

# Bounded in a Nutshell. The Multiple Universes inside the Shakespearean Line

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*O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a  
king of infinite space...*

**(Shakespeare, *Hamlet* II.ii. 256- 257)**

This year's commemorations of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death have invited different forms of reflection on those features that have made and continue to make him unique. In the same spirit, this brief and simple tribute to his universal greatness and relevance attempts to consider three instances of one of the most frequently explored characteristics of Shakespeare's style, which is the capacity to compress his multiplicity within just a few words. Most of the lines in his plays and poems develop highly condensed, multifaceted images, ideas, feelings, revolutionary thoughts and insolent transgressions, which the poet seems to have inserted on purpose to interpellate the intelligence of his audiences and readers. In all cases, there appears to be an extraordinary confidence that these compressions will be unfolded effectively, or that at least some of the facets will become evident in the process of co-authorial reading or listening. Indeed, this has proved to be the case over time, as every subsequent generation has read new layers of meaning into the complex Shakespearean line. In the present reflection, the lines, selected from two tragedies and a narrative poem,

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are contextualised for the sake of clarity and then explored as illustrative instances of Shakespeare's condensed multiplicities.

**I. "I have't. It is engendered. Hell and night/ Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light." Exploring subverted maternity.**

Iago is probably the most subversive of Shakespeare's villains. These lines close the first of his soliloquies, in I.iii<sup>1</sup>. At his stage in the play the Venetian authorities, under pressure from an imminent Turkish attack on Cyprus, need Othello to command the fleet and man the Cypriot garrison. Iago, whose original purpose is to erode Othello's peace of mind, now quickly adapts his plans in preparation for the transfer to the island. In this speech he inaugurates a communicative strategy that will feature prominently in his subsequent soliloquies, that of recapitulating on already established points in order to introduce new elements, and in this oscillation –past-present; common ground-new territory– he weaves narratives into the discursive net which is his ultimate trap. The *Iago narrative*, constructed in real time, is a narrative about his victims, but also about the *audience*: its impact is increased by his forceful establishment and manipulation of the audience's captive complicity. Unlike other Shakespearean villains, Iago thinks, plots and decides *as* he speaks, but he also transgresses the basic theatrical convention of the soliloquy. He systematically lies to the audience about the motivations

1. Thus do I ever make my fool my purse,  
 For I mine own gained knowledge should profane  
 If I would time expend with such a snipe  
 But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor,  
 And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets  
 He has done my office. I know not if 't be true,  
 But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,  
 Will do as if for surety. He holds me well,  
 The better shall my purpose work on him.  
 Cassio's a proper man. Let me see now;  
 To get his place, and to plume up my will  
 In double knavery – How? How? Let's see.  
 After some time, to abuse Othello's ear  
 That he is too familiar with his wife.  
 He hath a person, and a smooth dispose,  
 To be suspected, framed to make women false.  
 The Moor is of a free and open nature,  
 That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,  
 And will as tenderly be led by the nose  
 As asses are.  
 I have't. It is engendered. Hell and night  
 Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light. (I.iii.375-396)

behind his malignity, thus distorting the nature of this theatrical device, which presupposes the transparent, straightforward access to a character's innermost thoughts.

What Iago actually constructs in this soliloquy is the script for a "mini-play", for which he needs to revise the "cast" available: a gullible, relatively old husband, his young and beautiful wife, an attractive, young, unmarried officer and a mischief-maker –the part Iago has reserved for himself–, who will poison the husband through the ear by generating new narratives within that of this script. This configuration bears an evident resemblance to a medieval comedy, complete with the stock characters of the Roman tradition –the pantaloone, the *miles gloriosus* or braggart soldier and the Vice. Iago is trying to force the course of this tragedy into the mould of a comedy. Such an attempt at subverting the genre of the play would result in the degradation of Othello's tragic stature and in turning the hero into a laughingstock, quite in keeping with this villain's demeaning strategies. Thus, the generic uncertainty that defines most of Shakespeare's plays –an alternation between tragedy and comedy sustained by the plot during the first two acts, to be defined around Act III– is here character-driven rather than plot-driven.

