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Shakespearean Being: The Victorian Bard

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1

‘Who is it that can tell me who I am?’ (*King Lear* 1.4.220). Lear’s question, shadowed by the abdication of political sovereignty he has just performed in public, savors already of the existentially involuted ordeal that gapes four long Acts ahead of him. The tone of the question accordingly hovers between angry indignation and pathetic modesty. In the mouth of a patriarchal king, it is flagrantly rhetorical: nobody tells Lear where to get off. Yet the question is also insistently genuine: the misgivings of unaccommodated man – suddenly vulnerable, stripped of his social lendings – whisper riddles of identity that Lear cannot solve, and that he begins to suspect nobody else can either. Two parallel clauses (‘who is it’, ‘who I am’) frame in a nutshell the play’s central concern with what can or can’t be said about the self in its wandering between two worlds: one dead (the realm of fixed hierarchy and role-prescription), the other powerless to be born (the modern condition of free self-actualization).

This no-man’s-land charts a zone of cultural overlap to which Victorian poets’ reception and transmission of a Shakespearean legacy consistently refers. During a long epoch that was defined by unstoppable if incremental Reform, and that in anxious cultural self-assessment regularly compared Victoria’s reign to Elizabeth’s back in the glory days of Reformation, the

literature of the later nineteenth century placed poetry's prestige at the disposal of modern selfhood. Like the prose of bourgeois realism, which overtook verse as the century's medium of choice for continuous narratives of self-fashioning and its discontents, Victorian poetry bestowed on the ascendant ideology of individualism both enthusiastic articulation and austere critique. And it did so on terms distinct from the novel's: terms of discontinuity, instantaneous intimacy, sensation now abstractedly elemental, now embodied with a stark directness which verse's charter to embody literary content, all the way down to the micro-levels of verbal structure, was with increasing urgency conscripted to enforce.

The Victorian was the last major literary period whose poets almost unanimously adhered to the accentual-syllabic prosody that English poetry had settled on just before Shakespeare began writing, and that Shakespeare's influence had done much to establish in its norms and, dialectically with those norms, its extremes of tolerance. In his sonnets, his stanzaic and nonce song forms, and above all the athleticism of his dramatic blank verse, Shakespeare showed the Victorians, as he had shown generations of poets before them, how the tension between a fixed, recognized form and the insubordinate energies of passion or intellection or deceit might confer local habitation on contradictions roughly analogous to those Lear's question places before us.<sup>i</sup> In dramatic prosody the force of individuation wrestled with the discipline of circumstance – the givenness of the world in which the modern self must find itself – to build up and refine character. And it was the category of *character*, across a century of Shakespeare criticism inaugurated by Coleridge and Hazlitt and culminating in A. C. Bradley, that preeminently governed the Victorian literary appropriation of Shakespeare in general, and his poetic influence in particular.<sup>ii</sup>

Each of the two most conspicuous Victorian initiatives in poetic genre was devoted to the development of literary character; each was manifestly, consciously, derived from a Shakespearean precedent. From the sonnets, to which Romantic generic transvaluations had lately given new cachet within Shakespeare's oeuvre, there flowed by mid-century an impressive pageant of book-length lyric sequences. Some maintained the sonnet form, albeit seldom in its English or Shakespearean variant: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The House of Life* (1868-81), Augusta Webster's *Mother and Daughter* (1895), and in briefer compass George Eliot's *Brother and Sister* (1874) and Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* (1881) are only the best-known exemplars of a Victorian renaissance in the composition of sequenced sonnets wherein, even for the Italianate Rossettis, Shakespeare loomed supreme. Love consistently furnishes the theme of these works, as the intimacies of dyadic interplay and self-analysis, which sonnet form famously facilitates, sustain moments of subjectivity heightened by the effort to imagine the consciousness of the beloved. These moments of intense interiority are in turn strung like beads on a narrative line whose outcome, be it for better or worse, met the nineteenth century's appetite for *Bildung*: the moving portraiture of a self matured and instructed by experience of the heart's events. The Shakespearean pattern of character-building persisted even into sequences that adapted or replaced sonnetry *per se*: George Meredith's sixteen-liners in *Modern Love* (1862), Coventry Patmore's blander quatrains from *The Angel in the House* (1863), and above all Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), where the plangent central claim "I loved thee, Spirit, and love, nor can / The soul of Shakspeare love thee more" (61.11-12) discloses the currency of feeling in which this Victorian genre trades, even where feeling proves bluntly embittered as in Meredith, or ironically wry as in so remote a congener as Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage* (1858).

In the poetic sequence it is objective conditions that ripen or chasten the core urgencies of interiorized lyricism. Untold but insistently implied – and, like Shakespeare’s sonnets, ordinally numbered so as, in part, to make this point – the emplotment that is sequence not only puts the constituent lyrics in each other’s context but anchors the ensemble within a history whose shape accumulates an authority like fate’s: an envelope of events outside the text and (what amounts to the same thing) beyond the lyric speaker’s capacity to control. Barrett Browning’s scrupulous defenses against love are unavailing; in *Modern Love* the shipwreck of his marriage is something the husband can neither forfend nor repair. Imbalance between character and action – the surplus of explicit interior discourse in the text over implicit outward action in the world – owed more to Shakespeare than the example of his sonnets. Tennyson implied as much when he subtitled his lyric sequence *Maud* (1855) a ‘monodrama’ and spoke of it as a miniature *Hamlet*: a drama that was all soliloquy, its constituent phases of passionate rumination informed at every turn by actions like a churchgoing, an arranged marriage, a duel that, while they occur off-page, exert an iron grip on the soliloquizing protagonist’s evolving understanding of himself. The floor is his alone, by monodramatic design; yet the sobering truth of *Maud* is that it is the world that tells him who he is.

