PART FOUR

1609: imprinting the question of authorship

Play scene: "Measure for Measure" to "Coriolanus"

The year 1609 saw the first printing of two radically different books authored by William Shakespeare: *Shake-speares Sonnets* (containing the Sonnets and *A Lover's Complaint*) and *Troilus and Cressida*. This printing conjunction late in the author's career recalls the very first one, back in 1594, when both *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus* appeared. Yet the quarto of *Troilus and Cressida* is prefaced with a *Dedicatory Epistle* notable for its marketing link with Shakespeare's first minor epic – and first publishing venture – printed in 1593:

> So much and such favored salt of witte is in his Commedies, that they seem (for their height of pleasure) to be borne in that sea that brought forth Venus. Amongst all there is none more witty then this.[1]

We do not know the author of this *Epistle*, but Katherine Duncan-Jones speculates that it could be "a collaboration between Shakespeare and the publishers – or possibly even an insertion written by Shakespeare himself, designed to sell the work by drawing attention to its upmarket status" (*Ungentle*, 219). Be that as it may, the author does not simply link Shakespeare's "Commedies" with his minor epic, his "Stage" plays with his first published poem; he creates a "witty" and self-conscious etiological myth for their shared genesis: all spring from the salty sea of eros giving birth to the great goddess herself (a scene represented, for instance, in the famous painting of Venus on a half-shell by Botticelli).

No doubt the epistolary author was riding the printing wave of *Venus*, which had gone through perhaps eight editions by 1609, the most recent in 1607 and 1608, and would be printed again the year following (see Figure 3 above). The comedies and the minor epic of "William Shakespeare" share

[1] Reprinted in *Norton*, 1826: "This prefatory epistle . . . was added to the second state of the 1609 quarto of *Troilus and Cressida* (Qb). It is not found in the first state (Qa) or in the first folio (F)" (1826).

a distinct aesthetics governed by the fusion of passion and reason, the "height of pleasure" and the "edge of witte"; this fusion can metamorphose the viewer or reader into a higher state of being: "all such dull and heavy-witted worldlings, as were never capable of the witte of a Commedie, comming by report of them to his representations, have found that witte there, that they never found in them-selves, and have parted better wittied then they came" (reprinted in *Norton*, 1826). Consequently, we may not wish to underestimate the way in which the printing of Shakespeare's poems and plays became implicated in each other during his lifetime.

Duncan-Jones helps us extend this process by emphasizing that the "parallels between *Troilus* and *Sonnets* run wider still": both were printed by George Eld; they are "the product of revision"; and they contain epistles that "invite . . . comparison." Moreover, play and poem alike offer "a defamiliarizing re-fashioning" of literary tradition (the play, of Chaucer; the sonnet sequence, of Petrarch); and both are "deeply rooted in an awareness of death, and of the desperate struggle to make one's voice heard before disease destroys both pen and phallus" (*Ungentle*, 219–22). We could extend the thematic parallels to *A Lover's Complaint*, a poem also about a literary tradition (the complaint) and the struggle over voice, although now it is pure sex itself – the loss of virginity – that destroys the "concave womb" (1). Altogether, the links between the 1609 playtext and poems extending from 1593 to 1609 open up an intriguing line of investigation.[2]

For the third phase of Shakespeare's career (1602–1609), the *Oxford Shakespeare* identifies ten plays, in the following order:

Sir Thomas More
Measure for Measure
The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice
All's Well That Ends Well
The Life of Timon of Athens
King Lear
The Tragedy of Macbeth
The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra
Pericles, Prince of Tyre
The Tragedy of Coriolanus.

As before, the actual chronology is unknown, but we can still recognize the kinds of drama that characterize Shakespearean art in this phase. He continues his extraordinary combination of dramatic form, penning

[2] See Duncan-Jones: "Shakespeare . . . by the plague year 1609 was undoubtedly a celebrated and authoritative dramatist and poet" ("Called," 10).

