SHAKESPEARE'S NARRATIVE POEMS

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Abstract*: The prefatory dedications to Shakespeare's narrative poems enabled the poet to address several important aspects of the cleft between the oral and the written discourse. Shakespeare underlined the fallacies of writing at the expense of the exquisiteness of speaking. These are suggestive of the high store the poet set on his own creativity, as well as of the comprehensiveness of his poetic intuitions, and should be read as complementary to those projected unto his drama.*
Keywords*: oral discourse, written discourse, narrative*

"So Strong a Prop to Support so Weak a Burden" —

Of Shakespeare's works, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), two poems which he seems to have written in order to be published, may be suspected of having been altered first and foremost, as Gary Taylor puts it, due to their being "politely introduced to us by authorial prefaces" in which we "might think Shakespeare speaks to us, his readers, directly."[1]

This is not the only oral trait of the two poems. As a matter of fact, these works indicate orality at least as a literary motif or, more precisely, as a suggestion of their symbolic poetic mechanism —with orality being often claimed as a general trait of Shakespeare's works. On the one hand, the two poems invite us to read and interpret them as part of an epistolary exchange between Shakespeare and perhaps his patron, whom they are dedicated to — Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. On the other hand, they invite us to sense in them the paradoxical fine interplay of orality and scribality, the contamination of orality by the signs and elements of scribality.

Actually, as Gary Taylor claims, what we have here as poems are "'letters' (collections of alphabetical symbols; literature; personal epistles)," such written messages addressed to Wriothesley that demand, in their reading, an oral refurbishing by our listening to them.[2] The reader may stand here for a third party involved in a triangular relation that, from a poetic point of view, has always been ambiguous,[3] here also presented as eavesdropping to a conversation between a poet and his readership to which the dedication of the poems invites Wriothesley too. Regardless of who is first invited to overhear the conversation between the writer and someone else, what matters indeed, as suggestion and invitation, is Shakespeare's desire to refurbish the orality that the act of creative writing, and then of shallow editing usually deprives us of.

The Shakespeare that in 1593 made with V*enus and Adonis* one of his very few contributions to the printing of his literary works was a creative writer fully aware of his literary fecundity, choosing for the motto of his poem the following lines from Ovid:

Vilia miretur vulgus; mihi flavus Apollo
Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua.[4]

However, this motto shows Shakespeare concerned with his poem being rather read

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than listened to. Here, he chirograpically devised a text rather to be read as *literature*.

Shakespeare could not but be highly displeased with the unrefined condition of a lot of the published or unpublished creative writings of the time. He may also have rejected occasional poetry, even the refined type of verse that Ben Jonson diligently contributed. As a matter of fact, Shakespeare was too astute a writer not to pay attention to all these details. What one should understand by Shakespeare's "unpolished lines," as he himself termed them in the dedication of his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* to Henry Wriothesley,[5] is not only a writer's commonsensical modesty, but also a reality fully documented by his literary works, and that was obvious in his drama as well. Also, what Shakespeare had in mind when harshly labeling his own poem as "unpolished lines,"[6] was the general flaw of the written discourse, intended to be read in its handwritten or printed form rather than listened to.

As compared to the dramatic discourse, the literary one seemed to be much more vulnerable, in spite of the fact that its reception was not immediate. Conversely, the dramatic work presented Shakespeare with the opportunity to modify it according to the spectators' and actors' quick response — the perfecting of one's dramatic work having the chance to be a live and almost immediate process. Literary creativity does not have such openings, and the defunct text that the reader is presented with cannot be given but a correspondingly tardy response. Besides, after its publication, the literary text cannot be modified except in the form of new editions — bettered or further mystified and distorted by unskilled, careless typesetting and printing. Hence Shakespeare's specific response to print and to its pestilent drawbacks**.**

One should also consider the fact that in the early 1590s, when Shakespeare published his two narrative poems, he was still at the beginning of his creative career and that the seven plays he had already written and had been performed were indirectly indicative of the frustration and the risks of writing something in order to be published and, eventually, to become the focus of even harsher criticism. Such a situation epitomizes the drawbacks that customarily mar writing, i.e., the fact noticed by Plato that writing, in the form of literary works, cannot defend itself, whereas, in performance, the dramatic written discourse is succored by the orality that filters it.

Such an oralizing process, fully advantage of by Shakespeare's plays, results not only in a theatrically-functional text, but also in writing coming the closest to the anamnestical, ideal status of the spoken word. This appears to be one of the few instances of man's benefitting from the joined, synergistic advantages of writing and speaking, rather than being faced with their joined disadvantages. While, in the case of a performed dramatic work, the playwright or any of his sympathetic deputies can easily amend a play-text and control the audience's response (the prospects of a felicitous discourse being higher), in the case of a poem that is published, its literary discourse may appear to be doomed to a definitive and unfavorable verdict.