Thus the poetic sequence submitted lyric autonomy, that jewel in the Victorian ideological inheritance from Romanticism, to the test of time, which during the great age of literary serialization usually meant the test of history in its manifold cultural impingement on the self’s postulated freedom. A test more strenuous, and more manifestly theatrical, was imposed by the second major generic innovation effected by Victorian poetry, the refinement of the dramatic monologue. Here again an individual speaker engrosses discourse; here again the discursive field proves to be crisscrossed with overdetermining constraints. First among these is the presence of a

silent auditor, who in the full-dress Browning monologue serves as the world's delegate reinforcing class, gender, and other culturally specific norms (the police in "Fra Lippo Lippi", 1855, offer a textbook example), and thereby transmuting poetic lyricism to more or less stagily rhetorical performance that suggests a spectrum of Shakespearean analogues from, say, Antony's funeral oration in *Julius Caesar* (3.2) to the meditation on death that in *Richard II* makes a man of a king and, for a space, tongue-ties his attending nobles (3.2.144-77). The auditor may, however, be omitted without loss to the essential generic effect, and the monologue be made a soliloquy indeed: the term occurs once ('Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister'), the phenomenon often, in Browning's generically inaugural chapbooks from the 1840s. *note on aeschylus'* *soliloquy*? A fully developed instance of the soliloquy greets us, aptly enough, in 'Caliban upon Setebos' (1864). Although in Browning's monologue the *The Tempest*'s aboriginal islander is discovered in total isolation, and loosens his tongue only after assuring himself that it is siesta time even in heaven, everything he freely goes on to utter confirms his mental confinement within manacles of primitive but unbreakable cultural manufacture: Caliban's leisure activities, from sado-masochistic child's play with flora and fauna up to higher-critical theological speculation, all reproduce the same grim structures of impotent resentment under discipline that regulate his working conditions as a colonial slave.

So it is across the board with the most cogently imagined Victorian free-standing verse soliloquies. Augusta Webster's kept, abandoned, or waiting women in *Dramatic Studies* (1866) and *Portraits* (1870) typically speak alone, but their solitude is so swiftly peopled with half-internalized, half-contested other voices that monologue verges on dialogue. When 'The Happiest Girl in the World' enjoys her recently declared fiancé's absence, so 'that I may think of him and tell myself / what to be his means, now that I am his' (ll. 9-10), she has already begun

performing scripts of Victorian womanhood dictated by others, laid to heart, and now told by herself to herself in an effort at identity projection whose desperateness it forms part of her Lear-like dilemma never quite to know how to grasp. The speaker's effort, and the more capable if worse dismayed effort that Webster's poem exacts of the reader, belong on the same continuum of experiments in gender imagination where we also find Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* and a shelf-full of only less rash sister studies.<sup>iii</sup> The explicit performativity of gender in Shakespeare's comedies, fed by lively awareness of the way femininity was necessarily impersonated on Shakespeare's stage, made the dramatic verse monologue an audition space even more eligible for gendered roles than for subject positions that were assigned, like Caliban's above, on bases of race and class.

Only less striking, because more fully anticipated in earlier literary periods, were this Victorian genre's performances of masculinity. Browning's Duke ('My Last Duchess', 1842) and eponymous Andrea del Sarto (1855) tie themselves into rhetorical knots at a familiar Victorian nexus where marital dysfunction intersects the accumulation of prestige and profit in a man's world: definitively bourgeois concerns, which this poet repeatedly brought into burning focus by going back to the emergent urbane individualism of the Italian Renaissance where among Englishmen the author of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* had found them first. It was from entanglements such as these – which are the very stuff of the Victorian dramatic monologue – that Tennyson undertook to disengage a pristine masculine ideal in 'Ulysses' (1842). Perhaps the best-known instance of its genre, this poem may be the most anomalous as well; for the speaker is a veritable generic Houdini, unravelling one by one the ties of kingship, marriage, paternity, fatherland, religion, and culture itself. Shedding as restrictive impediments every attribute that, according to the logic that confers on the dramatic agent his *persona*, defines

the self, Ulysses emerges in the poem's infinitive finale ('To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield', l. ??) as sheer will: a Marlovian Faust or Tamburlaine, if not a Dantesque Ulisse; a figure pre-Shakespearean in his archetypal escape act, and to that extent negatively definitive of the statutes of limitation that identify Victorian poetic selves as essentially Shakespearean.<sup>iv</sup>

## 2

I have outlined the genres of lyric sequence and dramatic monologue early, and at some length, because they constitute the widest and deepest aspects of Shakespeare's poetic bequest to Victorian literature. Admittedly a more impartial history than I have the heart to practice would start at a more obvious place: the steady barge traffic in pastiche verse drama (most closeted, some not) that floated its largely unregarded way down the nineteenth century towards oblivion. Given the insatiable Victorian appetite for time travel, the *succès d'estime* that knock-offs of manifestly Shakespearean dramaturgy by Henry Taylor, Serjeant Talfourd, and others enjoyed early in the period tempted ambitious poets everywhere on the scale of talent to try their hand at history plays too: Browning (who while young had an *entrée* with the actor-manager William Macready until it was forfeited by the oddity of his scripts), Tennyson (who in mellow Laureate years under command-performance conditions wrote frosty historical dramas attended by all the best people), Swinburne and the poetess-couple known as Michael Field (whose plays were meant for the study and have stayed there). These superior instances were tips of an iceberg of Elizabethan-Jacobean imitation, which, like certain but not all aspects of Victorian theatrical production of Shakespeare's own plays, expressed a depth of cryogenic reverence that held the

Bard in a state of suspended animation, that should be acknowledged as part of our story here, but that should not be mistaken for living influence.<sup>v</sup> Writ large, Shakespearean designs did nourish robust contemporary work in the novel, whose generic distinctness from dramaturgy freed the likes of Dickens and George Eliot from the big chill that refrigerated poets seeking to engage Shakespeare at the macro level. Perhaps the best of the poetic lot was Browning's *Pippa Passes* (1841), an experimental script that, if it ominously lathers into soap-operatic melodrama when scene 1 rewrites *Macbeth*, crackles into new literary life when it sets song against prose in a heteroglot modal medley.