(or co-penning) three comedies, one history, and six tragedies. The generic boundaries are as unstable as they were. This is especially the case with *Pericles*, traditionally labeled a "romance"; it would be convenient to place this textually troubling "play from hell" (*Norton*, 2709) in the final phase, with the other "romances," but such is the generic untidiness of Shakespeare's practice that we need to subscribe to it.[3]

It will come as no surprise that the plays in this phase continue to exhibit Shakespeare's career-long combination of poetry and theatre. Among the ten plays, *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*, *All's Well*, *King Lear*, and *Coriolanus* especially require detailed examination, while the others contain important representations – such as Cleopatra's speech on the "scald rimers" and "quick comedians" discussed in chapter 1. Several of Shakespeare's greatest plays occur in this phase (*Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*), and, combined with some of the more textually compromised (*More*, *Timon*, *Pericles*), it is even more difficult to survey the professional project briefly. Nonetheless, if we try, we find a number of important characters who put on plays and write poems or sing songs or otherwise engage in a discourse of poetry and theatre, including Duke Vincentio in *Measure*, both Helena and Paroles in *All's Well*, Edgar and the Fool in *Lear*, and (perhaps surprisingly) Coriolanus. In *Pericles*, the medieval poet Gower steps on stage to perform a tale out of his poem *Confessio Amantis*: "To sing a song that old was sung, / From ashes ancient Gower is come, / Assuming man's infirmities" (1. Proem 1–3) – the word "Assuming" being a fine theatrical pun, suiting Gower's costume to his antique age. In this phase, we also encounter Shakespeare's most disturbing portrait of the poet-playwright figure: honest Iago.

Like Macbeth and Cleopatra, Iago is a consummate figure of the theatre (as is well known). From the start, he professes to Roderigo that he indeed has a theatrical "soul" (1. 1. 54), an exquisitely performed interiority: "trimm'd in forms and visages of duty," he keeps his "heart" attending on himself, "throwing but shows of service" on his lord, does "well" by him, and when he has "lin'd" his "coat," does himself "homage" (50–54). Moreover, in soliloquy he informs the audience, "I play the villain": "When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows, as I do now" (2. 3. 336; 351–53). What might be less known is Iago's deployment of (written) poetry. In Act 2, scene 1, he insinuates himself

[3] *Sir Thomas More* is even more a special case, since editions such as the *Oxford* and *Riverside* print only those parts thought to be written by Shakespeare. On Shakespeare as collaborator, including in *Pericles* and *Timon*, see B. Vickers, *Co-Author*.

into Desdemona's conscience as a Petrarchan poet, when she asks, "What wouldst write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?" ". . . my invention," he replies (118, 125),

> Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frieze,
> It plucks out brains and all. But my Muse labors,
> And thus she is deliver'd. (*Othello*, 2. 1. 126–28)

Just as later Iago stages the scene with the handkerchief, here he formally produces a twelve-line poem in rhymed couplets to demonstrate his prowess in poetic invention, the opening lines of which read: "She that was ever fair, and never proud, / Had tongue at will, and yet was never loud" (148–49).

Yet we also discover something more startling here: in this tragedy, Shakespeare appears to privilege poetry over theatre. In contrast to Iago, Desdemona is associated only with the art of poetry; this divine woman becomes at once its object and its subject. Early on, Cassio tells Montano that Othello "hath achiev'd a maid / That paragons description and wild fame; / One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens" (2. 1. 61–63). Later, however, Desdemona herself sings the immortal "willow song," originally voiced by her mother's maid, Barbary, in a feminine Orphic register: "Sing willow, willow, willow; / Her salt tears fell from her, and soft'ned the stones" (4. 3. 45–46). In Desdemona's song, Kenneth Gross discovers a "visionary moment": "the song holds out a cure for the more infectious babble in this play, a noise that does not so directly bind or blind its hearers, or turn itself into the motive for murder. Whatever knowledge the song offers to us draws a lyrical circle around itself." Even so, the play as a whole, as Gross says, exhibits "a tragic breach" (*Noise*, 125). His terms "lyrical" and "tragic" suggest that in this play a serious and vital dialogue and confrontation occurs between lyric poetry and dramatic tragedy. Poetry provides a space different from tragedy, a place and time at once visionary and redemptive, however fragile. The play does not simply stage the death of Desdemona; it also rehearses something like the tragic death of lyric itself.

