

1.

To write on Shakespeare is to tread a well-trodden path. After so many articles, and books, and performances, and revisions, and refutations, there seems little else to be said. But there is a kind of perverse pleasure that comes from recognizing this fact: knowing how much others have said forces one to search longer for something new to say. That search may take long, but the richness of Shakespeare's works is one that, sooner or later, rewards such searching.

I write this now, in the British Airways terminal of JFK airport, as a prelude to the next several weeks, when just about everything I do will be tinted with some sort of Shakespearean hue. I will be reading Shakespeare's works, as I have often over the last several years of graduate school. And I will be writing about those works, as part of the dissertation I am writing for graduate school. But unlike the last several years, I will be walking through Shakespeare's home-town as I read and as I read. Along with his works, I will be taking in the climate, the architecture, and the social world that shaped them. In this sense, the next several weeks, under the Stanley Wells Fellowship, will offer me the occasion to do more intensely what I have been doing for so long—trying, that is, to see Shakespeare's plays and his poems in their original historical light. But this Fellowship will also be a chance to do something I have not so far been able to do, which is to re-see Shakespeare's plays, his poems and his characters, in the light of his two homes, the city of London and the town, not far away, of Stratford-upon-Avon.

Call this fellowship, then, an exercise in revision—a chance to re-see the path that Shakespeare first embarked upon, with his works, so many years ago.

2.

I write this in London, where I am spending the day and the night before moving onwards and westwards to Stratford-upon-Avon. I passed the day walking through the city and checking off some of the more major tourist attractions. London is a city of many historical moments; the buildings of one period jut up against those of far older ones, and the resulting urban experience is one of being pulled, from neighborhood to neighborhood, in all manner of differing historical directions. There would seem to be little here that remains of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when Shakespeare was active, writing some plays and acting in others. And indeed, by all accounts, the city that London is now is a far cry from the city it once was—bigger, modern, central to the world economy in a way that Shakespeare's London not yet was.

Still, some similarities unite Shakespeare's London, of the 1590s, with this one of the 2010s. The first is affective, more than anything: the noise, the activity, the merging and the sudden dispersal of crowds. The London of Shakespeare's time was not nearly so bustling as the London today—but it was nevertheless a place of marked and intense activity, of the constant and fluid social contact that continues to define urban living. And if Shakespeare's plays—no less than Jonson's, Marston's, and Dekker's—are to be judged, the London of 1590-1610 was a place of pronounced, unpredictable social activity, on the one hand, and of constant financial transactions, on the other. Coming, as I am, from the relatively provincial confines of New Haven, Connecticut, I cannot help but wonder if my own shock at the sheer activity of London is not so different from the shock that someone like Shakespeare—coming from a place as rural Stratford—registered when he passed through the streets of London. For the city, in his works, occupies a strange and elusive position—even an ambivalent one. It is rare that Shakespeare chooses to set his plays in anything we would recognize as a contemporary version of the cities he lived in. And when he does—in *Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure* most prominently—the space takes on a dark and treacherous light.

The second marked similarity between this London and Shakespeare's is geographical—or rather, it is aquatic. Then as now, the Thames cuts the city into two distinct parts. For Shakespeare, though, the other side of the Thames—where the Globe now stands—was technically the suburbs, a place only loosely associated with the city, where bear baiting and theatrical productions were to be found in equal measure. Much, of course, has come to replace those buildings. But I found it instructive, during my day in the city, to walk across the many bridges that connect one side of the Thames to the other, for they allow one to re-live in miniature an experience that playgoers and playwrights together would have enjoyed—the experience, simply, of crossing the river to get from the city to the stage.

3.

Train delays. This keeps me in London another day. But the silver lining is it keeps me in London another day, and it was well spent. I secured tickets to a performance, at Shakespeare's Globe, of *The Merchant of Venice*. At present, I am not writing about this play in my dissertation; however, it indirectly informs much of my analysis of other plays, and this evening's performance of it drove home how revelatory performance always is of any Shakespearean play. One of the values of performance, in other words, is to throw into sharp relief features of the play that reading might suppress, misconstrue, or simply overlook.

