satisfaction can so easily thus tip into boundless, wanton destruction, in a depiction of revenge as that which is supernatural and, importantly, *super*-human. Revenge exceeds human control and—as the

image of vampirism vividly demonstrates—turns the avenger into that which is no longer human or bound by human mores. The act of revenge constantly threatens to cast the ordered world of Elsinore into a supernatural twilight realm, but this articulation of the connection between revenge and the supernatural is reconfigured frequently in the modern blockbuster. Recent film franchises such as *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* have exploited this relationship for a lucrative youth and adult market. Of particular interest for this essay, however, are the implications of the creative relationship between revenge and the supernatural within the recent popular phenomenon: the superhero blockbuster.

The possibility of boundless power appears actualised in the superhero's body, acting as a central locus for narrative and characterisation. Each superhero franchise derives narrative energy, purpose and impetus by evolving from a central origin story in which the human body is pushed to the extreme by emotional *and* physical trauma. The revenge narrative is key to not only interior transformation but also the *bodying* forth of visible, external change. Geoff King argues that the Hollywood blockbuster is a form which offers a 'contemplative' brand of spectacle, with time permitted for a 'certain amount of scrutiny'.⁹ With its powerful musculature emphasised by skin-tight spandex, and capabilities enhanced to superhuman levels through science, technology or fate, it is the body which is the central spectacle of the superhero film. The super-body epitomises the performance of revenge, as it simultaneously merges moral exceptionalism *and* physical exceptionalism. Though there may be significant delay between the desire for revenge and its fulfilment in the traditional manner of revenge dramatisation, in the superhero blockbuster the working out of vengeance is not meditative but practical. Not, therefore, an issue of morality but of opportunity. Revenge appears, moreover, an intuitive act. While Hamlet's theatre audience are invited into his world through his soliloquys, the blockbuster audience are granted subjective camera work and some interior monologues, and we are often left to guess regarding character motivation. Although the typical revenge superhero's dark origin story usually welcomes the possibility of multi-layered characterisation, in terms of revenge narrative agency the superhero renders the need for complexity void. After all, in *Superman Returns*, Superman does not need to debate the morality of Lex Luthor's actions when he can project a bomb into space.¹⁰ Peter Parker may be able to keep up with Nobel laureates, but Spider-Man only has the *nous* to pull plugs out of their sockets. At best he has a quick, strategic ability to work out the placement of webs, but there is a sense that, like his innate 'spider sense', this process is purely instinctive. The supernatural qualities of the hero's very body neutralise the subtlety of the revenge narrative within the superhero blockbuster.

While revenge thus still operates collaterally to the boundless possibilities of the supernatural, these adaptations are restrained by their key audience demographic. Despite dark story lines with orphaned sons called on to revenge the actions of those who have escaped society's justice, these are somewhat sanitised, PG-rated revenge tales. Instead of the fragmented and penetrated body (and body parts) which litter the Renaissance stage in

⁹ Geoff King, 'Spectacle, Narrative and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster', in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 116.

¹⁰ *Superman Returns*, dir. by Bryan Singer (Warner Bros., 2006), starring Brandon Routh and Kevin Spacey.

tragedies such as *Titus Andronicus*, violence in the superhero blockbuster is *only* preventative. The superhero avenger is less focused upon punishment than on demonstrating the power of the superhuman body. *Spider-Man* (dir. Sam Raimi, 2002) is a particularly apt example for demonstrating this non-violence.¹¹ The majority of its combat scenes are based around demonstrating the extent of the hero's supernatural prowess and end either in the villain's accidental death—for example, Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire) pirouettes mid-air and deftly avoids the metal blade which kills the evil Norman Osborn (Willem Defoe)—or in the villain's sacrificing his/her own life.

The preoccupation of these films with orchestrating such spectacles of super-nature is, moreover, structurally apparent.¹² In the blockbuster the emphasis on obviously stylised depictions of violence creates a visibly delineated, fantastical and hyperbolic sense of action (one that is clearly divorced from reality). Indeed, the close relationship between cinematic blockbusters and developments in the digital effects field presents us every year with ever-increasingly violent spectacles, advertising their distance from reality in their very stylistic and technical makeup: irregular speed—either obviously slowed or sped up—challenging and nonconventional camera angles, and jarring noise levels. Such films do not ever claim verisimilitude; rather, they revel in their fantastical premises. Their action sequences are committed to an extreme depiction of reality, placing the body within unimaginable levels of stress but still permitting it the most impossible feats of human endeavour, bravery and physical performance: strength, agility and marksmanship. These blockbusters create a modern pantheon, signalling their distance from reality by transgressing the limitations of human ability and depicting the awesome supernatural results.

As *Hamlet* demonstrates, in the revenge tragedy the supernatural operates synchronously as metaphor *and* dramatic spectacle. It at once depicts the superhuman as a terrible yet abstract warning for the society that cannot moderate itself, but also presents it as a staged reality. The supernatural, most commonly associated in the play with death—purgatorial spirits, graves, skeletons and images of hell—*re*-animates history, in particular, the Catholic past of newly Reformed England. As social commentary, the supernatural within the revenge tragedy thus engages with the politics of mourning at a time when, within his or

¹¹ Of course, this difference can also be explained by the differing certifications of the films. The superhero blockbuster is—with the exception of anti-superhero films such as *Watchmen* (dir. by Zach Snyder, Warner Bros./Paramount, 2009)—aimed predominantly at children, while *Man on Fire* (dir. by Tony Scott, 20th Century Fox, 2004) is rated 18. But it remains that the nature of the violence seen is differently characterised as preventative, while it is not without possibility that children's films can show bloody, penetrative acts of violence, such as those in, e.g., *The Last Airbender* (dir. by M. Night Shyamalan, Paramount, 2010), or *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (dir. by Andrew Adamson, Walt Disney, 2005).

¹² Unlike any other film genre, moreover, the blockbuster is defined in terms of its possibility for success or failure rather than by theme. Sheldon Hall argues that the process of defining a blockbuster by its possibility for epic success (in the language of trade, a blockbuster is a 'tall revenue feature' earning more than \$10,000,000), as well as by its ability to 'bomb' (the etymology of the term lies in its destructive capability as a World War Two aerial bomb), is one that is complementary rather than contradictory. These two antonymic definitions of the blockbuster, however, flag up the same and most distinguishing feature of the film: its boundless potential. See Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), pp. 135-138.

her lifetime, an individual could see enormous changes made to the institution of the Church and the particulars of practicing faith. The superhero blockbuster, similarly, operates comprehensively on the level of the spectacular; this is apparent on all levels of the film, including production values, budget, special effects and box office reception. But the superhero, too, still maintains parallels to the 'real' world through his/her employment of the supernatural. As central spectacle, the superhero body is an inherently readable text and one enormously responsive to the climate in which it is forged. The recent slew of superheroes in popular cinema could thus be called the creative reactions of Hollywood to an attack on the symbolic and imaginary heart of America.¹³ The superhero is the embodiment of American foreign policy after 9/11: a consolatory fantasy (necessary for a mood in which revenge was no longer the mainstay of the individual but became a national necessity) of vengeance and national power (manifested in the hero's exceptional body), whereby the nebulous War on Terror is transformed into a simple, Manichean military engagement.

Common to both the revenge tragedy and superhero blockbuster, thus, is a shared employment of the supernatural as a metonymic structure by which to *flesh* out the politics of the revenge narrative. There is something so potentially dangerous and contrary to all limits placed upon individual desire for revenge that it finds its most eloquent expression through images of the supernatural and the superhuman. It is the boundless quality of the supernatural, I believe, that catches the imagination and has proven so enduringly popular: a world that is still ours but is not bound by ethical or physical laws. In this infinite possibility we recognise the terrible, dark, but also liberated and exceptional, promise and power of getting even with those who have wronged us. Revenge is not merely an exercise in imagination or taboo thinking, however. The metonymic space of the supernatural, which revenge opens creatively, enables a dramatic engagement with and an imaginative reconstruction of the political, ethical and religious facets of a given society. Early modern England's conceptualisation of revenge thereby explores the shifts in religious doctrine with regards to life after death, while post-9/11 America dramatises the possibility of national revenge in the wake of an unprecedented blow to the state's exceptional self-conceptualisation. Through the contiguity between revenge and the supernatural, these reconstructions thus take the form of images which enthrall, presenting the audience with that which we desire but are physically and legally unable to achieve. Their extraordinary super-nature offers us apparent escapism but all the while they act as cyphers: they hold up a mirror and reflect back, albeit in a sometimes dimly illuminated form, reality.

¹³ The September 11th attacks triggered an outpouring of emotional and creative responses. Unsurprisingly, Hollywood heard the clarion call sent out by the American administration and the military for patriotic blockbusters. It is worth observing, moreover, that aside from the usual interactions between the military and the entertainment industry for consultation purposes in representing American military policy, the period shortly after 9/11 was one of intense collaboration. *Variety* reported in October 2001 that "government intelligence specialists [were] secretly soliciting terrorist scenarios from top Hollywood filmmakers and writers" through a "unique ad hoc working group" at the Institute for Creative Technology at the University of Southern California. In Claude Brodesser, "Feds Seek H'Wood's Help", *Daily Variety*, October 8, 2001, p. 1.

‘Art So Unnatural and Disgusting’: Idealisations of the Human in Early Actors’ Manuals and Hamlet’s Advice to the Players

Laura Seymour

The trend of writing manuals specifically for actors did not begin decisively in Britain and Ireland until the eighteenth century. These manuals often dealt with the gestures and facial expressions needed to represent humanity at its most passionate; indeed, many such manuals were organised into a number of sections, each dealing with a different emotion. Once this trend of explaining how to act out emotions onstage began, there was a veritable explosion of works dealing with the representation of human nature onstage. Early examples include the journal-series *The Prompter* (1734-6) by the businessman, writer and literary patron Aaron Hill and the government secretary and writer William Popple. This discussed ideas that would later appear in Hill’s influential *The Art of Acting* (1746) and *Essay on the Art of Acting* (1752), James Eyre Weeks’ *A Rhapsody on the Stage* (1746), and the works of Thomas Betterton and Henry Siddons, which will be discussed below.

These manuals concentrate almost overwhelmingly on the performance of Shakespeare’s plays: they utilise examples of Shakespearean actors and characters to illustrate the principles of acting style. These acting manuals cannot be said to represent Shakespeare’s opinion, nor do they necessarily represent actual acting practice (for what actor actually follows a theorist to the letter without fail, without being guided by their own intuitions and the particular play they are performing? And which successful theory is actually designed for such a rigorous purpose?). Though certainly very influential for other theorists of acting (they are cited in a number of subsequent acting manuals), it is very difficult to tell precisely how far these early texts influenced actors. However, this set of manuals provides an interesting insight into ways of thinking about humanity and superhumanity on the Shakespearean stage.

One thing that is fascinating about these manuals is the way in which they represent the impassioned (Shakespearean) character as possessing a kind of superhumanity more beautiful and eloquent than the passions of a real-life, everyday human. As a result, the expressions of human passion that are found in real life are often presented by the authors of these manuals as being sub-human, aberrant, and abhorrent. This paper draws out one connecting thread in various acting manuals in the two centuries after Shakespeare’s death: they all insist on a representation of human nature which is highly idealised. These manuals argue that what looks real and human onstage is a deliberately decorous version of human nature: moments of great passion such as the agonies of death or the throes of love and jealousy are, these manuals advise, to be performed by actors so that they are easy for an audience to understand, and, in short, are good to look at. Representing humans as they really behave, with all their stutterings, losses for words, ugly passions, and frenzied and aimless motions seems, on the other hand, unnatural when it is presented onstage. This paper suggests, then, that, in their earliest instantiations, manuals dealing with Shakespearean stage practice were, as arbiters of taste, vigorous advocates of a kind of superhumanity which only shows the most decorous parts of humanity onstage.

A prime example of such a text is *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action Adapted to the English Drama* (first published 1807) by the actor Henry Siddons (1774-1815), the son of the famous Shakespearean actress Sarah Siddons. This work is an adaptation of a German text by Johann Engel, the Director of the Berlin National Theatre, entitled *Ideen zu Einer Mimik* (1785). Siddons altered Engel's text so that it made explicit and detailed reference to British actors and to Shakespeare's plays. *Practical Illustrations* establishes an ambiguous relationship between actors and human nature: Siddons writes that an actor 'ought to seize all occasions of observing nature' yet 'never lose sight of the main end and grand design of his art, by shocking the spectator with too coarse or too servile an imitation'.¹ The actor ought therefore to portray an idealised nature: representing only the decorous and noble parts of human nature, and ignoring all the all-too-human coarseness that is really involved in impassioned human action. One example given by Siddons is very telling. He writes,

If the first actress now on our stage had never been present at the bed of a dying person, her acting, under such circumstances, might probably have lost one of its most natural and affecting traits. It is remarked, says a celebrated foreign author, that persons in the agonies of death have a custom of *pinching* and gently drawing to and fro their garments.