Victorian poets found Shakespeare's influence much more congenially manageable at small scale than at large. Just this point sustains the gravamen of one of the canonical essays of Victorian poetics, Matthew Arnold's preface to *Poems* (1853). Arnold scolds modern poets for preferring superficial effects of phraseology to the architectural infrastructure of a significant 'poetical action', and he cinches his arguments pro and con with reference to Shakespeare, who like all great writers knew a poetical action when he saw one yet whose gift for 'happy, abundant, and ingenious expression' tended 'to throw into comparative shade his other excellences as a poet. Here has been the mischief'.<sup>vi</sup> One poet's mischief, of course, is another's opportunity. Is it any wonder, when a writer even of Arnold's poise is obliged to introduce such a critique by an act of ritual genuflection ("Shakespeare: a name never to be mentioned without reverence") – when indeed the pretext for Arnold's preface is to explain the suppression of his own long verse drama *Empedocles on Etna* as unworthy – that poets in his day should take the main chance and imitate Shakespeare on the grounds of ad-hoc ingenuity where they at least stood a chance of drawing even?



Arnold's immediate antagonists were poets of the Spasmodic school, a contemporary flash in the pan of mid-century literature whose genuine but brief glory seems foretold in the single-mindedness with which, in the person of J. Stanyan Bigg or Alexander Smith, they struck off similes like sparks from the forge of ostentatiously spontaneous inspiration. Through these easy marks, however, Arnold meant to arraign bigger game: Keats and Byron, certain antinomian or luxuriating strains of Romanticism that these poets for him personified, and then back behind the Romantics the sponsoring word-wizardry of the Bard whenever he devolved 'into a fondness for curiosity of expression, into an irritability of fancy' (p. 666). Here lay the bad early-modern seed of a degenerative pathology that had fostered 'the dialogue of the mind with itself' and attended the 'doubts', 'the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust' (p. 654). Hamlet's will-puzzled hesitancy at the prospect of action, and the modern poet's reluctance to embrace the wholesome action of a classically attested plot, seemed to Arnold two sides of one tinsel coin. Yet the poetic genius of the age ran along the very channels Arnold rejected. It was after all the mind's dialogue with itself that informed, along different axes but with a common purpose, the genres of lyric sequence and dramatic monologue with which we began.

In major Victorian poems time and again a Shakespearean 'curiosity of expression' germinates in fresh directions unforeseeable from the plotted contexts in which they initially occurred. Tennyson's Mariana has little to do with her namesake in *Measure for Measure* beyond the stimulus to imagery and pathos that resides in the Victorian poet's adapted epigraph, 'Mariana in the moated grange'. The title of ' "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" ' is, pointedly, a phrase in quotation caught wild from the already vagrant, threadbare context it has in *King Lear*. To this provenance Browning's Victorian, at least partially industrial hallucination of anomie stands in a strong if unforthcoming contrast, bred if ever poem was from the

‘irritability of fancy’. For Christina Rossetti the prompt of a phrase from Lady Macbeth’s mad scene cued new poems not once but twice. In ‘Will These Hands Ne’er Be Clean?’ (1846), a volubly irregular ode, the teenaged poet curses a murderer from the comparative security of righteous indignation, while in later years the bottomless guilt of ‘“Cannot sweeten” ’ (1866, the title another typically double-quoted Victorian ascription) derives not from homicide but from the speaker’s anguished recognition that she murdered an innocent love when it was tendered long ago.<sup>vii</sup> Within the terse balladic structure of Rossetti’s later and better poem, initial stanzas of catechistic dialogue yield to monologue as self-inquest, thereby distilling at a formal remove from dramatic utterance something of the dazed affect of Shakespeare’s Scottish queen.

Two of the ‘terrible sonnets’ that Gerard Manley Hopkins threshed out in the 1880s worry in different ways the resonance of phrases situated in plots from the tragedies. ‘No worst, there is none’ opens its untitled meditation on mental and spiritual torment by extrapolating from what Edgar has had to say on the subject in *King Lear* 4.1.27-8: ‘The worst is not / So long as we can say “This is the worst” ’. The mind’s power to articulate the soul’s wretchedness draws an intellectual line beyond which there yawns an abyss about which all we know is that it is unknowable. Hopkins figures this manifest infinitude as ‘cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed’ (ll. 9-10), terms drawn again from Edgar’s word-painting of an impossible scenery for the benefit of his blinded father (4.6.11-24). That Gloucester in this scene commits his suicide and survives it too appears to have fascinated the Victorian poet who wrestled with *accidie* here and also in ‘Carrion Comfort’, which lurches into speech by groping after the most famous of Shakespearean formulae for entertaining the idea of self-slaughter:

Not, I’ll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;

Not untwist – slack they may be – these last strands of man  
In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;  
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.<sup>viii</sup>

This sonnet again rehearses a Shakespeare phrase in pursuit of the poet's examination of the powers and limits of phraseology as such, what can and can't be said. The cadence that falls on 'not' in Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' comes back in Hopkins's fourth line with teeth clenched, by reason both of a caesura-cloven hexameter and of the obsessive iteration of 'not' four times across the first line and a half. The option 'not to be' evokes from Hamlet a contemplative poise; Hopkins avails himself of it as shorthand for an outcome whose seductiveness means it must be resisted. After three centuries the condition called not-to-be that Shakespeare lodged into the English language has grown so familiar that a conscientious Victorian in his hour of moral angst has to pitch all the stress he can muster into the strenuous negation of that condition. For this contemporary of Nietzsche's, one must *not* choose not-to-be. Or else.