In spite of his creative experience and intuition, Shakespeare did not feel at comparable ease on literary grounds that, paradoxically, seemed more demanding and less firm than those of dramatic scribality and orality. He was given almost no chance to feel different from a sorcerer's apprentice, no matter the pains he took in mastering literary discourse. Actually, what bothered Shakespeare most was the shift from the writing, that in

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the field of drama was merely accidental and, therefore, not entirely characteristic of it, to the writing that edified inventiveness as literature, not only mediated it.

This also explains why Shakespeare was inclined to pay little attention to the written form of his drama — which he considered only intermediary and transient, as compared to the even more ephemeral theatrical representation, to the oral conclusiveness of the creative act. Shakespeare's artistic consciousness, however, was highly receptive of nuances, to say nothing of the radical changes that prompted him into another set of ironical confessions. This renders quite obvious his conclusion that the dramatic experience cannot be fully transferred and that, at times, it is even incompatible with the literary one, of poetry for instance, unless what the writer looks for is just the opposite effect of the dramatic monologue (as in Robert Browning's poetry or in twentieth-century poetic drama).

Shakespeare's dramatic works were written mostly in verse, but there seems to have existed very few plays he wrote in verse only, prose and verse copiously contributing to the considerable arbitrariness of the genre divisions.[7] What we can easily notice in Shakespeare's case is the specific scribal idiosyncrasy of both his lyrical and epic creativity — the epic standing for an enticing domain that Shakespeare tested his literary prowess against, by submitting his literary works to a readership quite different from the spectators of his plays, viz., to a readership much more circumspect and sophisticated than the average Elizabethan/Jacobean audiences.

This may also explain, as regards the playwright's appealing to a new creative manner, Shakespeare's indication of having chosen “so strong a prop to support so weak a burden.”[8] Matter-of-factly, what Shakespeare pointed to was his being aware of the greater promises of the written creative work, which, to a certain extent, was self-sufficient or, nonetheless, tended toward that. Shakespeare also realized the fact that the mastering of creative writing was not granted to everyone. Hence the generic that results, on the one hand, from the benefits of writing and, on the other hand, from an author's being rejected by the type of writing that he consents to employ.

Shakespeare was fully aware of the fact that writing represented a formidable means of making and supporting one's creativity, provided it was aimed at a major creative project — otherwise, as in occasional poetry, writing having most chances to turn banal and, in the long run, be discredited. Genuine creative writing does not consent to being significantly involved but in major topics. However, in either of the two instances, i.e., of becoming or not involved in the making of the literary or the dramatic discourse, this does not mean that creative writing can unconditionally claim perfection. Moreover, literature and drama are cases not only of an author's accepting a certain form of written creativity, but also of scribal creativity accepting him or not. In Shakespeare's time, the pressure of such a revelation was already strong — likely to poetically shape even the dedication of a poem.

Shakespeare seems to have tried to avoid any fallacious move in publishing the narrative poems he wrote. His dedicatory confessions were not intended to baffle the reader at all. What these two paratexts actually managed was to present their reader with some of the most blatant instances of a writer's sincerity and overwhelming ingenuity, provided there was interest in learning about that. Quite often, such confessions compete successfully with some of the most inspired theoretical statements of all time.

On the one hand, the agents of creative writing perceive it as being under the spell of

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copia. On the other hand, writing tends to make its agents oblivious to the other creative alternatives and, thus, on a deeper level, it is highly frustrating. Writing cannot defend itself, nor can it presently correct itself. Hence the higher probability of a deformed cultural product, i.e., of a literary or dramatic work that, though passable, may be perceived by its author himself as having fallen short of his expectations. To a certain extent, this may also explain Shakespeare *humorously* wasting so many words in the prefatory dedication to one of his poems — Ben Jonson himself extending the practice to quite a number of the plays he wrote. Shakespeare may justly have claimed to consider his publishing ventures both edifying and frustrating. The fact is that, after the release of *The Rape of Lucrece*, he no longer took interest in publishing his works and made sure he would not be involved in that at all.[9]

Several lines in the dedication of *Venus and Adonis* were intended to fully demonstrate one of the major drawbacks of writing. Neither can writing defend itself, nor can it self-adjust, as speaking so presently and naturally does. The written lines of literature, meant primarily or solely to be read, are quite vulnerable and may expand the province either of formal deficiencies (when being "deformed"[10]) or of content-related pitfalls. On account of this poem being not the province of any "graver labour,"[11] some written lines may not have been satisfactorily refined — being "so bad a harvest"[12] and, therefore, providing for the author's being criticized for his faults.