'Our actress has made the most happy use of this remark', he states, 'nipping' her clothes with her fingers when her character dies onstage, whilst simultaneously observing the principle that 'the agonies and approaches of death ought not to be represented with all the horrors which attend these dreadful moments in nature'.² Here, the performer is encouraged to take small, beautiful, details from nature and to ignore the ugliness of the whole. Indeed, it is debatable how close the actress whom Siddons describes got to nature at all: at first Siddons states that she must have been 'present at the bed of a dying person', but a few sentences later he assumes that her 'nipping' motions were derived not from direct observation but from a 'remark' in a book. Siddons continues with a plethora of examples: a hoarse dying voice onstage, for example, should, he advises, never be the 'disgusting rattling' that actually often occurs when humans die.³

In a fascinating paradox, Siddons describes unconstrained representations of passions onstage, which are more like the way people would act in nature, as 'art so unnatural and so disgusting'; a performance of rage for example, when an actor really lets rip, spitting as he speaks, with a tempestuous voice, flaring nostrils, and stampeding, rampaging gestures, would be 'a true representation of nature, but is very, very *disgusting* in the imitation'.⁴

¹ Henry Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action adapted to the English Drama from a work on the subject by M Engel*, 2nd ed. (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1822), p.14.

² *Ibid.*, pp.14-15.

³ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.17, 45.

Paradoxically, what seems more natural onstage is an idealised version of human nature: one where rage is articulate and controlled, death decorous and beautiful. Marshalling critical readings of *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Othello*, for example, Siddons demonstrates how the actors of his time achieved this superhuman effect.⁵ This need for the player to look attractive at the expense of a completely natural representation of humanity is echoed throughout actors' manuals; in their 1741 *The History of the English Stage*, Betterton et al emphasise that codes of gentility apply onstage as well as off.⁶ No matter which character one is playing, they advise, an actor ought to be decorous in her or his movements. For instance 'The *Mouth* must never be writh'd, nor the Lips bit or lick'd which are all ungentle and unmannerly Actions'. Even in the most awful rage, or the most abject terror, Betterton and Siddons insist that actors playing characters must demonstrate a superhuman control over their entire bodies. In doing so, the actor must also ensure that they show off humanity at its unreal (and thus superhuman) best: its most eloquent and beautiful in word and gesture.

In a section of his *Apology for Actors* (1612), a treatise defending stage-plays that deals with key classical orators and the ways in which they used gesture and action, Thomas Heywood cements the link between rhetorical decorum and acting style, arguing that:

it not onely emboldens a scholler to speake, but instructs him to speake well, and with iudgement, to obserue his comma's, colons, & full poynts, his parentheses, his breathing spaces, and distinctions, to keepe a decorum in his countenance, neither to frown when he should smile, nor to make vnseemely and disguised faces in the deliury of his words, not to stare with his eies, draw awry his mouth, confound his voice in the hollow of his throat, or teare his words hastily betwixt his teeth, neither to buffet his deske like a mad-man, nor stand in his place like a liuelesse Image, demurely plodding, & without any smooth & formal motion. It instructs him to fit his phrases to his action, and his action to his phrase, and his pronuntiation to them both.⁷

In particular, rhetorical notions of decorum in gesture (not gesturing superfluously or too little, but in a way which befits one's words and subject-matter) enables an actor 'to qualifie eury thing according to the nature of the person personated'. But of course in real life, people actually do all the indecorous things Heywood describes: they tear their words with grief, love, or rage, bang on the desk in anger, speak inaudibly through fright, and freeze in shock. No one (or only the superhuman) can so nicely 'observe his comma's, colons, & full poynts' when they are overcome with passion.

The key text for Siddons (as for countless other writers on Shakespearean acting style up to the present day) is Hamlet's so-called 'advice to the players' in *Hamlet*, Act 3. This 'advice', which has variously been contextualised to suit the purpose of the historians and

⁵ Ibid., pp. 123-6.

⁶ Thomas Betterton, William Oldys, and Edmund Currl, *The History of the English Stage* (London: for E Cull, 1741), fol.H1^v.

⁷ Thomas Heywood, *Apology for Actors* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1612), C3^{r-v}.

theorists of acting who have interpreted it over the years, has often been seen as serious or parodic advice from Shakespeare himself about how to act. It runs, as we all know, thus (3.2.1-11; 15-23):

Speake the Speech I pray you, as I pronounc'd it to you, trippingly on the Tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your Players do, I had as liue the Town-Cryer had spoke my lines: Nor do not Saw the Ayre too much your hand thus, but vse all gently; for in the verie Torrent, Tempest, and (as I may say) the Whirle-Wind of Passion, you must acquire and beget a Temperance that may giue it Smoothnesse. O it offends mee to the Soule, to see a robustious Perry-wig-pated Fellow, teare a Passion to tatters, to verie ragges, to split the eares of the Groundlings [...] be not too Tame neyther, but let your owne Discretion be your Tutor. Sute the Action to the Word, the Word to the Action, with this special obseruance: That you ore-stop not the modestie of Nature; for any thing so ouer done is from the purpose of Playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, as 'twere to hold the Mirrour vp to Nature; to shew Vertue her owne Feature, Scorne her owne Image, and the verie Age and Bodie of the time, his forme and pressure.⁸

Hamlet advises, as almost unanimously did Renaissance rhetorical treatises, their classical sources (notably Cicero and Quintilian), and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century acting manuals, that the players must steer a middle course between over- and under-playing passion. He notes that this is necessary for action to be communicative to an audience: though conveying the extremities of passion, the players must ensure it has a 'smoothness' which enables what they are saying and doing to be understood and appreciated. And, he concludes, this will enable the players 'as 'twere to hold the Mirrour up to Nature'. But how natural is the acting style Hamlet describes? The 'natural' performance of passion he advocates is mediated by a deliberate artificiality: the passion is tamed, reined in, and made legible to a theatre audience. As is often noted, the mirror Hamlet describes is one which changes and controls as well as contains and transmits the image of nature. Like Siddons' acting manual, the representation of human nature that Hamlet advocates here is one which has filtered out all the illegible, inaudible, contradictory, ugly, and extreme aspects of real humanity. Accordingly, Siddons cites this section of *Hamlet* to back up his superhuman ideal of characterisation, and Betterton et al end *The History of the English Stage* by quoting at length from, and commenting on, Hamlet's advice to the players, concluding that, as Shakespeare advises 'we must reckon *rude* and *boisterous* Gestures among the faulty'.⁹¹⁰

⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies Histories and Tragedies* (London: Isaac Iaggard and Ed Blount, 1623), p. 266. Reprinted in *The Norton Facsimile: The First Folio of Shakespeare*, 2nd ed (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), p. 774.

⁹ Siddons, *Practical Illustrations*, p. 45

¹⁰ Betterton et al, *The History of the English Stage*, fols. H6r-7v.

In the absence of acting manuals from Shakespeare's own century, an interesting body of work is the physician John Bulwer's set of texts dealing with the human body's power to communicate.¹¹ Among other works (which Bulwer mentions but are no longer known to be extant, but which perhaps continue Bulwer's analysis of 'the entire body as a signifying system') there are *Chirologia* and *Chironomia* (published together in 1644), *Philocophus or the deafe and dumbe man's friend* (1648), *Pathomyotamia* (1649), and *Anthropometamorphosis, or the Artificiall Changeling* (1650). Bulwer explains in *Chironomia* that 'Manuall rhetoric' as a whole involves 'reducing the usuall gestures of Nature into strict rules of Art', such that 'An Oratour is to observe both the Naturall and the Artificiall; yet so, that he adde a certain kinde of art to the Naturall motion, whereby the too much slownes, too much quicknes, and immoderate vastnesse may be avoyded'.¹² Human nature is central to oratorical style here; however, in order that the orator is optimally communicative (and persuasive) and does not make an ugly spectacle of her or himself onstage, Bulwer argues that human nature must be guided by 'Artificiall' rules.

The early modern and the long eighteenth century rhetorical and onstage ideal included a gesture and a voice that were refined and enhanced by art. This entailed that a very selective version of human nature was presented onstage. In real life, passion expresses itself through overloud, over-quiet, and otherwise indecorous motions and words. For the superhumans of the stage as represented by the earliest British acting manuals, however, human nature must be refined and idealised, made timeless, and ensured to be beautiful. The unnaturalness of this onstage humanity was perceived as natural by audiences and theorists accustomed to this kind of decorum. Yet that which was truly natural, the way in which humans actually behave, was perceived, onstage, to be subhumanly 'unnatural and disgusting'.

Siddons' use of Shakespeare was circumscribed by his purpose: he was seeking to create a taxonomy of emotions and the gestures appropriate to them, illustrated with examples. Shakespeare provided a popular and substantial reserve of examples of characters experiencing many different emotions. Rather than a text to be interpreted and its ambiguities drawn out, in Siddons' hands a Shakespearean work becomes a paratext, an illustration that is also a way of codifying and even stereotyping the occurrence of emotion onstage.

It is impossible to tell precisely how far Siddons' book influenced individual actors; however, this perhaps fits Siddons' purpose more than anything else. For Siddons speaks vehemently against the 'pedantry' of actors who simply follow to the letter those guides that detail which outward gestures to perform: this leaves us with the ability to 'complete a set of puppets', he writes, but not to act.¹³ Arguably, Siddons would have been most pleased by actors who took his Shakespearean examples for the rough, overly stereotypical guides that they were, and, like 'the first actress now on our stage', took whatever worked from acting

¹¹ Graham Richards, 'Bulwer, John (bap. 1606, d. 1656)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008) <www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3934> [accessed 21 August 2012].

¹² John Bulwer, *Chironomia in Chirologia...To Which is Added Chironomia* (London: Thomas Harper, 1644), fols. B8^v, K2^v.

¹³ Siddons, *Practical Illustrations*, p. 30.

manuals and from nature, without the audience ever being able to tell precisely which of these was the source of their gestures onstage.

These acting manuals deal with a distinction between nature and the artificial that is in many ways tenuous. It can be argued that as humans go about their everyday lives, we also, to various extents, perform our emotions according to conventions and social codes of behaviour. One difference between onstage and offstage performances of emotion is perhaps the fact that onstage conventions and behavioural codes are simply different to those offstage. Onstage, great decorum, beauty, and control are required in the expression of emotion. Offstage, however, a person is likely to come across as a fraud, as not truly experiencing emotion, if their expressions of emotion are too decorous, beautiful, and controlled. Releasing the full force of our emotions in everyday life, and thus assuring observers that this emotion is genuine precisely because it so obviously overwhelms our powers of self-control, may in some ways be described as a deliberate performance in itself. And this, arguably, is precisely what Hamlet does: his performance of madness, of being out of control, is done for strategic and political aims, demonstrating that sometimes it can serve a person's rational aims to cultivate irrationality for a time.

Who's Fooling Whom?: Superhuman Soothsayers and the Exposure of Human Hamartia

Kathryne E. Walsh

Despite comprising comparatively few lines, the words of the soothsayers in *Julius Caesar* and in *Antony and Cleopatra* are highly revelatory due to the ways in which other characters react to them. Ringing ominously and memorably, not only are the soothsayers' lines the literal presages of ruination, but they also provide insight into the fallible qualities of the characters to whom they portend. These soothsayers straddle the line between humanity and the divine; they transcend the mysterious boundary between earthly life and higher powers, and can therefore be considered superhuman. While this is evident to readers and spectators of the plays, primary characters therein do not readily give them such consideration. Caesar and Charmian do not perceive the soothsayers' abilities to be superhuman; instead, they treat these figures as crazy dreamers or as sources of entertainment, and thereby as fools. While fools are archetypically associated with Shakespeare's comedies, the soothsayers of these tragic plays also embody the classic notion of fool-related hidden wisdom that often goes unnoticed by more salient, albeit errant, characters. This paper will briefly explore the role of soothsayers, or similar figures, in both ancient Rome and Elizabethan England, and will focus on how the dismissing and deriding of them as fools rather than respecting them as superhumans exposes the vulnerability of humanity, as represented by the weak qualities of Caesar and Charmian, respectively.

Religious doctrines during the Elizabethan era, such as the *Royal Injunctions* of 1559, and biblical references in Deuteronomy 18.10, condemned the engagement of soothsayers.¹ Their capacities were aligned with 'charms, sorceries, enchantments, witchcraft [...] and suchlike devilish devices'.² If one were to resort to the counsel of these methods, doing so was believed to have demonstrated mistrust in the powers above. Soothsayers' superhuman capacities demonstrated a link that could have threatened the relationship with God that clerical figures traditionally had reserved.

Despite the vilification of such practices, 'many people still believed in supernatural creatures [...]; used magical charms and recipes; and consulted people believed to have supernatural skills or powers, especially in matters such as illness, childbirth, loss of property, or love-longing'.³ Even Queen Elizabeth I was closely advised by Dr. John Dee, a mathematician, astrologer, and perceived magician, regarding the date of her coronation and other political matters. She openly confessed in a 1568 letter to Mary Stuart, 'I am not ignorant that our dispositions are caused in part by supernatural signs...'.⁴ In this regard, she

¹ Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen's Conjurer* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), p. 92.

² Henry Gee and W.H. Hardy, eds., 'The Injunctions of 1559', *Documents Illustrative of English Church History* (London: Macmillan, 1914) <<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/engref/er78.html>> [accessed 18 August 2012], pp. 417-42.

³ Jeffrey Singman, *Daily Life in Elizabethan England* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995) pp. 26-27.

⁴ A.L. Rowse, *The Elizabethan Renaissance: the Life of the Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971) pp. 260-61.

was similar to leaders of ancient Rome, who also respected augurs' forecasts when making political decisions.