As Iago multiplies schemes and narratives, he also juggles identities. His legendary "motiveless malignity" –as Coleridge aptly defines it–, couched beneath deceptive rhetoric and repulsive imagery, now finds a device to maximize the multiplication of identities. Iago usurps the space of the dramatist, to which he incorporates other spaces in the generation of further narratives: scriptwriter, director, actor, and even reviewer and audience to his own plots, as he rejoices in the success of his machinations. This kaleidoscopic overlap of identities, a feature of Shakespeare's work, is closely attached to the condition of *creator*, partaken by all of his villains in their capacity to *generate/engender* plots.

It is precisely in his creative capacity that, in these last two lines, Iago will take one step further by explicitly using the imagery of *maternity* as the triumphant expression of his playwriting. These two lines encrypt the evil universe unleashed by Iago in the play. Like a demonic mother, Iago is now pregnant with lethal schemes –conceived on the seed of his malignant intelligence– to which he will give birth in the dark. It is a process of impregnation coming to the climax –complete with reception of the corrupt ejaculations of his genius: "I have 't"– at the end of a sexualised intercourse of thoughts and machinations, the back-and-forth movement that structures this soliloquy. Iago's maternity is the ultimate,

most scandalously impossible appropriation of identity, but it is also the ultimate expression of his subversion. Iago's mothering will not engender life but death: *it*, the "monstrous birth" that will be midwived to the world's light by hell and night, encrypts the mystery of Iago's identity in its most disturbing and fascinating magnitude.

## II. "...she chanted snatches of old lauds." Finding a resistant voice.

Ophelia's death happens offstage and is described by Gertrude to Claudius and Laertes at the end of Act IV. Her narrative, predominantly visual, accounts for a framed or latent scene—one that the audience has not watched but is made aware of—, which she evokes with a surprising and suspicious degree of detail.<sup>2</sup> She sets the scene, summarises Ophelia's activity—complete with an interesting digression into the "flower theme", with quite obscene undertones—, then continues to consider the moment previous to the accident, Ophelia's fall into the stream, the instant preceding her sinking and her death by drowning. Each stage is vividly portrayed by means of an attractive rhetorical display of imagery. Throughout, Gertrude seems all too eager to establish the accidental nature of Ophelia's death—signalled by a systematic personification of, and an insistent conferment of agentivity on, the willow tree and the brook, in an incident that will remain unclear and unresolved.

However, what makes this speech remarkable is not the problematic nature of the drowning narrative in itself, but the naturalised assumptions

2. There is a willow grows askant the brook,  
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.  
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make  
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples  
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.  
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds  
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,  
When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,  
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,  
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element. But long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death. (IV.vii.138-155)

that Gertrude expresses as part of a discourse about Ophelia as a subjectivity intervened by the views of others, to the extent that it becomes invisible and inaudible. Throughout the play, she has been the object of speculation – everybody has had something to say about her and her situation –, she has also been used as an object –to test Hamlet, to obtain information from him, to spurn him–, and she has also been treated like an object to be shaped by other characters; one that must be told what to do, what to say and how to think of, perceive and inhabit reality. Even after her death, other characters even dispute the right to determine whether it has been a suicide or not. The dead Ophelia continues to be the object of interpretations that attempt to fix her to some concept, assumption or stereotype.

The moment before she drowns, her clothes spread about her and keep her afloat “mermaid-like” while she sings a judgemental simile that carries several negative associations, the first and best known of which is the sinister figure of mythical origin that lures sailors with her *song* into shipwreck and death by *drowning*. By extension, in Elizabethan English, the word “mermaid” was used to refer to a prostitute, and this connotation is replicated in the discourse of the Elizabethan political narrative, where it refers to the figure of Mary Stuart, Elizabeth’s cousin and unfortunate rival to the throne. All these reverberations would probably have been felt as pertinent by an Elizabethan audience, and perhaps most of them would still sound relevant to an audience aware of Gertrude’s ambivalent attitude towards the unhinged girl.