Hence, throughout this phase poetry continues to be a topic of conversation; the poet, a formal character in the fiction. *Timon* opens with the "Poet," and he turns out to be a print poet: "When comes your book forth?" the Painter asks (1. 1. 26). "Upon the heels of my presentment" (27), the Poet replies, indicating that he is a print poet who specifically requires a patron for publication, Timon himself. Indeed, by studying the Poet's discourse from Act 1 through Act 5 we can assemble a rather detailed

poetics, however objectionable: "'When we for recompense have prais'd the vild, / It stains the glory in that happy verse / Which aptly sings the good'" (1. 1. 15–17). In these plays, Shakespeare also recollects his own poems in dramatic form. Even as late as *Coriolanus*, there are intriguing glances back to the famous image of the snail in *Venus* (4. 6. 42–46, *Venus* 1033–38), as well as across to the Sonnets, including Sonnet 23, to be foregrounded in the next chapter: "Like a dull actor now / I have forgot my part" (5. 3. 40–41). In this play, the author is still thinking about the myth of Tarquin and Lucrece (2. 2. 87–88, 5. 4. 42–43), as he is more famously in *Macbeth* (2. 1. 54–56). In this latter play, we find book and theatre brought into an alignment that otherwise might seem peculiar; the Old Man can remember, "Within the volume of . . . time I have seen / Hours dreadful and things strange," to which Rosse replies, "Thou sees the heavens, as troubled with man's act, / Threatens his bloody stage" (2. 4. 2–6). As such, Shakespearean drama is still driven by the Virgilian fantasy of textual fame. In *Coriolanus*, Menenius tells the first watchman about the hero, "I have been / The book of his good acts, whence men have read / His fame unparallel'd, happily amplified" (5. 2. 14–16).

Thus, Shakespeare's last great Roman tragedies – *Timon*, *Antony*, *Coriolanus* – extend the Virgilian matrix in complex ways. Timon begins in his house at Athens, but toward the end his feelings of betrayal lead him to relocate in "*the woods*" (4. 3. s.d.), where he indicts the "senator" for his "Rotten humidity" and praises the "beggar" for his pastoral serenity: "It is the paster lards the brother's sides" (2–12). Moving from court to country, Timon reverses direction on the Virgilian path, sadly destined never to make the famous Shakespearean return to court. By contrast, Mark Antony opens his tragedy rehearsing an Ovidian metamorphosis, in what constitutes one of Shakespeare's more powerful representations of the antic-king figure: "you shall see in him / The triple pillar of the world transform'd / Into a strumpet's fool" (1. 1. 11–13). Antony is, of course, subject to the Ovidian theatre of Cleopatra, as she herself directs: "Good now, play one scene / Of excellent dissembling, and let it look / Like perfect honor" (1. 3. 78–80). In this gorgeously debauched theatre, Egypt wears his "sword Philippan" (2. 5. 23) while Antony courageously finds himself entering the liquidating bliss of female space, as the female herself narrates: "Ere the ninth hour, I drunk him to his bed; / Then put my tires and mantles on him" (21–22). No wonder that, when the Eastern Star is ready to move beyond the ninth hour, she "perform'd the dreaded act" (5. 2. 331), death itself, with the serene skill of a consummate actor: "Give me my robe, put on my crown,

I have / Immortal longings in me" (280–81). But not before delivering one of the most stunning counter-Petrarchan blazons on record,[4] complete with the combined discourse of song and show:

> His face was as the heav'ns, and therein stuck
> A sun and moon . . .
> His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear'd arm
> Crested the world, his voice was propertied
> As all the tuned spheres . . .
> . . . His delights
> Were dolphin-like, they show his back above.
> (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5. 2. 79–84)

As to be expected, Shakespeare's Virgilian and Ovidian matrices are often typologically related to Spenser and Marlowe. For instance, at the end of this phase Coriolanus is as commanding a Marlovian figure as Richard III was back at the beginning: "Being mov'd, he will not spare to gird the gods" (1. 2. 256), for "Fame" is that "at which he aims" (263). In nearly every scene, Coriolanus presents himself as a man of the theatre: "It's a part / That I shall blush in acting" (2. 2. 144–45). Yet in Act 3, scene 2, we encounter a more complex representation conjoining Marlowe's Ovidian model of elegy and theatre with Spenser's Virgilian model of pastoral and epic. Volumnia is instructing her son to play his role before the people and the tribunes – the very unnatural scene that the Tamburlaine-like general blushes to act. When she tells him to "perform a part / Thou hast not done before" (109–10), he acquiesces:

> Well, I must do't.
> Away, my disposition, and possess me
> Some harlot's spirit! My throat of war be turn'd,
> Which quier'd with my drum, into a pipe
> Small as an eunuch, or the virgin voice
> That babies lull asleep! (*Coriolanus*, 3. 2. 110–15)

Reversing Tamburlaine's Spenserian exchange of shepherd's attire for the armor of the warrior, Coriolanus announces his own Ovidian metamorphosis. Inspired by the elegiac spirit of a harlot, he will perform his dramatic part as a figure of political harmony. In the process, he will "turn" his epic "throat of war," which was once "quier'd" with the instrument of epic, the drum, into the "pipe," the instrument of pastoral, small as an eunuch, or a virgin voice.