As many sixteenth-century-Englishmen gravely considered omens and predictions, and because soothsayers had been historically revered in ancient Rome, Caesar's dismissal of the notorious warning pertaining to the Ides of March would have stood out as a dire solecism to Elizabethan spectators of Shakespeare's play. This recognition would have engendered a sense of suspense combined with dramatic irony for a historically-knowledgeable Shakespearean audience, who were (perhaps more importantly to the playwright) 'fearful of the unknown, [...] apprehensive and excitable, [...] credulous and imaginative, [...] and] easily roused [...]'.⁵

The Soothsayer's foreboding to Caesar is straightforward. He does not embellish his message, yet he demonstrates an elevated source of wisdom through iambic rhythm and the frequent use of monosyllables: 'Beware the Ides of March' (1.2.17).⁶ When Caesar later smugly retorts that the Ides of March have come, the Soothsayer again employs mostly monosyllables in reminding him, 'Ay, Caesar, but not gone' (3.1.1-2). Monosyllabic speech is 'packed and loaded, although it is easy to overlook [its] importance because the words themselves are short and simple. Again and again, characters use them at moments of great stress or importance, and the short, simple words have poetic resonance'.⁷ The words are intentionally designed and written to stand out amongst the crowd of boisterous Romans, and to grab both Caesar's and the audience's attention.

While the audience, respectful of his prophesying, recognises the crucial nature of the Soothsayer's counsel, Caesar dismisses him as a foolish old man—'a dreamer' (1.2.24). He rejects the harbingers described by another dreamer, his wife, Calpurnia, whom he also considers 'foolish'; and he reacts similarly to the earnest rescue attempts of Artemidorus, about whom he scornfully asks, 'What, is the fellow mad?' (2.3.105; 3.1.9). Caesar deems each of these characters fools in the modern sense of the word—to him, they are ignorant and unhinged. While he perceives these weak qualities in those trying to help him, it ironically is his rejection of their help that exacerbates his own vulnerability.

The Soothsayer, Calpurnia and Artemidorus are not directly involved with his political world or aspirations, so Caesar casts them aside, makes them different in a negative way, estranges these characters as 'others'. This is particularly visible in the case of the Soothsayer, whose costumes and personas in theatrical, filmic, and television performances exemplify such alienation. Gregory Doran's Sub-Saharan Africa-inspired 2012 Royal Shakespeare Theatre production uniformly attired the senators in black togas, but contrasted the Soothsayer (Theo Ogunjipe) by portraying him as a witch doctor, covered from head to

⁵ Ibid., p. 275.

⁶ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar, The Necessary Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), pp. 506-45. Acts, scenes, and lines of the quoted material are specified via the in-text citations of this essay.

⁷ John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare: an Actor's Guide* (New York: Anchor Books, 1984), p. 123.

toe in white clay and mud and wearing a tattered loincloth.⁸ The 1953 film directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz portrays the Soothsayer (actor Richard Hale) as a crazy, wandering, old man with unseeing, glassy eyes—blind to the physical world yet able to picture the future.⁹ The man’s worldly handicap makes him strange to the other characters, who seem to think that physical incapacities correlate to mental incapacities. The 1979 television version, directed by Herbert Wise, costumes the wide-eyed soothsayer (Ronald Forfar) in a bright yellow, striped toga, with the unkempt hair of a mad scientist, therefore making his garb divergent from the more traditional Roman costumes of the senators.¹⁰

These Soothsayer personas are vastly differentiated from those of the homogenised Romans in order to emphasise the distinction between the superhuman and human. Their characters are congruent with the idea that ‘anything that does not fit into the conventional categories of society is suspect; by the same token, those who are suspect can see things about human beings that they themselves cannot’.¹¹ In addition to seeing the future, the Soothsayer can indeed see Caesar’s true pride and hamartia.

David Bevington writes of Caesar, ‘His insatiable desire for the crown overbalances his judgment; no warnings from the gods can save him [...]. He wilfully betrays his own best instincts and ignores plain warnings through self-deception [...]. So wise and powerful a man as this cannot stop the process of his own fate, because his fate and characteristics are interwoven: he is the victim of his own hubris’.¹²

Caesar demonstrates this hubris and misconceived invincibility, saying:

Caesar shall forth. The things that threatened me
Ne’er looked but on my back. When they shall see
The face of Caesar, they are vanished. (2.2.10-12)

While Caesar believes he is above the ‘nonsensical’ Soothsayer and tags him as a foolish dreamer, it is Caesar’s own dismissive reaction that reveals the real fool. Proponents of the free will theory would argue that the Soothsayer gives Caesar the opportunity to exercise his renowned wisdom and possibly save himself. However, Caesar’s ‘wisdom is consumed in confidence’, and his human weakness is exhibited by his lack of consideration for the superhuman power of the Soothsayer, combined with his simultaneous approach toward self-deification (2.2.49). Caesar has put himself so high upon a pedestal that he believes no one else can touch him, and it is this hubristic aspiration toward superhumanity that incites repudiation and disrespect towards others.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, dir. by Gregory Doran, Royal Shakespeare Company (Royal Shakespeare Theatre: Stratford-Upon-Avon, 2012).

⁹ *Julius Caesar*, dir. by Joseph Mankiewicz (MGM Productions, 1953).

¹⁰ *Julius Caesar*, dir. by Herbert Wise (BBC and Time-Life Television, 1979).

¹¹ Rowse, p. 257.

¹² David Bevington, ‘Introduction to *Julius Caesar*’, in *The Necessary Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), p. 507.

Antony and Cleopatra's Charmian also blatantly disrespects the superhuman power of the Soothsayer. When she demands he give her a good fortune, he explains that he cannot fashion the future, only foresee it—his powers are a gift from the divine and should therefore be respected. Only Cleopatra's attendant, Alexas, seems to comprehend that the Soothsayer's insight into 'nature's book of infinite secrecy' must be appreciated with reverence and fear (1.2.9).¹³ Yet, Alexas is already the butt of Charmian's and Iras's ill humoured wish (to see him cuckolded by a sequence of dying wives), and his unsuccessful attempts to prompt deference further corroborate the maids' insolence toward the Soothsayer. As is consistent with her poor sense of humour, Charmian has an impudent retort to all of the Soothsayer's auguries. When told that she will outlive Cleopatra, her response attempts to humorously undermine the gravity of the soothsayer's words: 'I like long life better than figs' (1.2.33-34). Who gets the last laugh, when the asps that directly cause her death shortly thereafter are delivered by a dark clown in a basket of figs? The slightly morbid humour of her end substantiates the futility of deriding the Soothsayer's prognostication.

Similarly to the way that fools are summoned in Shakespearean comedies, Charmian sends for the Soothsayer with the purpose of entertainment in mind. The milieu of amusement is reinforced by Enobarbus's order of the banquet and wine. Furthermore, Charmian's mocking tone and use of prose emphasise her casual, familiar level of interaction with the Soothsayer. The lack of formality further highlights the fact that she does not take his superhuman ability seriously. In contrast to Charmian's prose-laden speech, the Soothsayer reports some of his auguries in blank verse:

You shall be more loving than beloved. (1.2.24)

You shall outlive the lady whom you serve. (1.2.33)

If every of your wishes had a womb,
And fertile every wish, a million. (1.2.40-41)

In light of the way in which 'the introduction of verse in a prose-scene always marks a rise to a higher dramatic pitch, a higher emotional plane, verse being the natural language of emotion,' the Soothsayer is ennobled to the audience as more than Charmian's fool and source of entertainment.¹⁴ The employment of verse 'works to achieve intensity, compactness, and elevation in the language of dramatic characters,' so the weight of the Soothsayer's messages and the magnitude of his perspicacity are highlighted through his use of specific

¹³ William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, in Bevington, pp. 748-800. Acts, scenes, and lines of the quoted material are specified via the in-text citations of this essay.

¹⁴ David Laurance Chambers, *The Metre of Macbeth: Its Relation to Shakespeare's Earlier and Later Work* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1903) p. 7.

linguistic style and structure.¹⁵ While the audience grasps the weight of the Soothsayer's revelations, Charmian acts as if she is above his predictions, which she herself tries to control by making suggestions such as:

Let me be married to three kings in a forenoon and widow them all. Let me have a child at fifty, to whom Herod of Jewry may do homage. Find me to marry with Octavius Caesar, and companion me with my mistress (1.2.27-32).

Rather than respecting the soothsayer's superhuman knowledge of fate, Charmian insists on trying to regulate her own destiny, her actions thereby epitomizing human weaknesses similar to those of Caesar's: pride and perceived invincibility. Despite the ostensible theme of entertainment and the superficial light-heartedness of the scene, Charmian's treatment of the Soothsayer's superhuman insights as the musings of a fool illustrates her own human foibles: the denial of inevitable truth and the unappealing capacity to manipulate and abuse others in order to push her own agenda.

These soothsayers are particularly interesting when considering superhumanity, due to the fact they are indeed humans themselves. While Shakespeare's other seers such as the witches of *Macbeth*, Apollo's Oracle in *The Winter's Tale*, and the Ghost of *Hamlet* also provide insight related to destiny and truth, they are separated from human society and are accepted as transcendental, otherworldly forms. The soothsayers of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, are part of the social constructs of their respective theatrical worlds, making it easier for them to blend into the community, the mundane, the limits of humanity rather than the occult. Ironically, the haughty Caesar and Charmian assume that all humans are bound by certain limits to their capacities, but they do not apply this theory to themselves—they dismiss the soothsayers' potential for esotericism and believe themselves to be untouchable. Caesar and Charmian see those in the lower ranks of society as having the human ability to be misguided, err, and fail, while they are so high within the top tier of their respective societies that they misperceive themselves as exempt from that same truth of humanity. As a result of this misperception, the soothsayers' ambiguous words remain inconsequential in their eyes.

It is not the soothsayers' words that determine the fate of these characters, but rather the characters' human reactions to them. Some of Shakespeare's portents reveal direct truth (the Oracle's vindication of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*) only to have this dismissed due to pride; some frankly disclose destiny, only to have it twisted due to power-hungry avarice (Macbeth's regicide); and some provide clarification, ensuring peace and unity when accepted (as in *Cymbeline*). It is the human nature and the mentality of the characters that hear the auguries that determine their interpretation and response. There may be validity to the soothsayers' messages in themselves, but their weighty and legitimate nature is

¹⁵ George T. Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 255

intertwined with their reception by humans. The plays' plots might not have evolved as we know them without the characters reacting as they did to the soothsayers and their predictions.

The soothsayers in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are not fools in any sense of the word. In denying the soothsayers' superhumanity due consideration, it is actually the characters of Caesar and Charmian who prove foolish. Audiences during Shakespeare's time would have understood the cultural significance and theatrical function of the soothsayers, as well as the folly of neglecting their superhuman capacities. Audiences today continue to make this connection, aided by the play's linguistic structure and the dramatic choices made by modern directors. Through the roles of the soothsayers, Shakespeare both aims for historical accuracy and also knowingly baits a superstitious audience. Juxtaposing these roles with the reactions of the human elite, he indicates a delicate negotiation of balance between the medieval belief that destiny was divinely predetermined and the Renaissance belief that people could determine their own fate.

One could postulate that Caesar and Charmian's destinies could have changed had they heeded the soothsayers, but it is arguably fruitless to ruminate, as Shakespeare did not design them so as for us to even entertain the option. Their destruction-causing denial is an innate quality (exacerbated in Caesar's case by his aspirations for superhumanity). It is essential to understand that they are naturally complicit in their own fates. They are organically characterised by superciliousness and complacency, and it is only through this didactic human state that they are able to err. Caesar's and Charmian's misguided perceptions of the soothsayers as proletarian dreamers or entertainers—as fools—highlight their own weak, human traits: hubris, desire to control destiny, scorn for others, and disrespect for or obliviousness to superhuman capacities.

Negating Female Power: the Supernatural ‘Woman’

Danielle Woolley

The wind howled. Lightning stabbed at the earth erratically, like an inefficient assassin. Thunder rolled back and forth across the dark, rain-lashed hills. [...] In the middle of this elemental storm a fire gleamed among the dripping furze bushes like the madness in a weasel’s eye. It illuminated three hunched figures. As the cauldron bubbled an eldritch voice shrieked: “When shall we three meet again?”

There was a pause.

Finally another voice said, in far more ordinary tones, “Well, I can do next Tuesday.”

-- *Wyrd Sisters*, Terry Pratchett¹

The witch, the wrinkled, haggard old woman with the pointy hat and the broomstick, black cat trailing at her heels, the typical Halloween trope, by current societal values, it seems, is only justified for toddler-scaring and comic parody. Of course, witchcraft was, in the sixteenth century, empirically evidenced and punishable by death in Britain, with exorcisms and witch burnings reaching epic proportions; reliable estimates establish that the number of women executed, once accused of witchcraft, was about ninety-three percent.² Throughout this essay I intend to examine the feminine superhuman force, locating its negation through masculine spheres of discourse and action. I will argue that throughout *Macbeth* and *Henry VI Part I* there is never a truly autonomous feminine power and that the females that are, or become, superhuman, are abhorrent within the context of the play; this is not merely because of the power they possess as women, but because of their decisive, and sometimes forceful, removal of passive femininity in exchange for active masculinity. I will discuss this reversal of gender within the plays and draw some conclusions regarding the efforts of removal and dismissal of these characters from a tightly gendered universe which adheres to, and during the denouement, realigns, patriarchy.³

Witchcraft in the sixteenth century was not merely a private concern; it had deep resonance within the monarchy and parliament; it was a national affair. The Gunpowder Plot became synonymous with witchcraft, and Gary Wills states that Queen ‘Elizabeth’s government showed enough concern when a crude image of herself was discovered that it called in John Dee, the master of occult lore, to prescribe protective measures’.⁴⁵ Elizabeth

¹ Terry Pratchett, *Wyrd Sisters* (New York: HarperTorch, 2001), p. 1.

² Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, ed. Alan Macfarlane (New York: Blackwell, 1984), p. 85.

³ I refer to the *OED* definition of patriarchy as ‘a form of social organisation in which the father or the oldest male is the head of the family, and descent and relationship are reckoned through the male line; government or rule by man or men.’ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138873>> [accessed 11 January 2013].

⁴ For a more extensive historical account of the Gunpowder Plot and witchcraft see Gary Wills, *Witches and Jesuits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 35.

was also attacked with a potion slathered onto the saddle of her horse.⁶ The Queen herself was often doubted due to her gender; even in praising Elizabeth for her speech and deportment at Tilbury, James Aske, in his poem *Elizabetha Triumphans*, wrote: ‘she be by nature weake, | Because her sex no otherwise can be’.⁷ It is crucial that the reports of Tilbury show that Elizabeth felt the need to negate her own femininity. Most reports describe her as armoured as a man and on a white stallion, and her famous lines, ‘I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King’ re-emphasise this concept, of refuting the biological form of her body for something stronger, more masculine.⁸

Later, King James took an active role in the treasonous witchcraft trials in Scotland during the winter of 1580, the which, arguably, began his obsession with witchcraft. In 1597, *Daemonologie*, his book split into three volumes, was printed, advocating the hunting of witches. Most of the attacks on the King’s life were connected with witchcraft and devil worship; after the Earl of Gowrie’s attack on James, the pockets of the dead man revealed a pouch ‘full of magicall characters, and words of enchantment’.⁹ The public interest in magic and the occult may have peaked around the late 1580’s (a mere couple of years prior to the first staging of Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part I*), but the issue of witchcraft would have still been a pertinent, provocative, and potentially dangerous topic in 1606, when *Macbeth* was staged.

It is in this context that I wish to begin my argument with regards to the negated supernatural female in *Macbeth*. The three witches in *Macbeth*, along with Hecate, are an indissoluble mesh of feminine and masculine: officially gendered female, with multitudes of references to ‘Weird Sisters’ (1.5.8).¹⁰ However, their gender becomes ambiguous early in the play, with Banquo’s fearful observation, ‘you should be women, | And yet your beards forbid me to interpret | You are so’ (1.3.45-7). There cannot be much more of an obvious masculine feature than facial hair, and, interestingly, the only other reference to the word ‘beard’ in *Macbeth* is when it is used in a powerful martial sense: Macbeth, faced with an oncoming army states, ‘We might have met them dareful, beard to beard, | And beat them backward home’ (5.5.6-7). The witches’ embodiment of a male identity is furthered in Act 1, Scene 5, in which Macbeth writes to his wife: ‘Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it’ [the vanishing witches], (1.5.5-6). John F. Andrews argues that ‘rapt’ here is etymologically related to rape or ‘seizure by force’.¹¹ With physical beards and with implicit connections with rape, these female witches are remarkably male, opposing passive femininity for an ethereal, superhuman masculinity.

⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

⁷ James Aske, *Elizabetha Triumphans* (1588), cited in Janet M. Green “‘I My Self’: Queen Elizabeth I’s Oration at Tilbury Camp”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 28, 2 (Summer 1997) pp. 421-45 (p. 431).

⁸ Ibid., p. 444.

⁹ Samuel Johnson, ed., ‘Gowrie’s Conspiracie’ (1600), in *The Harleian Miscellany* (London: William Oldys, 1809), 3, p. 86.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Bloomsbury, 1984). All references are made using this edition unless stated otherwise.

¹¹ John F. Andrews, ed., ‘Commentary’, in William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (London: Orion Publishing Group, 1993), p. 26.

If the witches in *Macbeth* are introduced as masculine, Lady Macbeth invokes spirits to make herself so. In her infamous monologue, she fully renounces femininity for the gloriously active pattern of masculinity:

Come you mortal Spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'affect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall. (1.5.40-7)

I quote this passage at length due to the vital implications it has for Lady Macbeth's perceived femininity. Her decisive 'unsex me here' (1.5.41) (designed so that Lady Macbeth and the witches inhabit the same sphere of ambiguous gendered existence), is a literal command to remove her femininity, which the cadence of the speech carries through to the conclusion of a perverted femininity and a pseudo-masculinity. In his erudite article 'Purgation, Exorcism and the Civilising Process in *Macbeth*', Bryan Adams Hampton illuminates the concept of Lady Macbeth's abandonment of the feminine role with regards to the tasks of the contemporary housewife: care for the family through maintaining a clean house and through administering medical care.¹² His central thesis regards the conception of the human body as a Galenic model, which is governed by the four humours found in four bodily fluids: black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood. These fluids were always in need of maintenance; Wall states, 'the early modern body was in constant need of evacuations: enemas, laxatives and emetics for the lower body stratum; herbs, changes in thermal conditions, and for upper body 'purges' (vomiting, coughing, burping); blood-letting, exercise and orgasm for all round purification'.¹³ To view the body in this way is to re-assess Lady Macbeth's use of fluids throughout the speech; she is not merely asking for unnatural (and therefore superhuman) additions to her body, she is also neglecting the traditional feminine role of the 'purger'. Hampton concisely remarks that 'make thick my blood' (1.5.44) is, 'instead of healthful purgation, [an] invocation conveying the opposite: physical, emotional and spiritual constipation'¹⁴.

The concept of purging can be further examined with Lady Macbeth's summons to 'Come to my woman's breasts | And take my milk for gall' (1.5.46-7). There is evidence that

¹² Bryan Adams Hampton, 'Purgation, Exorcism and the Civilising Process in *Macbeth*', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 51.2, Spring (2011), pp. 327-347. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/studies_in_english_literature/v051/51.2.hampton.html> [accessed 4 December 2012].

¹³ Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge University Press 2002), p. 15.

¹⁴ Hampton, p. 338.

early modern anatomists were convinced that breast milk contained blood from the uterus or the heart, and there was a dominant cultural fear of diseases transmitted through the milk to the suckling babe.¹⁵ Lady Macbeth invites these diseases: her milk *is* gall, and she bids her body to become the antithesis of what is deemed natural; death and destruction reign where life should flourish.

Lady Macbeth further negates the female sphere in this same scene with her declaration ‘O! never | Shall sun that morrow see’ (1.5.60-1). Her imperative invocation for stopping the sun has resonance within the Bible; God stopped the sun for Joshua and made it go backwards for King Hezekiah¹⁶. Her remark is not only blasphemous in the Calvinist universe of *Macbeth*, it is also incredibly presumptuous from a gendered reading; she (a female) parallels herself with God, who was unequivocally gendered male throughout the Early Modern period. She models herself after a masculine mould, dismissing the passive, nurturing role of femininity for one of omnipotent masculine power.

Coppélia Kahn, writing on *Coriolanus*, asserts that his mother ‘makes her affection conditional on the fulfilment of her hopes’, and there is a similar synergy between Lady Macbeth and her husband.¹⁷ *Macbeth*’s Act 1, Scene 7 especially has been the subject of many feminist critics’ writing on the female agency in Shakespeare. Lady Macbeth assumes the dominant male role throughout the scene, further eliminating any remnants of her former femininity with the explicit:

I have given suck, and know
How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums
And dash’d the brains out, (1.7.54-8)

The adamantine Lady Macbeth equates masculinity with murder, and, in the image of murdering her babe, is completely eradicated of femininity; it is also worthy of note that ‘the attack on infants... [is] characteristic of Continental witchcraft’.¹⁸ Lady Macbeth, by this point, has become synonymous with the malevolent pseudo-male witches. Janet Adelman asserts that *Macbeth* plays out the fantasy of an all-male mother, but I disagree with this reading.¹⁹ I believe that *Macbeth* shows, through the utter perversion of the ‘nurturing mother’ trope into an abomination of masculine violence and imagined infanticide, that there is no fantasy of this state; instead, there is a culturally embedded fear of an all-male mother.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 341.

¹⁶ *New King James Bible*, Joshua 10:13, Isaiah 38:8. *Biblia.com*, 2012 <<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/>> [accessed 04 December 2012].

¹⁷ Coppélia Kahn, ‘The Milking Babe and the Bloody Man in *Coriolanus* and *Macbeth*’, in *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 158-59.

¹⁸ Janet Adelman, ‘Born of Woman: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*’, in *Cannibals, Witches, Divorce and Estranging the Renaissance*, ed. Marjorie Garber (John Hopkins University Press: 1987), p. 91.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 103.

Whilst Lady Macbeth figuratively metamorphoses into a male, *Henry VI Part 1*'s Joan la Pucelle literally dons armour for battle, becoming an unnatural phenomenon and a superhuman female. Act 1, Scene 7 shows Talbot's lexical anagnorisis: 'Our English troops retire; I cannot stay them. A woman clad in armour chaseth men' (1.7.2-3).²⁰ Joan herself remarks in a previous scene 'My courage try by combat, if thou dar'st, | And thou shalt find that I exceed my sex' (1.3.68-9). Here, then, is a literal embodiment of Lady Macbeth's masculine heart. Joan is labelled as a witch throughout the entirety of the play and is further embedded in the occult than Lady Macbeth; she *is* a witch, conjuring literal spirits for their aid: 'You speedy helpers, that are substitutes | Under the lordly monarch of the north, | Appear, and aid me in this enterprise' (5.3.5-8). Her invocation is efficacious compared to Lady Macbeth's impassioned yet physically fruitless pleas. Gabriele Bernhard Jackson concentrates on Joan as an oddly positive superhuman character; stating connections with Amazons and Viragos, and to further this concept, notes the Dauphin remarks Joan is a 'Bright star of Venus, fall'n down on the earth,' (1.3.123). Jackson argues that 'The Dauphin's welcome to Joan is thus calculated to arouse the most unsuitably positive and even possessive associations in an Elizabethan audience'.²¹ Joan is then viewed as a positive superhuman force with the parallel of the Roman goddess Venus, whose mythological attributes included prosperity and victory (although the goddess's other functions also encompassed fertility and sex—concepts more negatively furthered in Joan by the male English characters, discussed later in this paper). However, in her account of the positive supernatural female force, Bernhard Jackson does not account for the fact that it is pertinent that the welcome Joan receives *is* from the Dauphin. It would hardly be dramatically credible for anything other than praise to leave the Dauphin's lips; she is, after all, on his side.

Joan's character, then, from the English viewpoint, is not as positive as Jackson suggests; she is viewed as woman/man/witch throughout almost the entirety of the play. Her previously-mentioned armour is an interesting addition to her character. Although women in armour were written about in the early modern period, no actual drawings of women in men's clothing survive. The other notable armoured woman in early modern literature was Edmund Spenser's Britomart, but his *The Faerie Queene* as a poem does not involve the literal embodiment of a female in armour onstage. *Seeing*, then, appears to be different to merely reading. Prior to *I Henry VI*, the subject of women appearing in men's clothing was taboo, and only after this play did women's dressing as men become a widespread theatrical trope.²² The image of Joan dressed as a man cannot further remove her femininity; she fully entrenches herself within a male sphere of gender, literally renouncing the femininity of dresses and all they figuratively entail for a sword and a shield, for most of the play.

Joan is not the only witch to successfully raise spirits; the three witches from *Macbeth* also succeed in this task. Early twentieth century criticism concentrated mostly on the witches as being merely a psychological expression of Macbeth's psychosis, but they are much more

²⁰ William Shakespeare, *I Henry VI*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). All references are made using this edition unless stated otherwise.

²¹ Gabriele Bernhard Jackson, 'Topical Ideology: Witches, Amazons and Shakespeare's Joan of Arc', *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, ed. Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps (London: Verso, 1995), p. 151.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

than this within a feminist reading of the play. These witches re-emphasise their status as men through the language they use in Act 3, Scene 5, and Act 4, Scene 1, and their perverted femininity is conveyed through their actions in the latter of these scenes. Act 3, Scene 5 features Hecate admonishing her three underlings, but what is more interesting with regards to this scene is the language that the character uses. Hecate's verbs are decidedly male: 'How did you dare | To trade and traffic with Macbeth' (3.5.4-5). The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that circa 1569, 'trade' not only meant to negotiate with a person but was also used as a verb of commercial business. In the early modern period, 'traffic' as well connoted business, and as early as 1511 it meant the transportation of merchandise for the purpose of trade.²³ Therefore, Hecate's later line, 'Great business must be wrought ere noon' (3.5.22) imports the concept of a business transaction.

This concept of the witches as business powered, and thus predominantly male, considering the comparative lack of businesswomen in the early modern period, is furthered in Act 4, Scene 1. The choral line, 'A deed without a name' (4.1.49) is important here. In the early modern period, 'deed' signified, amongst the more obvious meaning of an intentional action, a legal document, and also connoted a deed of arms, having been used in this sense as early as the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*.²⁴ Thus, although the witches are never as explicitly martial as Joan, they connote the maleness attached to battle and armour as well as to business and commerce.