So Arnold had it backwards: Shakespeare's allegedly bad influence on poets whom his example reduced to mere verbalism repeatedly proved a force for good, not least where allusion to his own words was at issue, even as dutiful imitation of his larger deployment of mythic plots in structured dramatic action left Victorian poetry cold. Arnold himself thought better of a young man's classicist dogmatism by the time he wrote 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), best known for its brief anthology of 'touchstones' embodying literary greatness in a phrase, two of the ten touchstone passages being forged by none other than the meretricious wordsmith Shakespeare (2 *Henry IV* 3.4.18-20, *Hamlet* 5.2.335-8). The authority Arnold vested in these passages, and others quarried from the epics of Homer, Dante, and Milton, virtually confessed the migration of

poetry's prestige from longer into shorter modalities that had taken place in his lifetime. Of the two principal emphases that nineteenth-century lyricality assumed, one was textural and sensuous: the lyre itself may have been out of earshot during the greatest of print centuries, but compensatory strategies of escape from print into acoustic air are hard at work on every good page of Victorian poetry. And the melodious fluency and complexity of Shakespeare's verse, which even those readers who turned up the nose at nineteenth-century stagecraft had to concede was written for live oral interpretation, served Victorian poets in countless ways as an inventory of effects to strive for.<sup>ix</sup>

Lyricality as assonant beauty had dimensions of aesthetic finesse, but these tended to run only skin-deep; like the effects of phrasal citation and manifest allusion we have been considering, and in keeping with the art-for-art's-sake ideology that gained momentum as the century advanced, they lay open to appreciation by all who might cultivate a taste for them. Victorian lyricality had another side, however, that was embroiled with deeper mysteries arousing some of the period's strongest curiosities and defenses. This was the affiliation of lyric with subjectivity, and thus with those conundra of selfhood and character with which this chapter began. The heyday of the realist novel vouchsafed to lyric poetry, as a kind of cultural consolation prize, a special privilege to expose the self – the poet's self in the first instance, the reader's not far behind it. An anthology of lyrics was a gymnasium where one's sensibility hung in the balance, where heartstrings and sinews of intellect and fancy grappled with an imaginative greatness that was vested, not just in the language, but in the soul. It was the Muse who could tell you who you were – so ran one Victorian answer to Lear's question – and you knew it by the quality of your encounter with who poetry-reading showed you the poet was.

Right there of course was the rub, where Shakespeare was involved. Reading Shelley was one thing, reading Shakespeare quite another. Browning made this plain when he invoked the two authors as respective paradigms for ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ poets in his 1852 ‘Essay on Shelley’.<sup>x</sup> And, to bring nearer home the problem I wish to define here, so did Harold Bloom make it plain in the pages that inaugurated his remarkable 1970s studies of poetic influence, which in effect recast literary history as critically fraught episodes of interpersonal transaction.

The greatest poet in our language is excluded from the argument of this book for several reasons. One is necessarily historical; Shakespeare belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness. Another has to do with the contrast between dramatic and lyric form. As poetry has become more subjective, the shadow cast by the precursors has become more dominant.<sup>xi</sup>

In other words, within a modern dispensation that apprehends ‘lyric form’ as a form of subjectivity and to that extent associates poetic power with personal charisma, the acknowledged pre-eminence of a poet who worked for the most part in forms other than lyric is something of an embarrassment. From our side, the near side of a reorientation of sensibility that conjoins our (Bloomian) literacy to the Victorians’, the place Shakespeare occupies on the far side of history’s modern watershed puzzles or blurs his influence by making it hard to know just where to have him.

In ways now both infamous and obscure, Victorian men and women of letters reacted to this anomaly with frenzies of crackpot scholarship. This was the golden age of the Shakespeare deniers who, in default of satisfactory evidence concerning the actor from Stratford, settled the works instead on Elizabethan eminences better known and, to that end, tortured what documents did exist into cryptogrammatic disclosures that Bacon or Marlowe or somebody, anybody, else had engineered the personality deficit into which the vacuum-abhorring energies of balked individualism might now flow. Alternatively, for minds more philologically inclined, the matchless genius of dramatic psychology who set personal intimacy at defiance in regard to his own psyche might be made statistically knowable through oblique piecemeal analysis. The Shakspeare Society under Frederick Furnivall tabulated readily observable data like rhyme frequencies and the occurrence of end-stopped lines in order to index quantitatively the calculus of inspiration.<sup>xii</sup> This hard-headed pursuit of fact ultimately partook of something softer, and more characteristic of the era: the Victorian need to know an author inwardly, the close identification of reading with personality profile.<sup>xiii</sup>

The eccentricity of these tunnel-visionary endeavors is obvious. Yet they centrally expressed something widely pertinent to nineteenth-century culture and to the increasingly lyricized place of poetry within it: the vulnerability to which the bourgeois self was exposed by its own unstoppable enfranchisement from traditional norms. The denial and dismemberment of Shakespeare were as furiously resented by Victorian champions of the Bard as they are amusedly condescended to nowadays. But in fact they, no less than the counterattacks they aroused, were large and remarkable acts of cultural homage that put Shakespeare in the very best of company: with Homer and Moses. For the foundational Greek epics and the testaments of Holy Writ were also treated in the nineteenth century to systematic deconstruction and rehabilitation. In each

case a riddle of authorship posed so worrisome a challenge to lately embraced norms, which equated the experience of literary reading with deep inter-subjective exchange, that only radical solutions would do. The Wolfian hypothesis about the *Iliad*'s archaic collective minstrelsy, and the Higher Criticism that levelled scripture with other forms of writing ancient or recent, had shuffled and dealt the Western literary heritage into modern hands; it remained for the Baconian claimants and the prosodic analysts of Shakespeare to follow suit.