Witnessing a performance at the Globe was additionally instructive because of how closely the theater works to approximate the original conditions of performance that informed Shakespeare's plays. My tickets, for instance, were for standing only viewing—meaning that I did not sit in the rafters but stood, instead, in a pit of sorts in front of the stage, as many of the less affluent audiences of Shakespeare's own time would have done. Hamlet famously derides such lower-class play-goers as “groundlings,” but the experience of standing through a performance seemed hardly to merit derision. For when I stood, I was able to move from one end of the theater to the other, and along the way, to survey the performance from different angles. Indeed, one of the great virtues of standing was how fully it enables one to appreciate the sheer space of the stage—the three-sided platform which juts outwards, towards the audience—and the many subtle ways that space is manipulated, visually, to comic and tragic effects. I plan to see several more performances while I am here in London, both in Stratford and again at the Globe, and I am eager to learn more from them.

4.

Arrived at Stratford-upon-Avon. Actually being here truly underscores the value of the Stanley Wells Fellowship—it is easy to picture Shakespeare's hometown in the abstract, but it is a different matter to physically experience it. I am struck, walking through this town, by how sharply it contrasts with London, where I just was. Where the city seemed to go on forever, I can walk from one edge of Stratford to the other in half of an hour. Where London was architecturally heterogeneous, Stratford is more uniform in its buildings and layout. Little seems to have changed here since Shakespeare was born; the town remains very much a town, a small center of provincial life.

It seems to be that this contrast—between the rural world of Stratford and the urban one of London—would have been as operative for Shakespeare, in the 1590s, as it is for me today. And it seems to me that this contrast can go some way towards contextualizing Shakespeare's recurrent fascination, throughout his career, with the rural, the pastoral, and the ruggedly natural. Stratford, with its famous forest of Arden, embodies all of these things, while in London, they are altogether absent. So I cannot help but wonder, as I experience this contrast for myself, if there is not a

nostalgia that rims Shakespeare's many depictions of the countryside, as if being isolated from that landscape forced him to imagine it all the more vividly.

5.

Availed myself today of the Shakespeare Institute, which is associated with the University of Birmingham. The library is physically small, but the collections are stunning; all the holdings are related to early modern literature, and not only Shakespeare, either, but John Lyly, Ben Jonson, and Christopher Marlowe, as well—all writers whom my dissertation treats. Beyond that, the library holds a truly impressive array of secondary literature; truly, everything I need to consult is here.

I spent the majority of the day in the library, which is just a stone's throw from the bed and breakfast where I am staying. Then, I walked along the River Avon, which is a quietly beautiful part of town.

6.

Like yesterday, today was a day for Marlowe. I spent the bulk of my waking hours working on a section of this chapter which centers upon the tragedy of *Tamburlaine*, one of Marlowe's most popular plays of the early modern period, and a play whose forceful style makes its way into one of Shakespeare's earliest dramatic efforts, *3 Henry VI*. And just when I feared I needed an impossible-to-find volume of criticism, the library at the Shakespeare Institute turned out to have it. Again, I cannot emphasize how valuable it is to have two resources in the same place: the resource of Shakespeare's hometown, and the resource of the Institute's library.

Today was also a Marlowe day for a different reason. I attended my first performance at the Royal Shakespeare Company, a production of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. Much of my dissertation is concerned with styles of writing—Shakespeare's predominantly, but other writers', too—and while such research tends to prioritize close reading, performances are especially valuable counter-points, for they illuminate the way lines intersect with voice and embodied, on-stage action. Where this becomes especially instructive is the capacity of performance to throw into relief what we might think of as the "peaks and valleys" of a soliloquy or a stretch of dialogue—those lines, or phrases, or passages that acquire a greater weight, a greater value, relative to others.

This is a way of saying that watching the RSC's *Jew of Malta* afforded a fantastic lesson in the evolution of Marlowe's infamous "mighty line," his scheme of unrhymed, iambic pentameter lines. This tragedy is in many ways a subtler one than Marlowe's earlier *Tamburlaine*; it is replete, at least, with dramatic asides that signal to the audience a subjectivity other than the one that Barabas presents to his interlocutors. But like *Tamburlaine*, this tragedy is also replete with forceful, even hyperbolic lines, delivered in a steady, iambic pentameter. The actor playing Barabas delivered those lines with a vigor that often verged upon sheer yelling—but in a way that was revelatory of the most essential element of Marlowe's style, which is a rhetorical force that assaults the audience again and again, holding them in a rapt attention.

7.