Peter Stallybrass comments that '*Macbeth* is constructed around the fear of a world without sovereignty', and this theory is well-supported throughout his article.²⁵ However, I think this description of the play can be furthered, to read: '*Macbeth* is constructed around a fear of the world without *male* sovereignty.' Again, this concept can be traced to the reign of Elizabeth I and the anxiety apparent over her reign; however, the Queen does provide the basis of the counter-argument for this concept in the fact of her long and successful rule.

The perverted and unnatural femininity the witches possess reaches its peak when the witches brew a potion in their cauldron, which results in the appearance of spirits. The witches' ingredients consist of random bits of body: 'liver of blaspheming Jew' (4.1.26), 'finger of birth-strangled babe, | Ditch deliver'd by a drab' (4.1.30-1), and the result is a procession of ghosts. This process has parallels with birth; it is a kind of perverted birth: dead ingredients are put into a cauldron, figuratively representing the womb, and dead bodies emerge. The death embodied in various lines such as 'Tartar's lips' (4.1.29) also connotes violence, and violence, as I have explained, was traditionally located within the sphere of men. This scene, the last scene in which the witches appear, conveys a culmination of the concepts built up throughout Shakespeare's play, of removed femininity and active masculinity.

I hope that throughout this essay I have succeeded in arguing the lack of an

²³ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2013) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204275>> [accessed 11 January 2013].

²⁴ *Beowulf*, Anon., trans. Seamus Heaney (Cornwall: Faber and Faber, 2000).

²⁵ Peter Stallybrass '*Macbeth* and witchcraft', in *Focus on Macbeth*, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Routledge 1982), p. 192.

autonomous feminine superhuman force in both *Macbeth* and *Henry VI Part 1*, and related the way in which these pseudo-masculine female characters are abhorrent within the world of the play. I finally wish to discuss the denouement for such characters, and suggest that, regardless of genre, these women are all punished, and made humiliatingly feminine before their final exits, to reify patriarchy. The witches are banished from the stage for the whole of the final act of *Macbeth*, and, crucially, Macbeth does not blame them for his defeat. He blames the male spirits, ‘I pull in resolution; and begin | To doubt th’equivocation of the fiend | That lies like truth’ (5.5.42-4). In a mere three lines, the witches’ autonomy is ripped from them; they are reduced to petty underlings with no power and are not mentioned again.²⁶

Lady Macbeth suffers an even more humiliatingly ‘feminine’ end. She sleepwalks throughout her final scene onstage, her lexical brilliance diminished to feminine apostrophes, ‘All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh! Oh!’ (5.1.48-9). She is reduced to hysteria, a particularly feminine concept. To further this, her death is merely reported; she is not permitted to die onstage or in battle (Holinshed’s Lady Macbeth went to battle with Macbeth), and Macbeth’s response to her death is a simple ‘she should have died hereafter’ (5.5.17). Adelman succinctly remarks that Lady Macbeth becomes ‘so diminished a character that we scarcely trouble to ask ourselves whether the report of her suicide is accurate or not’.²⁷ By the end of the play, the character of Lady Macbeth is completely eradicated and, tellingly, patriarchy is restored through a complete lack of feminine characters: the invading army is filled with men and their sons, with not a woman in sight.

Perhaps the most brutal and humiliating end for a female character that has neglected the feminine is the end of Joan. Her masculinity is central to her character throughout, as discussed earlier, but her end is humiliatingly feminine. Bernhard Jackson comments upon the importance of her femininity in her final scene but does not give enough import to the biological aspect of Joan’s female body; the last vestiges for hope of life for Joan lie literally in her female body, the body she had previously covered in maleness.²⁸ She pleads not to be executed due to the state of her body—she claims pregnancy: ‘I am with child, ye bloody homicides’ (5.6.62). In the early modern period, women that claimed pregnancy were not burned; their deaths were postponed. Thus, the male anxiety for the realignment of patriarchy in *I Henry VI* is shown to be extreme. Despite claims of pregnancy, Joan is still burned as a witch (a particularly, though not exclusively, feminine end), and patriarchy is reinstated.

Thus, it becomes apparent that Shakespeare’s supernatural females transgress strict boundaries of gender, and that the women who become masculine through discourse and action are either punished by being simply excised from the play, or punished permanently by death. Superhuman women negate the female sphere—they cannot be superhuman *and* feminine. ‘Superhuman’, especially with regards to the occult arts, is just too powerful for a feminine character. Therefore superhuman women become, in some senses, male. They are punished not only for their magic, but, through the specific feminine endings these characters are doomed to, it is apparent that they are punished for their masculinity, too.

²⁶ For a fuller account of the diminished witches, see Adelman, ‘Born of Woman’.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.156.

Shakespeare's Deflation of the Superman

Jonathan Drahos

ELIZABETH'S 'SUPERHUMAN' PORTRAIT

At the National Portrait Gallery in London hangs one of the most famous portraits of Queen Elizabeth I. The so called *Ditchley Portrait* (circa 1592) is massive, and (when I visited) hangs on the northeast wall, the most visible position in the high ceilinged room. The portrait shows the Queen, in all of her regal strength, standing upon a map of England and Wales. It would appear that her position on the map signifies her superhuman dominance over the physical world: a figure bigger than life. Her costume is lavish; her jewels have the ornate and rare qualities of wealth, stateliness, and taste. She daintily clutches a decorative fan, which she holds out from her V shaped, elegant, corset restricted waist. Albert C. Labriola describes the V shape as a symbol of her spiritual (V-virginal) purity and a 'breast plate' like emblem of military prowess.²⁹ Her shoulders are enhanced with a curtain rod-like stiffness that seems balanced with an unusually wide hoop skirt. She stands almost in a spotlight, with the sun lighting her gently painted, if aged apparent face. The penetrating sun is also illuminating the map with vivid brightness. As Roy Strong suggests, 'The clouds part to the left to reveal the dawn of a new age'.³⁰ There is a magical sense that the Queen herself is the life giving sun. At first look, one is taken with the brilliant use of colour, shape and composition by the artist Marcus Gheerhaerts (1562-1635).

One is also taken with the grandeur of symbolic regal power and beauty. If we look again, closely, however, we see a face that is hardened by the weight and anxiety of a tenuous reign. Louis Montrose explains that the painter 'introduces dissonance into this icon of quasi-divine sovereignty; namely, his use of chiaroscuro to model Elizabeth's facial features, which creates a relatively naturalistic image of the sovereign at three-score years of age'.³¹ There also exists the (intended?) juxtaposition of the perfect 'virgin' Queen standing above a whole world of people—who can see straight up her dress. The exaggerated circumference of the hoop skirt is reminiscent of the bold circumnavigation of the globe by Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake and other exotic explorers of the new world, which illicitly exposed the Queen, her nation, and her subjects, as well as enriched them with rich gifts from valorous Knights. As Rhonda Lemke Sanford notices: 'we can see the tiny ships sailing under Elizabeth's skirt'.³² Sanford, like Labriola, equates the metaphor of the Queen's militarism and sexuality: 'These ships represent the dual possibility of military invasion or commercial

²⁹ Albert C. Labriola, 'Painting and Poetry of the Cult of Elizabeth I: *The Ditchley Portrait* and Donne's *Elegie: "Going to Bed"*', "Studies in Philology", 93, 1 (University of North Carolina Press, Winter, 1996), <<http://jstor.org/stable/4174537>> [accessed 18 Oct 2012], p. 46.

³⁰ Roy C. Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 154.

³¹ Louis Montrose, 'Elizabeth through the Looking Glass: Picturing the Queen's Two Bodies', in *The Body of the Queen: Gender and Rule in the Courtly World 1500-2000*, ed. by Regina Shulte (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), pp. 61-88 (p. 73).

³² Rhonda Lemke Sanford, 'A Room Not One's Own: Feminine Geography in *Cymbeline*', in *Playing the Globe: Genre and Geography in the English Renaissance Drama*, ed. by John Gillies and Virginia Mason Vaughan (London: Associated University Presses Inc., 1998), pp. 51-73, (p. 64).

enterprise, both of which can be read as unacceptable transactions with a chaste queen (the one representing rape, the other prostitution) in this iconography'.³³ Also, it is a unique look into what was the Queen's greatest vulnerability in a male dominated England—her gender. The ruler of the country during Shakespeare's early life, the most powerful person in the world, was a childless, husbandless, beautiful, self-professed virgin Queen. She was the ultimate 'magazine cover' object of sex herself. How could the nation, then, not be obsessed with an erotic sense of irony? The Queen and her council battled anxiety regarding her gender, her virginity, her strength to rule, and her refusal to marry, throughout her rein.³⁴

The erotic nature of the painting is unmistakable, and it is a prime example of how art during the period could reflect (subversively) the nation's male dominated sexual obsession.³⁵ I point up the *Ditchley* painting as a metaphor for the type of thinking that inspired the erotic thrust in early modern writing—evident in Shakespeare's later plays such as *King Lear* and, perhaps most boldly, from Shakespeare's epyllion *Venus and Adonis* (1593):

'Fondling,' she saith, 'since I have hemmed thee here
 Within the circuit of this ivory pale,
 I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer,
 Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:
 Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,
 Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.'³⁶ (229-234)

The Elizabethan epyllion is a short narrative, based on classical myth, erotic in nature, with a dependency on meta-natural Ovidian mutability. Shakespeare, uniquely within the genre, has a separate and distinct inward sexual ambiguity—an elimination of sexual difference—not found in other contributions to the genre, or indeed (unequivocally) within his own early works of drama. What makes Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* unique is the detachment of the moral, which is always present in his plays.³⁷ This is precisely what Michel Foucault

³³ Rhonda Lemke Sanford, *Maps and Memory in Early Modern England: A Sense of Place* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 34.

³⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 168. Greenblatt describes the queen's brilliant strategy to define herself as the Virgin Mother of her English citizens, a strategy that resulted in a reign as an unmarried queen for over forty years.

³⁵ The Ditchley painting was commissioned by Sir Henry Lee, one of Elizabeth's formidable champions. He fell in love with Anne Vavasour, Gentlewoman of the Queen's Bedchamber (E.K. Chambers, *Sir Henry Lee: An Elizabethan Portrait* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 31.). Anne had a very public and scandalous affair with the Earl of Oxford and later gave birth to the Earl's child, and was imprisoned by Queen Elizabeth, since ladies of her bedchamber were supposed to reflect her own supposed chastity (Daphne Pearson, *Edward de Vere (1550-1604): The Crisis and Consequences of Wardship* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 109.). Was the painting a device to even the score for Anne's public disgrace and imprisonment?

³⁶ William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Poems*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones and H.R. Woudhuysen (London: Arden, Cengage Learning, 2007), pp. 231-232. All quotes from *Venus and Adonis* are from this edition.

³⁷ One could argue that Marlowe's fragment epyllion *Hero and Leander*—written in the same year (1593)—was left unfinished purposely to detach the moral consequence of the young lovers, but certainly George Chapman's continuation of Marlowe's poem attaches a strong Christian moral. Edmund Spenser's contribution to the genre in *Muiopotomos* is quite moral as well. He changes Ovid's story and moralizes it by metamorphosing Arachne

terms a ‘hermaphroditism of the soul’.³⁸ In a male dominated world, with enormous and intolerable anxiety associated with the feminization of masculinity, Shakespeare put forth his epyllion as a treatise that transcends that anxiety and moves toward complete instability of moral and social norms. By doing so, he humanises the superhuman structure of the monarchy.

Rebecca Ann Bach describes the irony of a female monarch ruling a society obsessed with a ‘homosocial imaginary’.³⁹ This ‘male-male’ bonding is a phenomenon based at the very heart of masculine identity. In order to maintain control of uncontrollable sexual desire, the early modern male was forced, according to William Carroll, to create a persona of extreme masculinity.⁴⁰ This included strong and unbending identification with other males. The sociopolitical aspects of the homosocial cannot be overestimated. In a male dominated world where most women, according to Sara Munson Deats, suffered ‘deplorable’ conditions, any movement that would compromise masculinity was considered a threat and was vehemently denigrated on social, governmental, and religious levels.⁴¹ According to William Carroll, ‘what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called the homosocial’ includes all things masculine and rejects all things that might be construed as identifying males with feminine characteristics. Carroll explains how male-male bonds ‘prove stronger than male-female desire’.⁴² How did the male population, then, avoid the obvious fact that they were subject to a woman monarch? The answer lies, states David Norbrook, in Elizabeth’s genius creation of the ‘cult of the Virgin’. She theatricalised herself as the ‘Virgin Mother of England’ and was careful to communicate a masculine world with herself as a spiritual, chosen ‘exception’. Importantly, national poets such as Edmund Spenser and John Donne solidified this heroic, divine, and superhuman image. Norbrook gives us the example in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. Norbrook states ‘the control of sexuality is an essential precondition of religious reformation. Just as it is the necessary basis for political civility: Duessa must be unveiled, the Bower of Bliss completely destroyed’.⁴³ With poets like Spenser, sensuality was always tempered with morality and Protestant conformity.

as a cause of the sin of envy rather than the power of the Gods over men. See *The Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, eds. William A. Oram, Einar Bjorvand, Ronald Bond, et al (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 424. Spenser never approaches the high rhetoric of eroticism. As John Roe suggests, Spenser’s *Muiopotomos* is ‘more like a sophisticated Aesopian fable than an amorous narrative’. See John Roe, ‘Ovid “renascent” in *Venus and Adonis* and *Hero and Leander*’, in *Shakespeare’s Ovid: The Metamorphoses in the Plays and Poems*, ed. by A.B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 38.

³⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Will To Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, 1, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 43.