When poets tried their hand at this table, they gamed the Victorian literary system in ways that savored of a spiritualist séance. Lyric's strong association with subjectivity obliged them, in the case of the curiously absent, absconded, or analytically dismantled Shakespeare, to hazard some compensatory necromancy. Any poet who meant, not just to recall this or that Shakespearean phrase, but rather to have Shakespeare's living presence bless the creative spirit in new work, had to create that presence first, to cast the faceless dramaturge in a role suiting present purposes. The Bard famous for being all things to all people was not much use, interpoetically speaking, until – and this is to restate Bloom's point – he could be made some one thing to some one poet.<sup>xiv</sup> Victorians often managed this by conscripting some other, earlier poet as straight man or fall guy, whose mediation stepped the superincumbent charge of Shakespeare down to more manageable currency. Such a pragmatic reduction went unremarked above in our last instance from Hopkins, 'Carrion Comfort,' which gets its purchase on the dilemma of Hamlet through the opening stanza of Tennyson's 'The Two Voices' (1842): 'Were it not better not to be?' That, for Hopkins, was the question, an allusive lens whose double (k)not focussed the diffuse radiance of Hamlet's much-disseminated line.

Tennyson may have shown Hopkins the way to such address when the great seventh lyric from *In Memoriam* enlisted, behind the mourner's pathetic ordeal at dawn outside the dead

Hallam's house, the fraught simile 'like a guilty thing,' which came from *Hamlet* by way of a textual crux in the "Intimations" ode of Wordsworth. The latter's 'High instincts before which our mortal Nature / Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised' reclaims for secular experience some portion of the otherworldly awe that attaches to Horatio's reporting how at daybreak old Hamlet's ghost 'started, like a guilty thing / Upon a fearful summons' (1.1.142-8).<sup>xv</sup> Tennyson at this point knows no more what he may be summoned to than what he may be guilty of; yet his double-jointed allusion recapitulates in epitome a history of the transformations in world-view that lie behind his encounter with a peculiarly Victorian liminality. Browning in bumptious contrast, and as always with a higher obliquity of angle, walked a like knife-edge at the finale to 'Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha' (1855). 'Do I carry the moon in my pocket?': the loft-stranded organist's cry for light seems to come, with the flash of original genius, out of nowhere, while in fact it adapts a throwaway line from Cloten, of all characters, in *Cymbeline*, of all plays (3.1.41-4), to mesh with a tissue of images deploring the embroilment of truth's natural light within webs of human artifice, 'our life's zigzags and dodges, / Ins and outs, weaving a new legislature' (ll. 112-3). That last word 'legislature' clinches what has been riddling Browning's stanzas, the mediating presence of Shelley ('unacknowledged legislators of the World,' *The Defence of Poetry*; the dome of life staining 'the white radiance of Eternity,' *Adonais*), which burnishes the Shakespearean trouvaille to high gloss even as the implied fraternizing of Shelley with Cloten, rebellious scions whose politics went nowhere, keeps the Victorian poet's liberalism on a tight leash.<sup>xvi</sup> Thus Tennyson's third-party refraction of Shakespeare particularizes a perhaps too familiar text, Browning's generalizes a text perhaps too obscure; both allusions utilize an intervening poetic tradition so as to make of Shakespeare not a fetish but a renewable resource.



Instances like these of local evocation and repurposing are scattered across the best Victorian poetry, yet they bear less freight as a cultural phenomenon than the quite different work of the Shakespeare fetishists. The friendliest way of approaching the Bardolatrous sonnets with which we shall conclude is to propose that they sought a viable alternative to spiritualist legerdemain, through a radically metapoetic acknowledgment of the scandal that Shakespearean objectivity posed to subjectivist canons of literary taste. Poets nonplussed by Shakespeare's impersonality could, and did, compose poems that were about Shakespeare's transcendence of the personhood in which poetic influence ordinarily took shape. Moreover, given the nineteenth-century tendency to regard the sonnets as exceptions to Shakespeare's exceptionalism – dating at latest from the hour when 'with this key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart' to Wordsworth ('Scorn not the Sonnet', 1827, ll. 2-3) – it is ironically appropriate that confessional meta-poems on this theme often materialized as sonnets themselves.<sup>xvii</sup> The best known is Arnold's, from 1849:

Shakespeare

Others abide our question. Thou art free.  
 We ask and ask – Thou smilest and art still,  
 Out-topping knowledge. For the loftiest hill,  
 Who to the stars uncrowns his majesty,

Planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea,  
Making the heaven of heavens his dwelling-place,  
Spares but the cloudy border of his base  
To the foiled searching of mortality;

And thou, who didst the stars and sunbeams know,  
Self-schooled, self-scanned, self-honoured, self-secure,  
Didst tread on earth unguessed at. – Better so!