Another day of Marlowe writing and research. The weather here is remarkable—chill, gray, with relentless blusters. It is hard to believe that this is summer, and hard to imagine what it is like here in the winter. Attending the RSC's *Jew of Malta* has very much helped me to sharpen my argument in this section of the chapter, which asks why Marlowe's blank verse style should become as popular as it did. As last night's production made clear, that style was a style of iambs, but more than that, it was a style of grand, emphatic emotions—emotions whose profundity elevates the speaker above his interlocutors in a manner rather analogous to the way that the stage architecturally elevates the actor above his audience, erecting a barrier between the two that helps to enforce our

attention. Marlowe's style, it seems to me, similarly works to enforce the attention, to elevate the speaker above his audience through the grandeur of his emotions, which are expressed most profoundly in the grandeur of his verse. I am still, however, thinking through this section of the argument, and I hope to use the next few days to resolve it.

8.

More work today on Marlowe and the fashion for bombast that took over the stage. The day was complemented by a tour of Anne Hathaway's home and of the grave that holds Shakespeare's tomb.

9.

Day trip into London. My advisor, David Scott Kastan, was giving a talk at the Globe Theater, on the subject of Shakespeare's influences—a timely talk, given the chapter I am working on. Fittingly, this talk was back at the Globe Theater, in London, but it was housed in the famous Wannamaker Theater, the small, indoor venue which offers a kind of simulacrum of the original Blackfriars Theater. Like the larger, outdoor Globe, this theater is more a sketch of the original venue than a reproduction of it. Still, it was incredibly revelatory to encounter such an indoor theater in-person. The sheer intimacy of the space is remarkable; from where I sat, I couldn't quite touch David, but he was clear and close to me in a way that performers at the Globe never quite were. The consequence of this is how much more everything could be experienced: the visual details of everything were sharper, the voices of the speakers clearer, the acoustics much more audible.

The current chapter I am working on does not treat indoor theaters of the sort that the Wannamaker approximates. But the last chapter in my dissertation, which centers on the subject of Shakespeare's late style, treats in detail plays that were written for the Blackfriars, like *Cymbeline* and *The Winters Tale*. The closeness of this environment stands in sharp contrast to the openness of the Globe, and it is prompting me to re-think some of the claims I have been making about Shakespeare's late plays—specifically, I wonder, how might the improved acoustics of the Blackfriars allow for a greater range of vocal expression? Might softer, more modulated lines, expressing subtle tremors of fear or anticipation or intimacy, be possible in a way that they were not at the larger, outdoor Globe? Might performances at such venues, with their greater acoustics, therefore represent something of a polar opposite to the emphatic declamations of the bombastic blank verse that had made Marlowe—and Shakespeare after him—so popular?

10.

Back in Stratford today, splitting my time between this argument about Tamburlaine and some of the arguments in the last chapter of my dissertation, which has already been written. It is a worthwhile project to revisit old arguments, while I am here, even as I try to spin out new ones. For the experience of being here is very much prompting me to see Shakespeare's material in a new light.

11.

An exhausting but immensely productive day of writing and revision in the books today. I will supply more details tomorrow, but for now it is bedtime.

12.

Had the pleasure this evening of attending the RSC's production of *Othello*. There is much to say about this play in general and this production in particular, but I want to start off just by transcribing some of the notes I took while attending this performance:

-The play opens with a kind of still life, of two men in a single gondola, still, as if frozen. They are silhouettes at first, but as the light dims, they are revealed to be a black man and a white. The former would seem to be Othello, but is soon revealed to be Iago, who is played in this production—like Othello—by a black man.

-This casting decision gives a much different weight to Roderigo's crudely racist "thick lips" comment, which prompts Iago rather cartoonishly to beat Roderigo over the head with his staff.

-Iago is cloaked and hooded when he yells out to Brabantio, and he speaks to him with his back to him, making himself a faceless and raceless silhouette to the Venetian nobleman.

-This Iago is fun, agile, impish, a far cry from the serpentine villain of Ian McKellen's Iago. He is good-natured, funny.

-The decision to cast a black man as Iago gives further, interesting weight to lines like "blackest pitch" and "our country," exchanged between Iago and Othello. Indeed it changes the dynamic between these two altogether. Iago is no longer, exactly, the representative of a Venetian culture from which Othello, as a foreigner and a black man, will always be excluded. Instead, Othello confides in Iago more as a fellow-outsider.

-This is play is a play about a military world; as such it is a play about violence and about men, and about the dignity that the latter is believed to confer upon the former. This logic of course motivates Othello's murder of Desdemona, but it is driven home much earlier in this performance when Othello ties Iago to a chair, hand-cuffing him and strangling him as he struggles to believe what his lieutenant has insinuated.