³⁹ Rebecca Ann, *Bach, Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature Before Heterosexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 2.

⁴⁰ William C. Carroll, ‘“And love you ‘gainst the nature of love”: Ovid, rape, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*’, in *Shakespeare’s Ovid: The Metamorphoses in the Plays and Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 49-65.

⁴¹ Sara Munson Deats, *Sex, Gender, and Desire in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1997), p. 50.

⁴² Carroll, p. 53.

⁴³ David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics In The English Renaissance* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 106.

Elizabeth herself was not a champion of feminism. She was not even a voice for women, but a male voice who held male councillors, supported male dominated laws, and perpetuated male homosocial hegemony—all the while presenting herself, theatrically, as what Norbrook describes as ‘a divinely ordained exception rather than a general principal’.⁴⁴ Perhaps to counter this image of Elizabeth as divine mortal goddess, Shakespeare used erotic poetry with an equivocal framework—a curious mix of Protestantism and Classical Paganism. For Alan Sinfield this is an Ovidian device of epic transformation and an inconstancy of gender.⁴⁵ For Shakespeare, this inconstancy, or sexual ambiguity, was focused on subverting the very real ‘homosocial’ anxiety of holding firm to masculinity at all costs.

In Shakespeare’s narrative verse we find even greater freedom in deflating the ‘super-masculine’. As Clifford Leech explains: ‘A poet writing narrative verse was able, if he wished, to disregard current convention in a way not so easily possible in the theatre.’⁴⁶ Through imaginative ekphrasis in *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare seems able to transgress the homosocial completely.

VENUS AND ADONIS

Nowhere in Shakespeare’s plays do we find the same ambivalence toward sexuality and social stability as we find in his minor epic *Venus and Adonis*. Shakespeare alienates his ostensible characters from emotional depth. Certainly Adonis would not be studied as an inward creation, but as a ‘type’ of person who is used as a template, or blank canvas for the creation of more thematic discoveries about sex and gender. Adonis, who has become through most of the poem a creative fiction, seems only to exist as an idea—a representation of a sexual void. In sharp contrast, Ovid’s Adonis is depicted as superhuman. He is born from the bark of a myrrh tree, and Ovid endows him with divine qualities:

The waternymphes upon the soft sweete hearbes the chyld did lay...
Within the tree, and lately borne, became immediatly
The beautyfullst babe on whom man ever set his eye.⁴⁷ (X. 589-601)

For thousands of years, Adonis has enjoyed the reputation of being the ideal physical human specimen.⁴⁸ Spenser’s Adonis, like Ovid’s, is a willing sexual partner in *The Faerie Queene*.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴⁵ Alan Sinfield ‘Marlowe’s Erotic Verse’ in *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion*, ed. by Patrick Cheney, Andrew Hadfield, and Garret A. Sullivan, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 128

⁴⁶ Clifford Leech, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet for the Stage*, ed. by Anne Lancashire (New York: AMS Press, 1986), p. 177.

⁴⁷ Ovid, *Ovid’s Metamorphoses The Arthur Golding Translation* (1567) Edited, with an introduction and notes, by John Frederick Nims, with a new essay, ‘Shakespeare’s Ovid’, by Jonathan Bate (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2000), p. 265.

⁴⁸ Since c. 600 BCE.

Venus relishes in Adonis' 'joyous company' and she 'Possesseth him, and of his sweetness takes her fill' (3.6.46).⁴⁹ Spenser also yields an Adonis with divine and supernatural qualities:

All be he subject to mortalitie,
Yet is eterne in mutabilitie,
And by succession made perpetuall.
Transformed oft, and chaunged diverslie:
For him the father of all formes they call; (3.6.47)

Yet with Shakespeare's Adonis, we are confronted with a character who remains, for most of the twelve hundred lines, obdurate and sexually flaccid. Shakespeare counters the power structure of maleness in Elizabethan society; he pulls the superhuman Adonis from his lofty perch and puts him to an aggressively sexual challenge. Adonis fails completely. Shakespeare demonstrates how frustrated Venus becomes in being unable to take Adonis sexually, even when he relents from exhaustion:

Hot, faint and weary, with her hard embracing,
Like a wild bird being tamed with too much handling,
Or as the fleet-foot roe that's tired with chasing,
Or like the froward infant stilled with dandling,
He now obeys, and now no more resisteth,
While she takes all she can, not all she listeth. (559-564)

'Listeth' meaning, of course, 'wanting', or a desire for much more than Adonis wants, or perhaps, more than he truly understands. We find Adonis, time and again, not only admonishing love for love's sake, but also blatantly establishing his own sexual ineptitude:

'I know not love,' quoth he, 'nor will not know it,
Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it.
'Tis much to borrow and I will not owe it;
My love to love is love but to disgrace it,
For I have heard it is a life in death,
That laughs and weeps, and all but with a breath.' (409-14)

⁴⁹ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, in *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. by J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). All quotes from *The Faerie Queene* are from this edition.

The sexual rhetoric remains empty here. It is as if Adonis' knowledge of love is based on hearsay. He exclaims, 'For I have heard it is a life in death...' (413). He simply cannot react appropriately to Venus' sexual advances. The narrator explains that 'Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn' (4). But we discover throughout the poem that it is not simply that he prefers hunting to sex, or that he does not know how to use his sexual equipment. It seems that he is afraid of contact before he understands how, who, and what he is attracted to:

'Fair queen,' quoth he, 'if any love you owe me,
Measure my strangeness with my unripe years.
Before I know myself, seek not to know me;
No fisher but the ungrown fry forbears,
The mellow plum doth fall, the green sticks fast,
Or being early plucked is sour to taste'. (523-28)

Adonis' tender years seem a purposeful rhetorical excuse for ambiguous sexual identity. Yet Adonis is a man, after all. He is not a boy, as he pretends. He is fully capable of sexual engagement. But with whom? That is the question that Shakespeare leaves open for our contemplation. Curiously, however, Adonis tests himself with the 'fake' bargain he makes with the great goddess upon his departure to meet his friends for the hunt. Like the passage concerning Salmacis and Hermaphroditus in Book IV of *Ovid's Metamorphoses*: '...the boy | Waxed red: he wist not what love was: and sure it was a joy | To see it how exceeding well his blushing him became' (403-404), the reader is at once frustrated and exhilarated by the possibility of Adonis' sexual potential:⁵⁰

'Now let me say good-night, and so say you;
If you will say so, you shall have a kiss.'
'Good-night', quoth she, and ere he says adieu,
The honey fee of parting tendered is:
Her arms do lend his neck a sweet embrace;
Incorporate then they seem: face grows to face. (535-540)

Again, Shakespeare brings us allusions of hermaphroditism with the mutable 'incorporate' figures. They become a single sexual being. The sensuousness of the kiss is tempered—not with Adonis' disdain, but with a permeable and mystical union of 'face grows to face'. Yet Venus remains insatiable and unsatisfied.

Shakespeare sometimes depicts Venus as a perceived form of perfection and at others as an overly aggressive, 'bold-faced suitor' (6). The narrator describes her 'fair immortal

⁵⁰ Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation*, p. 97.

hand' (80) and her god-like ability to float on 'primrose's (151) as if they were 'sturdy trees' (152). Further, Venus herself claims that: 'My beauty like the spring doth yearly grow' (141) and that her eternal youthfulness has 'no defects' (138). Shakespeare is perhaps mirroring the claims of the cult of the Virgin Queen. His Venus, like the Queen, has enjoyed a spotless reputation. She is the goddess of love and sex—born of the ocean, daughter to the almighty Zeus, mother of Aeneas, sexual conqueror of the war god, Mars. But in Shakespeare's poem, she is also vulnerable. She becomes, according to Pauline Kiernan, an 'incongruous...helpless' and 'all-too-human' goddess.⁵¹ Venus shares the same vindictive jealousy of Adonis with the goddess widely known to be linked to Elizabeth I—Cynthia, goddess of the moon.⁵² The perceived ideal of god-like power and beauty becomes deflated, powerless, frustrated, and, finally, hopeless. Was Shakespeare subverting the perceived glory of the monarch?

Stephen Greenblatt refers to the careful strategy of Elizabeth I as 'charismatic absolutism'.⁵³ Greenblatt's case is that Elizabeth was constantly busy with the empty space between what he calls the monarch's 'ideological claim to perfect wisdom, beauty and power and the all-too-visible limitations of the actual Elizabeth'. The charisma lies in pretending that these limitations 'did not exist'. This pretense put the Tudors in a place of absolute fear of insurgency, civil strife, and social collapse. This fear caused strict moral edicts. Shakespeare was able to subversively sidestep these edicts using the distance of his poetry and transcend the boundaries of Elizabethan masculine hegemony. In essence, Shakespeare deflated and mortalised the popular perception of the ruler's divine charisma.

⁵¹ Pauline Kiernan 'Venus and Adonis and Ovidian indecorous wit' in *Shakespeare's Ovid: The Metamorphoses in the Plays and Poems*, ed. by A. B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 81-95 (pp. 92-93).

⁵² Sir Walter Raleigh's poem 'The Ocean, to Cynthia'—a popular court poem—laments Raleigh's fall from grace and links Queen Elizabeth with the virtues of the moon goddess. Spencer refers to Raleigh's poem in 'Book III' of *The Faerie Queen*. There is also Ben Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels*, a morality play performed by the boys at Blackfriars. This is to name only a few sources.

⁵³ Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Learning To Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 92.

Origins of a Touchstone: Playing a Comic Superhero

John Curtis

No dark night, but rather a bright morning: my phone flashed; it wasn't Commissioner Gordon, but Beth Roznowski, offering me a part in the summer term's production of *As You Like It*.¹ One month on, the intriguing thematic title of this issue of the *Shakespeare Institute Review* coupled with an editorial policy that allows for writing that is deeply personal (as opposed to purely academic) prompted me to offer some thoughts on an interpretation that integrated aspects of the superhero archetype into playing Touchstone.

The final costume concept was inspired by Superman: scarlet trunks over bright yellow tights and a bright red Roman 'T' emblazoned across my pectorals. The colour scheme was based on the traditional harlequin of a jester from a pack of playing cards and gave the impression of inverted Iron Man. The parody of the superhero concept was enhanced by the costume's figure-hugging contours. Form-fitting spandex was substituted by dyed cotton thermals, and the inhabitant was one balding male, approaching middle-age and somewhat lacking the chiselled chin, dark hair and ripped muscle-definition that is associated with twenty-first century, Hollywood superhero incarnations. Donning a red G-string (with beading) in anticipation of wedding-night activity gave extra wow-factor to the final scene. Looking at some of the photos, however, I am more than content to allow a belief that I had developed a slight beer-belly deliberately for the part.



¹ A review of the production featured in *The Stratford Herald*, 26 July 2012 <www.stratford-herald.com/arts-reviews/5765-shakespeare-academics-prove-they-can-act-well-too.html> [accessed 03 September 2012].

There is something about Shakespeare's fools that makes them loners—outsiders and commentators—that is not to say that they are peripheral figures: they shape the on-stage action but stand apart from the main protagonists, undertaking that which others cannot. Indeed, foolish antics may not always meet with the protagonists' approval—but foolery is rarely vanquished in the way that evil is.

A consideration of superheroes reveals some recurring features. Apart from their special powers, they forego their family name and operate under an assumed identity. They have a distinctive appearance. An element of mystery may surround their origins, and the character's isolation can be palpable with few (if any) familial, platonic or romantic relationships. However, the isolation allows for devotion to a value-orientated crusade and the promulgation of a particular behavioural code. Image and message combine to become a power-full 'brand' that offers a meaningful contribution to society. The world is usually a better place as the result of the costumed character's work. I'd like to develop these observations on the superhero archetype with reference to Touchstone.

Touchstone's name is a nominal oddity in the *dramatis personae* of *As You Like It*. The noun's connotations are significant: a touchstone was a highly-prized and valuable object, possessed by those skilled in the art of alchemy. Its application purportedly allowed the magus to distinguish between precious metals and imitations. Touchstones were synonymous with truth and conveyed special knowledge. Such incisive, prophetic qualities mirror this character's dramatic function and were viewed as 'superhuman'. In addition, the text suggests that Touchstone's multi-coloured clothing, his motley, makes him instantly recognisable, distinguishing him from the courtiers and the rustics. The garment is lavish—winning Jacques' admiration—and may have been instrumental in leading to three tailors being 'undone' or 'bankrupted' (5.1.41).²

Touchstone's literary origins are unclear. The character has no clear parallel in the primary literary source of *Rosalynde*.³ In that sense, the character is a pure product of Shakespearean genius. Within Shakespeare's play, Celia says that Touchstone was sent to her (and Rosalind) by Fortune, although according to Jacques, Touchstone claims he was once a courtier (1.2.32; 5.4.39). Certainly Touchstone is familiar with the workings of the court; he knows something of the protocols regarding romance, politics and honour. He is willing to defend any slight upon his pedigree and his observations betray some learning: he references 'capricious' Ovid and uses the Greek form of he: *ipse* (3.3.4-5; 5.2.34). However, there is no indication of any lineage of the type that Orlando and Rosalind or Celia and Oliver lay claim to. The play's text presents Touchstone without parents or siblings. We may wonder how and why, if he was once a courtier, he shifted from nobility to foolery. Even Audrey, his love-interest, appears an ephemeral encounter, their relationship apparently being destined to a mere two months of 'wrangling' (5.4.165).