All pains the immortal spirit must endure,  
All weakness which impairs, all griefs which bow,  
Find their sole speech in that victorious brow.<sup>xviii</sup>

It is not that Arnold, soon to become so acerbic a critic on the theme of poets' ignorance, knows *nothing* about Shakespeare. The encomium of epithets in line 10 recites with impressive confidence certain qualities of Shakespeare's inner aplomb amid a life of outward misrecognition; and the final tercet strongly infers that equipoise on this scale betokened a uniquely earned mastery of humanity's various pathos. All the same, there is a rogue ambiguity in the concluding deixis that exposes Arnold's large inference to a doubt larger still. For, while the 'brow' in question just may be the brainy forehead of William Shakespeare as handed down by Jacobean portraiture, such phrenology has no foundation within this sonnet, which instead properly looks back to the image of the 'loftiest hill' (3) whose slopes are visible but not – this

being the whole point of the early conceit – its brow. If ‘that’ protuberance is the ‘victorious brow’, the one in the heavens hidden by clouds from human ken, then Arnold can have no share in its victory. The sonnet’s concluding image thus unravels its argumentative conclusion, returning the foiled searcher to where he began, in the contemplation of a sublimity that out-tops mere knowledge. And that really is what a Victorian poem of this kind wants anyhow: to know that Shakespeare is as unknowable as the summit-dwelling God who, as Cowper had put it in a hymn to which (and not to any Shakespearean text) Arnold’s sonnet alludes, moves in a mysterious way and ‘plants his footsteps in the sea’.<sup>xix</sup>

‘Thou art free,’ at the end of line 1, deploys its adjective as a cipher that means, in effect, what Shelley told his divine, inhuman skylark: What thou art we know not. We should listen for a cognitive if not a vocal hitch just before the word ‘free’, a reluctance to predicate anything of the Hero as Poet (thus Carlyle’s Shakespeare), who occupies the zenith, or nadir, of that chameleonic Negative Capability with which Keats famously associated him.<sup>xx</sup> Swinburne, when he rewrote Arnold’s act of poetic homage a generation later in 1882, outdid Arnold by making the reluctance to predicate an absolute show-stopper:

William Shakespeare

Not if men’s tongues and angels’ all in one

Spake, might the word be said that might speak Thee.

Streams, winds, woods, flowers, fields, mountains, yea, the sea,

What power is in them all to praise the sun?

His praise is this, -- he can be praised of none.

Man, woman, child, praise God for him; but he  
Exults not to be worshipped, but to be.  
He is; and, being, beholds his work well done.  
All joy, all glory, all sorrow, all strength, all mirth,  
Are his: without him, day were night on earth.  
Time knows not his from time's own period.  
All lutes, all harps, all viols, all flutes, all lyres,  
Fall dumb before him ere one string suspires.  
All stars are angels; but the sun is God.<sup>xxi</sup>

There is delicate poignancy in this atheist's reverence for what does command his worship.<sup>xxii</sup>  
Although Swinburne ranks among the artists of excess, like the best of this school he is an adept  
in the opposite arts of curtailment as well. Here the apostrophic second-person address of which  
Arnold liberally availed himself is not used but disowned, subjunctively glanced at in the  
opening sentence – and then expressly declined. Swinburne refuses 'to speak Thee': he will not  
and does not say 'thou' to a being that transcends personhood, a being whose victory is,  
precisely, that 'he can be praised of none'. That Shakespeare for Swinburne is less a (mere)  
person than (a) mere being emerges towards the volta of this sonnet: 'He is'. Period. Full stop.  
Expressly retrenching from 'to be worshipped' to 'to be', Swinburne rebukes the presumption of  
contemporary undertakings, Arnold's included, to tell the king of poets who he is.

Swinburne's taboo on predication is a piece of that earnest commerce which the  
Victorians transacted between poetry and religion, and which culminated in the dying  
Tennyson's on-cue demand that he be given, not the Bible, but 'my Shakespeare', open to a

beloved passage in *Cymbeline*.<sup>xxiii</sup> For this traffic the border was opened in theory by Coleridge's definition of the imagination as 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM', and it was repeatedly crossed in practice when poets straining at the tether of orthodox belief reverted to basics and rekindled the unimaginable zero of the burning bush ('I am that I am', Exodus 3:14) in ritual celebration of the ontology of creation.<sup>xxiv</sup> Shakespeare's inscrutability, like that of the more distant author-functions Homer, Moses – and Jehovah – served as a cultural absolute securing the freedom, even as it grounded the dilemma, of the modern individual, pledged to self-knowledge yet coiled against conceding any limit to the self. Hence the fascination of Victorian dramatic monologists with speech acts of truncated or pseudo predication: Ulysses' 'that which we are, we are' and the companion question framed by Webster's Circe, 'Why am I who I am?' (l. 109), exemplify the extraction of their Victorian genre from such Shakespearean occasions as Hamlet's 'Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not seems' (1.2.77) and Iago's 'I am not what I am' (*Othello* 1.1.50?). Comparison with properly dramatic originals draws out the shivering loneliness that inheres in Victorian poetry's isolation from the theatrical interchange of dialogue and action. 'This is I, Hamlet the Dane' (5.1.53); 'This is I, / The Lady of Shalott': the post-mortem greeting at the end of Tennyson's 1832 poem leaps, as it were, with pre-emptive literality, into Ophelia's grave, eliding the interpersonal conflict staged there in the play and binding identity to mortality as a pair of non-negotiable absolutes. When the homely young woman who peers 'By the Looking-Glass' in Webster's monologue exclaims, 'Alas! it is I, I, I,' her cry collapses the mission statement heading *Richard III* ('I . . . I . . . I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion, / Cheated of feature by dissembling nature', 1.1.14-9) into a textual impasse that corresponds to the generic and gendered constriction of her sphere of action.<sup>xxv</sup>