Ophelia, like a mermaid, also sings while sinking, and her song consists of “snatches of old lauds”, hymns or songs of praise –later Gertrude will refer to “melodious lays”, songs of lament–; and it is interesting to consider how the choice of the word “snatch” –which, apart from “fragment” or “piece”, means “vagina” in Elizabethan English– continues to sustain the obscene undertone of the speech as well as Gertrude’s interpretative slant. Next, she offers two further speculations: Ophelia sings, either because she is unaware of danger –and the word is “incapable”– or because she is accustomed to water, like an animal, a “creature”. Ophelia is finally described as a “poor wretch” pulled down to “muddy death.”

However, well beyond Gertrude’s beautiful and grotesque narrative interference with Ophelia’s death, there is an ultimate space of resistance that Shakespeare cleverly allows the maddened girl: “she chanted snatches of old lauds.” Ophelia sinks to her death *singing*, and her song is her voice and her poetry, at long last emerging without conditioning or imposed

interpretations, without oppression and in freedom, even if this means her death. The others –represented in Gertrude– might try to speculate about the genre of her song –“old lauds” or “melodious lays”– or the reasons why she sings; they might even try to review her song –“old”, “melodious”–, but Ophelia is now too far away for them to distinguish it. Neither they nor the audience will ever know exactly what song Ophelia sings before she dies because this undecipherable music only belongs to her; it is her own and no one else’s. The line, as well as her voice –which she finds at the end of her existence–, is her ultimate microcosm of resistance.

In giving Ophelia this last-minute poetic empowerment, Shakespeare is once again –as in many other of his plays in which the subaltern speak– giving a voice to those who have no voice. The agonized utterings of the oppressed, the excluded, the minorities, the Others that always find an expressive space in his plays and poems, are here ventriloquized in the unintelligible, fragmentary –perhaps obscene– song of a dying girl. Her unfinished, broken poetry emerges, paradoxically, as the dim, feeble beginning of a resistant, musical voice which will grow stronger and louder in later plays –*Othello*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *Cymbeline*, to name but a few– as it gathers consistency and shapes its own expressive language, its own self-made, distinctive, “non-native”, exotic variety of English with which Shakespeare will complete his own, much more accurate, creation of humanity.

### III. “Within this limit is relief enough.” Crossing poetic boundaries.

The subtext of the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* traces the gradual development of a poetic manifesto as a process punctuated by a series of rhetorical exercises, much like those practised by schoolboys in Shakespeare’s time. The apprentice poet attempting the sequence of compositions is Venus herself, in search for a poetic voice which she will only find at the end of the story.

This line, from the “Park” speech by Venus in the first part of the poem, marks the turning point between the two stanzas in which Venus attempts a self-blazon.<sup>3</sup> The blazon, one of the Petrarchan-rooted conventions that

3. ‘Fondling,’ she saith, ‘since I have hemm’d thee here  
Within the circuit of this ivory pale,  
I’ll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;  
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:  
Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,

dominate Elizabethan aesthetics up to the advent of Shakespeare and his generation, constitutes one of the fundamental devices in the sonneteering tradition so vigorously destroyed by Shakespeare. It consists of the detailed description of the beloved –always female– by means of a highly stylized catalogue of physical features. What the blazon emphasises is a fragmentary, fossilised view of the female body, in which the itemised body parts are to be dissected by the –invariably male– poet in a display of rhetorical skill. The blazon foregrounds the poetic talents of the male artist rather than the stereotyped, nameless beauty of the female subject.