It is quite strange to see a dramatic prodigy like Shakespeare wasting so many words in the dedication of his poem just in order to show how much he was concerned with poetics-related matters. Nonetheless, this remains characteristic of the first works one writes and publishes, as it is, in Shakespeare's case, the circumstance not only of *Venus and Adonis* in the field of poetry, but also of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in the field of comedy (in this early play the poetic concerns being sublimated even in the characters names, not only in the hints made or in the emphasis on the epistles exchanged by the main characters).

Venus and Adonis, the first work that Shakespeare published, was dedicated not only to a friend and patron, but also to a reader who was both ideal and real, and who was indeed expected to read the poem. Hence Shakespeare's increased concern with poetic matters. Unfortunately, the dedication of *The Rape of Lucrece*, his other narrative poem to Wriothesley, exhibits considerably less poetic awareness and concern. That may be also because of the favorable criticism that the first poem received. Shakespeare was said to have intended to contribute *The Rape of Lucrece* as a much more serious work,[13] affixed by a dedication which Tucker Brooke is inclined to consider the most affectionate of the time. Seemingly, this narrative poem was meant to gratify a much more sophisticated readership — "the wiser sort" that Gabriel Harvey dealt with in view of this poem, not the "younger sort" that *Venus and Adonis* explicitly addressed.[14]

In *The Rape of Lucrece*, Shakespeare was able to fully display his versatility and he began his short composition in verse, a "pamphlet," in a similar way to his later *Troilus and Cressida*, right in the middle of the action. Shakespeare seems to have used the opportunity to write and publish his two longer poems also in order to fully exhibit his attraction to the classical heritage. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Comedy of Errors* would soon be intended to refer the same heritage, though from a dramatic point of view.

The poet's increased literary skills are quite obvious in *The Rape of Lucrece*, at least

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as far as the more elaborate and articulated images are concerned.[15] This is indeed a poem that can be claimed to have represented an important step in Shakespeare's mastering the literary and the dramatic discourse. But neither *Venus and Adonis*, nor *The Rape of Lucrece*, is a perfect poem and, though the handling of anamnestical verse is impressive in both cases, hypomnestical temptations are also strong. (As a matter of fact, this situation is characteristic of Shakespeare's early drama too.) In spite of this almost inevitable fault, the writing of the two poems and of the dedication that they occasioned, as well as the very fact that they were published, shows Shakespeare having nothing against writing or print in general, only against their possibly falling short of his creative expectations.

However, there is always a blessing in disguise even in the bitterest experiences of the kind. The very fact of writing something that is to be published or to be performed changes your own perspective upon creative writing and makes you aware of *how* and *what* you are writing. In his two narrative poems, Shakespeare's creative awareness is not systematic enough, though it is already sharp. Neither is it too abstract, nor is it the province of a sophisticated poetic lingo. In this respect, Shakespeare seems to strongly disagree with the faulty half-creative, half-critical practices of the age. Among other things, what he tries to show is how one can deal with some of the most sensitive poetic aspects in a fairly simple, limpid language — indeed, save for their rather occasional dedications, his two poems making out of their literary discourse quite a fine example of anamnestical writing.

Basically, there existed three distinct divisions of Shakespeare's poetic concerns. First and foremost, his narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, relied on the indirect voicing of poetic ideas by means of dedications. However, the epic formula of these epic poems was not highly favorable to the expression of one's poetic beliefs, except by means of several artifices that went against some of the creative practices of the Elizabethan age, but are quite common nowadays — when genres have postmodernly merged and are more relative and mixed than ever. It was drama, though, that most allowed the articulation of Shakespeare's poetic ideas. From this point of view, drama was closer to the novel, owing to its protean, multifarious opportunities of voicing poetic concerns. In Shakespeare's time, such opportunities would include apocryphal prologues and epilogues too, evincing the collective poetic consciousness of the age in the altering or not of a play in the course of its being directed, performed or published.

Most of Shakespeare's plays were paid such poetic and poietic attention, the dramatist seeming unable to safeguard much against the respective practices that, in the field of drama, may have looked quite normal to him. As a matter of fact, Shakespeare appears to have borne no grudge against those abusing his dramatic works. He took everything as it came, as a part of the martyrdom of the most renowned dramatic careers. However, Shakespeare managed to reach in his sonnets the most convenient and individual/original way of expressing his aesthetic creed — no longer having to dissimulate or append it. Quite purposefully, in the sonnets, the poetic concerns are not significantly less dealt with than the sentimental ones.