When Isabella J. Southern told Shakespeare, in yet another eponymous sonnet (1891), ‘Impartial art thou, as the teeming earth, / On which swarm creatures vile and gay and good’ (1-2), her care to distinguish impartiality in the Bard from moral indifference – ‘And yet far short of license dost thou stop’ (8) – recruited Shakespeare, as a proxy god, in order to salve a Tennysonian angst lest the powers that be should prove to care for nothing.<sup>xxvi</sup> A freer-thinking contemporary, Mathilde Blind, stood ready to go further and waive Southern’s ethical scruple in favor of pure ontology, which we have seen emerging as the essential article of Victorian faith for those who swore by the Bard. Blind concludes her series of ‘Shakespearean Sonnets’ (1895) with a couplet that reaches back past Exodus to Genesis and the *Fiat lux*: ‘For Shakespeare was, and at his touch, with light / Impartial as the sun’s, revealed the All’.<sup>xxvii</sup> The sovereign image of the sun and incantatory ‘All’ come to Blind’s sonnet straight from that of Swinburne (in whose Shelleyan school she was a disciple); so does the telltale refusal to subscribe to anything beyond the proposition that ‘Shakespeare was’. More was involved in the fashion for ‘Shakespeare’ sonnets, however, than lineal influence between one Victorian and another. With an indirection only less ambient than that of Shakespeare himself, by the fin-de-siècle these practices formed part of the cultic atmosphere enveloping poetry as such. Transcendently abstaining from a predication that would profane the mysteries of creative identity, poets staking their claim on those mysteries practiced a Bardolatry that dared not speak its name.

Calling the bluff of these pieties fell to the contrarian Browning, who paid them a whistleblower’s respects in a late sonnet (1884) whose title – not, signally, ‘Shakespeare’ but ‘The Names’, observed in a double sense the literary solemnities of the day.<sup>xxviii</sup> That Browning took the full measure of Shakespeare’s anomalous resistance to Romantic subjectivism – a resistance of which he himself was the most conspicuous Victorian imitator – is clear not only

from the 'Essay on Shelley' mentioned above but also from the paradoxical riposte to Wordsworth that culminates the 1876 poem 'House': if Shakespeare did bare his soul in the sonnets, Browning avers, then the sonnets are *ipso facto* uncharacteristic of him, and unworthy too: 'the less Shakespeare he!'<sup>xxix</sup> At the same time, Browning could see that the reflexive Victorian reverence before Shakespeare's genius scanted his humanity, and thereby the influence of the very art his apotheosis was intended to glorify. By claiming too much for literature, the hyperbolic defense of poetry that was conducted in the Bard's name actually abetted everything in modern society that conspired to put literature in cultural quarantine. To interrupt this vicious circle called for the strongest medicine Browning knew, the name of God Almighty:

#### The Names

Shakespeare! – to such name's sounding, what succeeds

Fitly as silence? Falter forth the spell, --

Act follows word, the speaker knows full well,

Nor tampers with its magic more than needs.

Two names there are: That which the Hebrew reads

With his soul only; if from lips it fell,

Echo, back thundered by earth, heaven and hell,

Would own 'Thou didst create us!' Nought impedes

We voice the other name, man's most of might,

Awesomely, lovingly: let awe and love

Mutely await their working, leave to sight

All of the issue as – below – above –  
Shakespeare's creation rises: one remove,  
Though dread – this finite from that infinite.

The distinction Browning draws between two orders of 'creation' – Shakespeare's of a richly compounded human diversity, God's of elemental humanity itself – rewinds the Victorian tradition to its theoretical point of origin and underscores, at the bottom line, the categorical divide supporting Coleridge's "repetition in the *finite* mind of the eternal act of creation in the *infinite* I AM' (emphasis added). Shakespeare remains a name to conjure with; but whoever 'tampers with its magic more than needs' is playing with fire: not blasphemy, exactly, but a corruption of the language that poets own a special duty to protect. This may be why Browning's sonnet uses the much-belabored verb *to be* so sparingly, and in such a way as to shift the Shakespeare question from ontological to epistemological ground, from the language of transcendent being to the contingent being of language: 'Two names there are'. To know what's in a name, Browning suggests, is an occupation portioned to the hearts and minds of men and women, and it constitutes the beginning of wisdom for modern poets who would tell us who we are.

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<sup>i</sup> Every stanzaic form employed in Shakespeare's narrative poetry found a Victorian imitator. The sestet rima of *Venus and Adonis* coldly furnished forth Bulwer-Lytton's epic *King Arthur* (1849), the rhyme royal of *Lucrece* occurs repeatedly in Morris' *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), and the *abba* quatrain of 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' nearly anticipates that of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850). On the nineteenth-century influence of Shakespeare's tetrameter song lyrics see Bate, 62.



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<sup>ii</sup> This topic is deftly opened and set in broad context by Arac, to whose focus on fiction may be added the emphasis on ‘Action in Character, rather than Character in Action’, which Browning signaled in the preface to his first play *Strafford* (1837). See also Taylor, 221-3.

<sup>iii</sup> *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines, in a Series of Fifteen Tales* (London: Smith, 1851).

<sup>iv</sup> See Poole on aspects of Shakespearean character (Falstaff, Hamlet) that fed into this decontextualizing ‘kind of drama’ (53, 83).

<sup>v</sup> All this dramaturgical pomp found its confirmatory underside in pantomimic farce, e. g. W. S. Gilbert’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: A Tragic Episode in Three Tableaux, Founded on an Old Danish Legend* (1891).

<sup>vi</sup> Arnold, *The Complete Poems*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Kenneth and Miriam Allott (London and New York: Longman, 1979) 663-4.

<sup>vii</sup> *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R. W. Crump (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 3.96-7, 298-9.

<sup>viii</sup> *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, ed W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 99-100.

<sup>ix</sup> Perhaps the most intensely practical reverence for Shakespeare’s verbal artistry is to be found in the prosody handbook by American poet Sidney Lanier, *The Science of English Verse* (New York: Scribner, 1880).

<sup>x</sup> ‘Introductory Essay’ to the *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Moxon, 1852), in *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 1.999-1013.