[4] On Cleopatra as a Petarchan poet, see Schalkwyk, *Performance*, 47.

Yet one of the most interesting of such representations occurs in *All's Well*. Helena, in disguise as a pilgrim, writes a displaced Petrarchan sonnet along the Virgilian path, as read in her letter to the Countess by the steward Reynaldo:

> I am Saint Jaques' pilgrim, thither gone.
> Ambitious love hath so in me offended
> That barefoot plot I the cold ground upon
> With sainted vow my faults to have amended.
> Write, write, that from the bloody course of war
> My dearest master, your dear son, may hie.
> . . .
> I, his despiteful Juno, sent him forth
> From courtly friends, with camping foes to live.
> (*All's Well That Ends Well*, 3. 4. 4–14)

Effectively, Helena uses the Petrarchan form to re-write the epic war of the *Aeneid* into her own performed biography, in service of love and marriage. For in Virgil's epic, "despiteful Juno" is the enemy of Aeneas, responsible for sending him forth from courtly friends and living with camping foes. By presenting Helena as a poet-playwright figure, Shakespeare can bring about his comedic recuperation: the name of "Helen" itself.[5]

Nowhere is the discourse of poetry and theatre more sophisticated than in the play we should expect – "beyond question the greatest of all tragedies" (Kermode, introduction to *King Lear*, *Riverside*, 1297). The premier figure for this conjunction is the Fool himself, the professional actor who sings some of the most gifted songs in the language – a figure, we might say, in whom the distinction between poetry and theatre is no longer visible:

> The sweet and bitter fool
> Will presently appear:
> The one in motley here,
> The other found out there.
> (*King Lear*, 1. 4. 144–47)

Yet the play's other great poet-playwright figure wears his profession more on his sleeve. In disguise as the bedlam beggar, the aristocratic Edgar constantly reminds the audience that he is an actor in danger of betraying the script he has authored: "My tears begin to take his part so much, / They mar my counterfeiting" (3. 6. 60–61). When he does sustain the pressure,

[5] Even in this play, Marlowe's art is alive and well – in the Clown, Lavitch, for instance, whose song about "Helen" begins, "'Was this fair face the cause,' quoth she, / 'Why the Grecians sacked Troy?'" (1. 3. 69, 70–71). In his chapter on the name "Helen" in *All's Well*, Schalkwyk neglects Helen of Troy.

no one disappears more darkly into his authorial role, complete with mad snatches of ruined song, borrowed and invented: "The foul fiend haunts poor Tom in the voice / Of a nightingale" (3. 6. 29–30). Surely this is one of the most resonant neglected lines in the canon, reverberating throughout not merely Shakespeare but Western literature itself. In this late tragedy, as in the first, the specter of Philomela returns for revenge, haunting the tortured masculine psyche with Ovidian songs and plays too horrible simply to laugh off. In the end, the Fool evaporates from the play-world, like the Ghost in *Hamlet*, while Edgar, like the princely son of that Ghost, proves ineffective in his use of poetry and theatre to cure anyone of what Hamlet rather precisely calls "th' imposthume . . . / That inward breaks, and shows no cause without."[6]

Recalling such contours in these third-phase plays, we may turn to the 1609 quarto printing Shakespeare's last poems. This volume publishes the very question of authorship raised by the two sets of poems juxtaposed in the previous two parts of the book: are these final poems the works of a print or a manuscript poet, one who self-consciously presents himself as a national author or one who is presented as such by others? To probe this question, the final part of the book divides into two respective chapters on the 1609 quarto, the first on the Sonnets, the last on *A Lover's Complaint*.

[6] Edgar's bastard brother, Edmund, is clearly a Marlovian overreacher (Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 499). Correspondingly, Edgar emerges as a Spenserian chivalric figure, when he challenges his brother to a duel for rather high stakes: the nation itself. Spenser's story of King Lear in *The Faerie Queene* (2. 10) is a source for Shakespeare's play (*Riverside*, 1298), and Coyle ("King Lear") argues that Shakespeare models Edgar's staging of Gloucester's leap off Dover cliff on Malbecco's suicide (*Fairie Queene*, 3. 10). See also Tobin, "Parallels" and "Malbecco."

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