Shakespeare had an extra reason to see to the publication of his two long narrative poems and have them printed by a prestigious printing house, while refraining from publishing any of his plays. By 1594, two of his text-plays had already been abused in print, published in unauthorized, “bad” quarto editions, based on whatever memory could retain

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from the performance of the second part of *Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus*. To these unauthorized and phony editions, Shakespeare's reaction could not be but a renewed retort — by publishing *The Rape of Lucrece* and mostly by the text of its dedication, that, similarly to the preface to *Venus and Adonis*, testified to Shakespeare's increased awareness of the literary world, also sharpened by the dramatic experience of the seven plays he had already written.[16]

Shakespeare was also prompted to publish his poems by the theaters' being closed between 1592 and 1594, because of the spells of plague affecting England. However, the publication of the two poems was not accidental or occasional, being grounded and paratextually supported and underlined by means of prefatory dedications. As for Shakespeare's sonnets and for the rest of his late works, one should notice that, while they stand for the writer's craving for a certain poietic ideality, they also bear testimony to the writer's pragmatic creative approaches and poetic beliefs. One should also notice that there is no contradiction between a conventional set of aesthetic ideas, such as the immortality of the very poems Shakespeare decides not to publish himself,[17] and the active poetics invested and explicitly dealt with in the lines of a certain poem. Hence the above-mentioned distribution ruled by poetic realities and limitations, as well as Shakespeare's inspired compliance with them — his poetics being featured as paratext, metatext and regular texts (in the dedications of his narrative poems, in the prologues and epilogues to his dramatic works, and in the very text of his plays and lyrical poems).

Notes

1. Gary Taylor, "General Introduction," *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987 ed. cit., p. 2.

2. As Robert Adams Day puts it, "the lonely writer of a letter may deliver himself at length and with an intimacy which the exigencies of speech seldom permits; he may pour out his heart, or the author may choose to make him reveal his character in spite of himself" (*Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction before Richardson*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966, p. 6).

3. In his critical work entitled *Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response*, Wolfgang Iser notes that removal of the indeterminacy by the reader "always permits the possibility of connecting one's own experience with what the texts want to convey" (*Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*. *A Reader*, second edition, ed. K. M. Newton, London: MacMillan Press, 1997, p. 196).

4. Christopher Marlowe translated it as: "Let base-conceited wits admire vile things, / Fair Phoebus lead me to the Muses springs."

5. "Right Honourable, I know not how I shall offend in dedicating my unpolished lines to your lordship, nor how the world will censure me for choosing so strong a prop to support so weak a burden. Only, if your honour seem but pleased, I account myself highly praised, and vow to take advantage of all idle hours till I have honoured you with some graver labour. But if the first heir of my invention prove deformed, I shall be sorry it had so noble a godfather, and never after ear so barren a land for fear it yield me still so bad a harvest. I leave it to your honourable survey, and your honour to your heart's content, which I wish may always answer your own wish and the world's hopeful expectation" (William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. cit., p. 224).

6. Or, more precisely, that any written discourse could not conceal more than dutifully expose.

7. As noticed by Milton Crane, "Shakespeare's prose is beyond question the finest body of prose by a writer in England. The idea may at first appear strange; one grants that Shakespeare wrote prose, but one may hesitate to admit him to the company of prose writers, for, after all, he wrote dramatic

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prose.... His prose is the richest and most various in the language; it draws its greatest strength and suppleness from the fact that it was written to be spoken by characters in plays. At its best , it contributes enormously to the depiction of personality, and it is an indispensable element in the creation of atmosphere. And even at its least interesting, as in the journeyman scenes of exposition, it is less obtrusive than the purely utilitarian verse, which can range from neutral to downright distressing" (*Shakespeare's Prose*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 1).

8. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. cit., p. 224.

9. This did not mean that he no longer wrote poetry — his sonnets, for instance. Hence Shakespeare's opinion that *Venus and Adonis* had fallen short of the "graver labour" he intended to contribute.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Stanley Wells notes that, "like *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece* is an erotic narrative based on Ovid, but this time the subject matter is historical, the tone tragic" (William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. cit., p. 237).

14. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. cit., p. 1721a.

15. Ibid.

16. Including two comedies and four chronicle plays.

17. About eight sonnets dwell upon this literary motif and topic (15, 18, 19, 55, 60, 63, 81, 101).

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