Venus' self-blazon proposes a revolutionary break away from the Petrarchan paradigm, in the first place because it is composed by a *female* poet singing about herself. At the same time, this female voice is performing an Ovidian *gender-crossing*: the reversal of conventional gender roles in the poem, whereby Venus becomes the (over)active wooer of a bashful, almost feminised Adonis. Secondly, Venus uses another convention, the geosexual topos, in order to stretch it to transgressive lengths. She introduces herself as a park: a deer preserve and hunting ground; an enclosed area where deer are protected, fed and bred only to be hunted, killed and eaten later. This paradox is expressed through popular sexual topography metaphors combined with the hunting imagery, all of which stresses the ambivalence of eroticised maternity, another defining feature of the complex figure of Venus. She synthesises the convergence of the urge to protect and nourish and the urge to possess and dominate. In this sense, the park, her breeding-hunting ground, is also the playpen she offers to her deer/dear Adonis, her child/lover, the boy hunter/prey.

Venus' description of her body as a park is also informed by the recurrent oral- gastronomic imagery that defines her discourse and actions throughout most of the poem: the "mountain", "dale", "hills" and "pleasant fountains" of her anatomy are laid open for the "deer" to feed on. At the same time, the poetic tracing of her sexual topography seems to follow the direction of the conventional blazon, albeit with subversive undertones, from the

Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

'Within this limit is relief enough,  
Sweet bottom-grass and high delightful plain,  
Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,  
To shelter thee from tempest and from rain:  
Then be my deer, since I am such a park;  
No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark.'

(229-240)

facial features down to the breasts, the “pleasant fountains” that blend the maternal and the sexual. The word “limit”, however, sets a boundary to this movement: this is indeed the limit within which the deer can find “relief” –to both hunger and sexual tension–, the limited area encircled by the “ivory pale” of Venus’ arms within which she expects to capture the elusive Adonis; but this “limit” also evokes the boundary line established by the traditional blazon. The poetic portraiture of stereotyped female beauty will only reach as far down as the breast line. It is at this moment, at this word, that Venus crosses the conventional “limit” in order to focus on details of the physical landscape that lies beyond. The qualities and textures of her pubic hair, her buttocks and her genitalia and, perhaps also, in a veiled allusion, her fluids and moisture, are all carefully and enthusiastically surveyed and offered to the reluctant young man, with the conclusive statement in the final couplet –particularly the three possible meanings of “rouse”: awaken, cause a quarry to start from cover, arouse sexually– bringing together the different trends of imagery deployed in this section.

In terms of the poetic manifesto behind these lines, the “limit” joyfully crossed by Venus in her self-portrait introduces another powerful statement about poetry and poetic expression: if there is to be a new form of blazon, then it must cross all boundaries and reach the multiple “beyond”. Poetic expression must never conform to limits: it must find a way of trespassing; it must flout all kinds of rules and conventions of gender, decorum, discretion and even its own idiom. The new poetics is to be Ovidian, not Petrarchan; it should rejoice in diversity; it should titillate readers by accounting for all the possible ways in which human beings love and lust for each other. It should shamelessly praise all the colours in the gamut of human experience. Venus’ poetic celebration of herself and her body is the map for this new poetics, complete with the hidden areas to be reached and explored by the restless, daring tongue of poetry. Its glorious impudence is the insolence of Shakespeare’s final crossover in the search for a new poetic mode of expression that will break free from the Petrarchan paradigm and leave it behind forever.

Shakespeare can compress multiple universes into each of his lines, from imagery to obscenity; from thought and feeling to ideology and principle. His ever-surprising capacity to express what he pleases within the confines and restrictions of conventions, and then to flout, stretch and reshape those conventions, resides in his intelligence. It is a flexible, multifarious intelligence; the intelligence of creativity but also the intelligence that interpellates other intelligences. Shakespeare knows that his audiences and readers will be



able to follow his meaning, and so he invites a collective activation of their memory as well as a creative kind of alertness that will be put into play and interplay with his own. He knows that everybody, no matter their education or lack of it, no matter their literacy or lack of it, will take something back with them after their encounter with his text. He knows that, by the end of the play or the poem, everybody's world will have become wider, more colourful, less simple and more problematic. Shakespeare is writing with joy, with insolence, with courage, with respect, to delight, disconcert and challenge the intelligence of his audiences and readers.

## References

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