² Textual references use *As You Like It*, in *Complete Works: The RSC Shakespeare*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 472-525.

³ Thomas Lodge, *Rosalynde: Euphues Golden Legacy* (London: Thomas Orwin, 1590).

Touchstone's power lies in his grandiloquence: a "biscuit-dry" wit that manifests itself through extensive wordplay, wry quips and sharp observations. His ability to think faster than others combines with his unorthodox style of delivery. Touchstone communicates through extempore punning, rhyming and elaborate anecdotes. These contrast with the sentimentality and predictability of others. That special ability wins admiration from Jacques, Rosalind, Audrey and Corin, and prompts Duke Senior to acknowledge that Touchstone is indeed 'very swift and sententious' (5.4.52). Touchstone is a mentalist, an extra-ordinary intellect, a speedster.

The value of such wordplay is not to be underestimated. Modern society values those who can defuse confrontational situations before they escalate into physical (and armed) conflict. Touchstone muses on the power that 'if' has in resolving a stand-off—rhetoric prevails where black-letter law cannot—peace is achieved through qualification: 'your "if" is your only peacemaker—much virtue in "if"' (5.4.77). Empathy and insight into the human psyche are qualities that often provide greater hope than destructive might. Special envoys, shuttle diplomacy and peace missions are more welcome news stories than invasions and persecution. Indeed, successive Nobel Prizes for Peace testify to the success of exponents of 'jaw jaw' in reconciling seemingly intractable positions.

In terms of promulgating a particular code, Touchstone's disposition is to counter the prevailing theme of a scene, tempering melancholy with humour; idealism with reality; considered responses with improvisation and passion. In 1.2, he starts with comments on honour and the role of fools in the criticising the wise. He satirises Le Beau's flamboyant behaviour. In 2.4, he muses on the follies of lovers. In 3.2, away from the city-life of the ducal court, he studies the rustic life of a shepherd, concluding that some aspects are admirable while others are 'vile' and 'tedious' (3.2.14-15). He goes on to mock the love poetry of Orlando, and Touchstone's liaisons with the lusty Audrey and the wayward cleric Sir Oliver lampoon marriage. Touchstone's manic over-reaction to William's romantic overtures to Audrey is a perversion of chivalric principles—resulting in a threat to kill the young lad in 'a hundred and fifty different ways' (5.1.43-4). In the play's final scene, Touchstone explores the escalation of quarrels through the seven degrees of a lie. In the course of the play, Touchstone's behaviour similarly intersects with many of the seven life phases of 'student', 'poet', 'lover', 'warrior' and the civil role of a justice. His observations are antithetical to those ages articulated in Jacques' most celebrated monologue but conveyed with Touchstone's unique blend of intensity and forcefulness. Touchstone's language and behaviour pose obstacles to any naturalistic approach to the character. He has human traits but there is very little that is recognisable as 'mainstream': to that extent he is super-human.

And so, to interpretation and my attempts to integrate elements of the superhero archetype into a performance. I greatly admired Richard Katz's portrayal of Touchstone as an aging circus performer at the RSC's Courtyard Theatre in 2009 and David Fielder's ribald 'Mr Punch' at Shakespeare's Globe in 1998.⁴ Both drew on different parts of the clowning

⁴ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, dir. by Michael Boyd, Royal Shakespeare Company (Courtyard Theatre: Stratford-Upon-Avon, 2009); William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, dir. by Lucy Bailey, Shakespeare's Globe (Globe Theatre: London, 1998).

tradition. For further inspiration I stood before the jester's statue on Stratford's Henley Street. I wondered about a failed magician concept and smiled at my memories of Tommy Cooper but my thinking quickly moved to the Great Gonzo from the Muppets and from there to a comic superhero-type. I found support for such a construction as aspects of the foregoing analysis became apparent to me.

In addition to the striking costume, the text provided assistance in allowing for sudden entrances and exits with impact and speed. In each of his scenes, Touchstone's appearance is something of a surprise: he appears, dominates the action for a short while and, once he has said his piece, he either ceases to speak or withdraws. Such unexpected arrivals and departures are a staple of superhero storylines. My first entrance was a sprint across the width of the stage, resulting in a dramatic collapse from a feigned heart attack. The woodland entrance was enhanced with a teddy bear, before I retired with Corin, employing a hand-clapping gallop akin to something from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.⁵ The second half of the play included entrances using Corin's crook and hurrying on alongside an increasingly dishevelled Audrey. Each entrance and exit was distinctive, unpredictable and unorthodox, helping to mark Touchstone as an unconventional outsider.

My own superpowers are relatively limited. To paraphrase Kent in *Lear*, that which ordinary men are fit for, I can do—but I did find that I was able to enhance Touchstone's wordplay through a range of accents and impressions.⁶ There were niches for employing the type of voices associated with English aristocrats and country bumpkins, as well as mimicking the zeal of a preacher from the American Bible Belt, becoming a fierce warrior from *Braveheart*, using the broad dialect of a Yorkshireman, and adopting a suitably outrageous French accent⁷. The lack of any superhero strength was heightened by my collapsing like Pheidippides when delivering the message for Celia and struggling to lift the same suitcase that she had easily carried into Arden. The lack of emotional constancy was underlined with my reliance on the placebo of a teddy bear. As the play developed, the character became larger, climbing aloft on a bench to deliver a monologue about the need for 'courage' in the face of the supposed adversity of an impending wedding: I did this in homage to Branagh's own cinematic tribute to Olivier's delivery of the Saint Crispin's Day speech.⁸ All built towards the wild and whirling tempest of words and actions that spanned the bounds of etiquette and that ran from the retort courteous to the lie direct.

For my part, playing the character in this way was challenging in terms of the demands it made on physical energy and verbal delivery, but I immensely enjoyed the opportunity to subvert the social conventions that govern working life. However, as with all superheroes—it might be time to hang up my tights; but if so, I have discovered how adding a comic book dimension to a role can enhance the comedic.

⁵ *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, dir. by Terry Gilliam (EMI Films, 1975).

⁶ *King Lear*, 1.4.28-30, in *Complete Works: The RSC Shakespeare* (pp. 2004-2080).

⁷ *Braveheart*, dir. by Mel Gibson (20th Century Fox, 1995).

⁸ In *Henry V*, 4.3.20-69, *Complete Works: The RSC Shakespeare* (pp. 1026-1097).

⁹ *Henry V*, dir. by Kenneth Branagh (Curzon Film Distributors, 1989); *Henry V*, dir. by Laurence Olivier (Eagle-Lion Distributors, 1944).

Hero as Avatar: *Karmayogi*, Kerala's Kalarippayattu *Hamlet*

A review of V. K. Prakash's Malayalam film adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Thea Buckley

At the beginning of the 1993 film *Last Action Hero*, a classroom teacher is trying to interest the schoolboy protagonist in a film of *Hamlet*: 'Treachery, conspiracy, sex, sword fights, madness, ghosts. And everybody dies. Shakespeare's Hamlet could not be more exciting. And though he may seem incapable of taking action—he is one of the first action heroes... You will now see a scene from the film by Laurence Olivier'.¹ Predictably, the schoolboy's imagination segues into its own escapist film short, this one alternatively starring Schwarzenegger as Uzi-wielding Prince of Denmark:

Hamlet-Arnie: 'Hey, Clauuudiuuuus. You killed my faather. BIG mistake.'

Voiceover: 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark, and Hamlet's taking out the trash.'

(Hamlet rampages through Elsinore: throwing Claudius out of a window, hurling Yorick's skull at an assassin, and gunning down Polonius and other spies, only pausing for a cigar break.)

Hamlet: 'To be, or not to be...' (flicks open lighter) 'Not to be'. (He lights up as, behind him, Elsinore explodes in a fireball.)²

Fast forward nearly twenty years from Schwarzenegger's *Hamlet*, to another film adventure starring an invincible hero. With his latest film, *Karmayogi*, Indian national award-winning director V. K. Prakash has created a revenge tale worthy of the action movie label—including a title which translates to 'the Sacrificer' or 'the one who does selfless action'.³ In this rousing Malayalam language adaptation of *Hamlet*, a Shakespearean homage with a twist, something is rotten in the feudal South Indian state of Kerala. The royals are members of the martial Yogi clan and masters of *kalarippayattu*, the ancient martial arts form reputed to be the ancestor of karate. Hamlet and King Hamlet, here 'Rudran Gurukkal' and 'Rudran Valiya Gurukkal' (both played by local star Indrajith), are trained warrior-rulers who, when the realm is in danger, also morph into avatars of their namesake avenging god.

¹ *Last Action Hero*, dir. by John McTiernan (Columbia Pictures, 1993).

² The trailer includes excerpts: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJ4B_NxsHCI> [accessed 28 September 2012].

³ *Karmayogi*, dir. by V. K. Prakash (Creative Land Pictures, 2012). A trailer with subtitles can be watched here <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tu6yGDyKM68>> [accessed 28 September 2012]. It is likely an early trailer as 'Shakespeare' is spelled correctly in the others.

The parallel between hero and divine warrior is established at the outset, with the opening credits set to a hymn in praise of Lord Shiva, the Hindu God of Destruction (also known as ‘Rudran’, literally ‘the roarer’ or ‘the fierce/terrible one’).⁴ The traditional performance-opening prayer here does double duty, an homage which overtly sets up the film’s theme of divine might and ritual sacrifice. This Shiva motif is foregrounded throughout Prakash’s adaptation; Rudran, is not only the god’s namesake but also belongs to his bloodline. This explicit paralleling of hero and divine destroyer not only works to build viewers’ expectations towards an inevitably explosive conclusion, but also heightens the cultural translation of Hamlet as mythical superhuman.

The film’s opening hymn over, the score shifts to the martial sound of clashing wooden war-staffs, set to a demanding crescendo of *chenda* temple drums. The first scene immediately deviates from Shakespeare’s script; rather than the night watch on the castle ramparts, we see the daylight, dirt-floored courtyard of a princely ancient Kerala home, packed with sweating *kalarippayattu* warriors, training fiercely against each other in preparation for battle. ‘This movie is a proclamation for the human race to stand firmly in their duties without hesitation’ announce the English subtitles against the Malayalam voiceover, which then inform the viewer that Shakespeare is a ‘literary immortal’, his *Hamlet* having lived on in India for over four hundred years. The message is clear: this battle-hero Hamlet is going to demonstrate how to not sit on one’s hands while carrying out one’s duty, a concept which the local culture has taken as deeply to heart as it has the Bard.

Over *Karmayogi*’s opening scene of battling warriors, the voiceover concludes by relating the legend behind the adaptation: ‘Once, to atone for killing a brahmin, Shiva took birth on earth and wandered as a beggar, for twelve years.’⁵ In remembrance of this highest penance is held the traditional *kelipathram* ritual art.’ In this adaptation, Rudran is a *kelipathram*, a uniquely Keralan hereditary role in which the practitioner is considered to be possessed by Shiva; he observes an ascetic pilgrimage of silence and abstinence, seeking alms door to door and blessing generous households. Rudran’s family altar includes a painting of Lord Shiva as the first *kelipathram*, holding a skull, here doubling as a metatheatrical nod to *Hamlet*. Rudran’s own *kelipathram* pilgrimage causes his possession by a force of superhuman vengeance and serves as a catalyst for *Karmayogi*’s major plot action; this closely follows Shakespeare’s story in the beginning, before the narrative deviates with spectacular results.

The story opens with the hero in mourning, his father having reportedly been bitten by a snake while asleep on the porch of their Shiva temple. Rudran appears at the temple, grieving, among spectators of a religious dance held to celebrate his mother’s wedding; he is still clothed in black since the customary forty-one days of mourning have yet to elapse. When his best friend Shankunni/Horatio (Ashokan) privately reports that he dreamed of the

⁴ Shiva’s role as the Destroyer is a positive one, representing part of the natural life cycle of birth, death and rebirth. To list Shiva’s myriad names and attributes here is impracticable; Rudran is a particularly fierce aspect of the god, who is evoked here as protecting the innocent while destroying evil. Shiva is also a famous *yogi* (yoga practitioner), the lord of cemetery spirits, the god of dance, and the ancestor of the Yogi clan of Kerala.

⁵ Brahmins are the priests and the highest of the four castes. To kill a brahmin was a forbidden sin.

former chieftain, Rudran sleeps on his late father's tomb and dreams of his father's ghost, clad in his former *kelipathram* pilgrimage dress. The dream/beggar metaphors further arguably evoke Hamlet's later lines during his 'madness': 'I have bad dreams [...] A dream itself is but a shadow [...] Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretched heroes the beggars' shadows' (2.2.248, 251, 254-55).⁶

In the dream, Rudran Valiya Gurukkal asks his son to seek vengeance, revealing that he was actually poisoned by his own brother.⁷ The rest of the movie is spent in Rudran's doing just that, with a few metaphorical twists – these not only add local colour but also greatly alter the story's characters and the plot trajectory. The majority of this relocation surrounds the central metaphor of Rudran-as-divine-Destroyer. Prakash twists the Shakespearean narrative to fit it primarily to Rudran's role as action hero, in the typical 'masala' Indian fight-and-romantic-song mix (including one steamy number with Moonumani/Ophelia in a tropical waterfall).⁸ If Ophelia's stream is a jungle waterfall, the rest of the setting has been similarly exoticised by scriptwriter Balram Mattanoor, who also adapted *Othello* into Malayalam in the 1997 film *Kaliyattam*.¹⁰ Here, Elsinore is Ekarajyam, the clan headquarters, and the Chatthothu family's traditional palatial Keralan house is complete with warrior-training courtyard and claustrophobic corridors. Shots through the window-bars accentuate the feeling that 'Denmark's a prison' (2.2.262); the 'mousetrap play' is set as another tale told during the indigenous *poorakkali* dance, which takes place at the adjoining household shrine.¹¹ This exoticising of locale lends a sense of distance and removal, aiding our suspension of disbelief in this less pensive prince. He does, however, still require a pep talk or two from Shankunni, who urges him, eyes bulging with outrage, to bump off the lascivious Bhairavan/Claudius (Thalaivasal Vijay), together with some unintentionally comic effects from very literally translated subtitles: 'If you don't kill that sex maniac soon, I will.'