<sup>xi</sup> Bloom *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 11. Bloom goes on to allege it as ‘the main cause’ for Shakespeare’s slender relevance to the poetic-influence project ‘that Shakespeare’s prime precursor was Marlowe, a poet very much smaller than his inheritor’; such ‘absolute absorption of the precursor’ left Shakespeare oddly frictionless, offering successor poets no points of purchase to grapple with. That this inspired student of Romanticism went on to beat the drum for characterology in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998) reinforces – by the acclaim his book attracted as well as the obloquy – the cultural stamina of certain Victorian habits of reading. See *Harold Bloom’s Shakespeare*, ed. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 6-10 and 145-209; also Neil Corcoran, *Shakespeare and the Modern Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-3.

<sup>xii</sup> The lead mole in this scholarly tunnel was Furnivall’s protégé F. G. Fleay: see ‘On Metrical Tests as Applied to Dramatic Poetry: Part I, Shakspeare’, *Transactions of the New Shakspeare Society* (1874), part 2. Among anti-Stratfordians the most notorious is Ignatius Donnelly, *The Great Cryptogram: Francis Bacon’s Cipher in the So-called Shakespeare Plays* (Chicago: Peale, 1888). See on these matters Taylor, 162-230; Grady, 47-51.

<sup>xiii</sup> The book that installed itself as the authoritative literary account of Shakespeare met this Victorian need in the priorities of its subtitle: Edward Dowden, *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art* (London: King, 1875).

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<sup>xiv</sup> Poole, 118, touches on the ‘important questions about control, complicity and recognition’ that in Victorian allusion haunt the gaps between Shakespeare and his characters.

<sup>xv</sup> *In Memoriam* 7.10, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 1969), 870; Wordsworth, ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, ll. 140-51, in *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest de Selincourt (1904; new ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 461.

<sup>xvi</sup> ‘Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha’, in *Poems*, ed. Pettigrew and Collins, 1.~~XXX~~. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry and Adonais*, ll. 460-4, p, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 2nd ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), 535 and 426.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Poetical Works*, ed. de Selincourt, 206.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Complete Poems*, 39-40, which incorporates Arnold’s revisions of this sonnet through 1877.

<sup>xix</sup> ‘Light Shining out of Darkness’, ll. 1-3, in Cowper, *Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford and Norma Russell (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 455.

<sup>xx</sup> Carlyle, *Of Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Fraser, 1841). Reference to Shakespeare links two much-quoted passages from Keats’s correspondence: ‘At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed [*sic*] so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’ (to George and Tom Keats, December 1817); ‘As to the poetical Character itself. . . it is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character. . . It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen’ (to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818). *Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings and John Mee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 41-2, 147-8.

<sup>xxi</sup> Printed second (after Marlowe’s) in a sequence of ‘Sonnets on English Dramatic Poets’, in *The Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne: Poems* Philadelphia: McKay, n.d., 521. Swinburne’s *A Study of Shakespeare* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880) offered the most spirited and rhapsodically insightful of Victorian rejoinders to the textual analysts discussed above. See Sawyer; also Nick Freeman, ‘Swinburne’s Shakespeare: The Verbal Whirlwind?’, in *A. C. Swinburne and the Singing Word*, ed. Yisrael Levin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 91-106.

<sup>xxii</sup> Grady finds that ‘for Swinburne, God is, in effect, in the unquantifiable *je ne sais quoi* of Shakespeare’s blank verse’ (53).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son* (London: Macmillan, 1897), 2:425-9.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), 1:202. In succeeding chapters Coleridge exemplifies the operations of ‘secondary’ or poetic imagination through close analysis of *Lucrece* and *Venus and Adonis*.

<sup>xxv</sup> Tennyson, ‘Ulysses’, l. 66, and ‘The Lady of Shalott’, ll. 170-1, in *Poems*, ed. Ricks, 565 and 361n.; Webster, ‘Circe’, l. 109, in *Portraits and Other Poems*, ed. Christine Sutphin (Peterborough: Broadview, 2000), 182, and ‘By the Looking-Glass,’ l. 25, in *Dramatic Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1866), 117. The way out of these melancholy generic self-predications lay through the contingencies of the world, although engagement with these contingencies required speakers to compromise their lyrical autonomy.

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‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ (1855) strikes just this bargain the moment Browning’s painter-monk opens his mouth: ‘I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!’ (l. 1, in *Poems*, ed. Pettigrew and Collins, 1.540).

<sup>xxvi</sup> ‘Shakespeare’, in *Sonnets and Other Poems* (London: W. Scott, 1891), 61. Other late-century sonneteers of note include Constance Naden (1880) and Frances Kemble (1883); Eliza Cook contributed a ‘Tercentenary Ode’ (1864).

<sup>xxvii</sup> ‘Shakespeare’, ll. 13-4, in Blind, *Birds of Passage: Songs of the Orient and Occident* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1895), 117. Blind’s ‘Shakespearean Sonnets’ were, true to Victorian form, in fact Petrarchan. This one also owed a trick or two to the epitaph Pope wrote for Newton, ‘God said, *Let Newton be!* and All was *Light*’: *Poems of Alexander Pope*, vol. 6, ed. Norman Ault and John Butt (London: Methuen, 1964), 317. The Victorian installation of Shakespeare, rather than Darwin, in Newton’s place tells in itself a tale of two centuries.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Poems*, ed. Pettigrew and Collins, 2.964-5. First published 29 May 1884 in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, this sonnet was donated to a fundraising *Shaksperean Show Book* appearing on the same date; Browning wrote it with a lively sense of the company it would be keeping there. See the discussion by Danny Karlin in “‘The Names’: Robert Browning’s ‘Shaksperean Show’”, in Marshall and Poole, 150-69. See also Browning’s less prudent, and less successful, monologue for Shakespeare (also published 1876), ‘At the “Mermaid”’.

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