In this Keralan adaptation, Fortinbras/Sathyan (Sreejith Ravi) belongs to a rival feudal clan (cue sinister martial artists completing aerial flourishes in the paddy fields, backlit by the rising sun); local busybody-voyeur Kidathan/Polonius (M. R. Gopakumar) brushes his teeth with a fresh twig by the riverbank, while giving parting advice to Kanthan/Laertes, who is off to spy on the rival fiefdom; the graveyard is a remote cremation site on holy ground, where bloodshed invites catastrophe on the realm. Rambo-like action scenes involve Rudran using jungle vines to fend off Assamese assassins (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, perhaps?); bare-handedly battling multiple sword-wielding *kalarippayattu* warriors; or even enacting a dramatic rescue of Shankunni. As J. Hurtado put it, 'Have you ever been reading

⁶ William Shakespeare, 'Hamlet,' *Complete Works: The RSC Shakespeare*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) pp. 1918-2003. All quotes are taken from this text.

⁷ God Shiva, to save the Universe, once swallowed poison and was unharmed when it stayed stuck in his throat. Shankunni later uses this metaphor to illustrate Rudran's impasse with Bhairavan.

⁸ Masala is a mixture of ground spices; a 'masala' movie thus contains a heady mix of elements.

⁹ This recalls Saxo Grammaticus' tale, where Prince Amleth 'took the woman to a distant and im-penetrable fen' to seduce her. In Marvin W. Hunt, *Looking For Hamlet* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 14.

¹⁰ Jayaraaj's Malayalam films *Kaliyattam* (Jayalakshmi Films, 1997) and *Kannaki* (Neelambari, 2002), adaptations of *Othello* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, respectively, both feature temple artist protagonists.

¹¹ A full description of this art form, with masculine 'martial arts steps' is given by Shekhar Hooli, 'Karmayogi - an adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet', *oneindia*, 24 May 2011, <<http://entertainment.oneindia.in/malayalam/news/2011/karmayogi-adaptation-shakespeare-hamlet-240511-aid0062.html>> [accessed 28 August 2012].

Shakespeare's immortal classic, *Hamlet*, and wondered where all the flip kicks were?'¹²

Prakash alters not only the Shakespearean narrative but also the characters, presumably to increase the focus on the eye-for-an-eye karmic payback in what he terms 'an entertaining action drama' in which everyone reaps the fruits of their actions.¹³ In between fending off his foes and saving the realm one person at a time, Rudran romances feisty, sensuous Kerala belle Moonumani (Nithya Menon), who bickers with Rudran, but does not betray him; instead, she rages at her father for spying on them, and resists family pressure to marry outside their clan. Bhairavan is especially sinful, sharing an extended love scene with sister-in-law Mankamma/Gertrude (Padmini Kolhapure) on the dawn of their wedding day, indicating an established affair. To add to his sins of regicide and lechery, he also beats an eavesdropping Kidathan to death with a mace and then frames the 'mad' Rudran. Mankamma is also a sinner; although her sincere maternal feeling for Rudran is indicated by a traditional Kerala lullaby, she frames him for her self-harm. With her last breath, she also confesses she unchastely hated his father.

The karmic rationale behind Rudran's father's death is more complicated. The old ruler is seen as personifying Shiva, to the extent that Mankamma's maidservant avers the ridiculous impossibility of his death by snakebite, since snakes revere Shiva and would never harm their own lord. Here, the only sin the old king had done was to gain his wealth in an unfair wager with his rival neighbour Sathyan Valiya Gurukkal, impoverishing his son, Sathyan. In revenge, Sathyan attempts to assassinate Rudran and also curses his love with Moonumani, who dies as a result. Moonumani is here apparently absolved of any possible sin of suicide, leaving the viewer to wonder whether her ambiguous drowning was either a family honour killing, or another of Bhairavan's crimes.

In addition to altering the extant characters from the source, several characters are here either invented or eliminated, arguably to introduce traditional Mollywood tropes into the story.¹⁴ For example, omitting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern allows Shankunni to be Rudran's best and only childhood friend and trusty confidante. To counterbalance the innocent Moonumani and strengthen her position of tragic heroine is introduced the staple vamp, in the person of a nameless Catwoman-like martial-arts-mistress-cum-sorceress. She lives in the forest, initiates Kanthan into the mysteries of *kalaripayattu*, and provides him and Bhairavan with a potion to kill Rudran 'in the time it takes for a crow to fly from the cashew tree to the magnolia'. A stock wise old grandma-figure attends the queen; Sathyan's bumbling, crazy servant here plays the role of buffoon, replacing any banter between the clownish gravediggers.

¹² J. Hurtado, 'Hamlet + Martial Arts = KARMAYOGI', twitchfilm.com, 01 March 2011 <<http://twitchfilm.com/2011/03/hamlet-martial-arts-karmayogi.html>> [accessed 28 Sept 2012]. Star Indrajith learnt *kalaripayattu* for the role, and says the fights are 'a blend of *kalaripayattu* and Chinese martial arts'. In 'Hamlet gets Malayalam movie version', *IBNLive*, 27 May 2011, <<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/hamlet-gets-malayalam-movie-version/154740-8-70.html>> [accessed 28 August 2012].

¹³ In Sanjith Sidhardhan's 'Hamlet takes to martial arts in *Karmayogi*', *The Times of India*, 29 August 2011, <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-08-29/news-interviews/29940663_1_kalaripayattu-karmayogi-cinema> [accessed 28 August 2012].

¹⁴ 'Mollywood' is the Malayalam film industry.

The film's main departure from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, however, is in its steady negation rather than accentuation of its hero's mortality. His soliloquy on suicide is replaced by a strategic discussion with Shankunni on the best way to use *kalaripayattu* moves to kill his uncle, Shankunni advising, 'Hit him in the solar plexus'. The sacred conch instantly sounds, the drums swell to a crescendo, and the image goes black while red letters spell out across the screen in English text: 'To be... or not to be'. The effect is an eerie throwback to the world of Shakespeare's English original; however, rather than choosing whether to exist as a human or to become a ghost, it is as if Rudran is deciding whether to remain human or to become superhuman.

Spurred to action, a determined Rudran dons his father's traditional *kelipathram* costume and goes on pilgrimage, earning widespread local respect as avatar.¹⁵ The most telling moment in Rudran's divine reconfiguration comes when Kanthan and Bhairavan attempt to turn the crowd of Moonumani's pallbearers against him; these instead crouch in obeisance, chant in praise, and refuse to fight against 'their god'. By the time of the final tournament, held on the night of Mahashivarathri, Rudran looks invincible.¹⁶

In the dramatic denouement, in the torch-lit manor combat arena, Rudran battles Kanthan with *kalaripayattu* swords; Kanthan dies of a poisoned tip, while pointing to Bhairavan. Here, the narrative begins to radically deviate from its source. Mankamma, realizing his role, tries to strangle her husband with her scarf, before collapsing. Rudran pursues Bhairavan overnight until they finally reach the holy cremation ground, where they grapple with a trident, Shiva's legendary weapon. When Bhairavan taunts Rudran with his inability to spill blood on holy ground, he recalls Shankunni's advice. To the swelling strains of a Shiva hymn about divine power, Rudran hits Bhairavan squarely in the solar plexus, sending him into a lake, killing him bloodlessly and leaving himself the last warrior standing.¹⁷

On home ground, this masala-martial-arts-semi-Shakespearean movie met with a mixed critical reception. Calling *Karmayogi* 'the result of my undying passion for evolving cinema and my favorite Shakespearean work,' Prakash mixed two different popular Indian film traditions in his appropriation: the 'masala' blockbuster with fight and dance scenes, and the philosophical 'art film'.¹⁸ Reviewer Veyeen's criticism was especially stinging, calling the film (sic) 'strikingly faithful to the First Quarto text in the play—To be, or not to be, aye there's the point, To Die, to sleep, is that all?—in that it's the hesitance and irresoluteness [in

¹⁵ The mythical substitution culturally relocates Shakespeare's work in a way beyond that which the film's geographical resetting and semi-historical costume redressing can here achieve.

¹⁶ On Mahashivaratri, the fourteenth night of the February-March moon, Shiva married Parvathi and danced the cosmic Thandavam. Devotees mark the day by penance, fasting, and staying awake overnight for a vision of the lord. It is also believed to be an auspicious day on which to die; Bhairavan plans to exploit this legend to appease the public after Rudran's 'accidental' death.

¹⁷ This evokes the legend of Narasimha, an avatar of Vishnu, who was similarly restricted from bloodshed and so smothered his enemy. This specificity is also reminiscent of the different moves used to kill the enemy warriors in the *Mahabharata* epic, with each method according to each person's karma.

¹⁸ 'No Question Of 'To Be Or Not To Be'', *Yantha*, 01 Nov 2011, <www.yantha.com/news/view/1/No-Question-Of-To-Be-Or-Not-To-Be> [accessed 28 August 2012].

which type of film it aims to be] that is evident throughout'.¹⁹ However, despite the corniness, the film definitely deserves a watch; in fact, it garnered enough critical recognition to be entered as Kerala's official submission to the annual International Film Festival of India.²⁰

It bears a final mention that for *Karmayogi's* philosophical underpinnings of immortality Prakash draws on several entrenched local creative conventions; for example, the prohibited onstage killing of the hero.²¹ But beyond this, Prakash plays on the idea of liberation from the wheel of karma, self-realisation through *karmayoga*, or the selfless performance of one's duty.²² This concept is famously at the root of the battlefield dilemma faced by the legendary Indian warrior prince Arjuna when poised to kill his evil relatives on the opposing side.²³ Poonam Trivedi parallels Hamlet's and Arjuna's indecision over regicide, while positing that there is one essential difference that decides the princes' different fates: Hamlet is left to develop his own spiritual compass, while Krishna acts as Arjuna's guru, his divine revelation and emphasis on selfless action resolving the prince's moral dilemma, enabling him to attack and win the war.^{24,25}

Performing such selfless action in the metaphorical 'battle of life' is similarly supposed to result in the end of karma, and thus liberation from the karmic life cycle. Here, the local audience would understand that when Rudran dresses as a beggar in penance, he also symbolically comes a step closer to enlightenment by getting rid of selfish attachment to worldly status and possessions. In the end, after Rudran-*kelipathram* charitably gives his kingdom to Sathyan, and embraces Shankunni, he walks off into the sunset, to the rousing strains of a symbolic Shiva hymn with lyrics which translate to 'when Shiva's son awoke'. In awaking, does Rudran's spirit die then, once he becomes a god? Or, in this allegory, does he merely pass into a mirror mythical realm, like Schwarzenegger's movie character in *Last Action Hero*, where he is both immortal and invincible? Is it indeed in homage to 'the immortal' Shakespeare that in Prakash's adaptation, the immortal subsumes the mortal, god subsumes man? In his version, the hero's farewell still is set to holy song. But one gets a sense that, far from being laid to rest, this immortal avenger will be back.

¹⁹ Veyeen, 'Karmayogi Review', *Nowrunning.com*, 19 March 2012, <www.nowrunning.com/movie/8199/malayalam/karmayogi/3627/review.htm> [accessed 28 September 2012]

²⁰ Mark Thornton Burnett convincingly argues that as Malayalam Shakespeare films are 'not readily available in commercial DVD format outside India,' this 'points to a less Eurocentric and more indigenously rooted conceptualization of the filmic product' (p. 56, 'Vishal Bhardwaj and Jayaraaj Rajasekharan Nair', in *Shakespeare and World Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 55-88.

²¹ This is prescribed in the ancient sacred Sanskrit dramatic performance manual, Bharata's *Natya Sastra* (c 200 BC-200 AD). A *veda* or philosophical scripture, the *Natya Sastra* regulated and codified everything from mood to makeup, and its codes are often followed in traditional Kerala art.

²² The ideal of selfless civic duty is arguably one that is particularly valued in the state of Kerala, with its tradition of electing Communist governments.

²³ This occurs in Veda Vyasa's epic *Mahabharata*, which tells the story of two warring royal households, one supported by Krishna, an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu. Here I am indebted to Paul Hamilton's comparison of Arjuna's and Hamlet's indecision over familial parricide.

²⁴ In "'Pluck out the heart of my mystery...'" Hamlet, Arjuna and Gandhi', University of Delhi, 7 March 2013.

²⁵ Arjuna's spiritual initiation forms the *Bhagavad Gita*, the sacred scripture so integral to the Hindu code of clear conduct that during his national freedom struggles, Gandhi referred to it as his 'spiritual dictionary', qtd. in B. R. Nanda, *In Search of Gandhi: Essays and Reflections* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 13.