-Grimly, and without any subsequent explanation, one scene opens in darkness, with men in shadows water-boarding and then torturing a prisoner, overseen by Iago.

-"Her faith I put my life on it" remains one of the most chilling lines of this play.

13.

Most of my scholarly effort lately has been devoted to working on my dissertation, which focuses on the subject of style in Shakespeare's plays. But last night's production of Othello reminded me of what I am tentatively planning for my second project, after the dissertation, to focus on, which is the lack of catharsis in the tragedies of Shakespeare's period—Shakespeare's own plays, especially. For the feeling of witnessing Othello's downfall is not one of any kind of relief; nor is there—as there so often is in classical tragedies—any effort by any character to memorialize, or turn into ritual, the horrors and sufferings that have just been depicted on the stage. Instead, Othello, through his final moments, is intensely alone in his suffering; and while we are encouraged to sympathize with him, Shakespeare's tragedy also underscores the great gap in subjectivity and feeling that divides his tragic hero from us—such that we can only encounter Othello as a spectacle, as something that escapes or even refutes our empathy.

14.

Another day trip to London, today, where I registered as a reader at the British Library, which is truly one of the most amazing libraries I have ever encountered in my life. The holdings, the architecture, the space, the scholarly activity—it is all quite stunning. While there, I was able to consult several books of secondary material on Marlowe that I had not been able to procure up at Stratford. All in all, a very successful day!

15.

More theater today. Another production of *The Merchant of Venice*, this time by the RSC. All in all, this performance was not as cohesive or compelling as the one I had seen at Shakespeare's Globe, several days earlier. But it was still a thrilling experience—especially in its visual effects. The

entire performance, a massive pendulum swings from one edge of the theater to another. It is unclear—even frustratingly unclear—what this pendulum exactly is intended to signify, or even to do. But it adds a vaguely ethereal, other-worldly air to this dark comedy of city life, and that atmosphere is enhanced by the reflective wall that adorns the back end of the stage, and by the similarly reflective surface that guilds the stage’s floor. This Portia did not have the golden locks for which she is praised by her suitors, but she was immensely charismatic and agile as a performer. Perhaps most remarkable, however, was the performance of the clown Launcelot Gobbo, whose dark humor, in Shakespeare’s comedy, is radically drawn out in this version of the play; the actor is made up with an eerily gaudy white-and-red clown-face, and he slides back and forth between the stage and the audience with a sly charm, but it is the off-handed ease with which he delivers some of his most anti-Semitic lines which makes this Gobbo so haunting.

Performances like this are especially instructive for me because the second chapter of my dissertation—which, confusingly, I began the project by writing—takes clowns as its focus. Specifically, it focuses on the interaction between clowns and their audiences, on those moments that we might describe today as “breaking the fourth wall.” While I had been aware, in the abstract, of such moments when I read Shakespeare’s plays, I had never actually experienced them for myself, and it is truly remarkable how such thoroughly un-actorly behavior has the effect of focusing the attention, of drawing one into the represented moment—paradoxically because it seems not to be a fictional, represented moment at all, but one that is entirely “real.”

16.

Today it was back to more Marlowe. I am struggling, at this point, with an abundance of material. There is simply too much to say. But at this point, I am happy to sift through it all. Tomorrow it will be back to London.

17.

London today. British Library in the morning and early afternoon, and then it was back to the Globe Theater for another performance, this one of *As You Like It*. After the RSC’s *Merchant of Venice*, this play provided something of a fitting complement, since both plays feature remarkably comic, remarkably interactive clowns. But the style of those two clowns, as critics have often observed, is radically different, *As You Like It*’s Touchstone operating as more of a “wise fool” than *The Merchant of Venice*’s Gobbo. It was fascinating to contrast the differences in performance produced by these differences in speaking style, but for all of their differences, both characters cultivated a similar air of cynical, off-handed disregard—a kind of comic disdain for the comic worlds in which they have been enmeshed, which motivates their interaction with their audiences.

18.

More Stratford today. The Marlowe section has enlarged rather considerably thanks to several very productive days here, but it is nearing its logical conclusion. In the mean time, I enjoyed a tour of the local butterfly farm, which was truly a rare sight to see.

19.

This trip has already proved to be incredibly valuable. I have completed the section on Marlowe, and am now in a good position to move on to treat Shakespeare’s early plays, *3 Henry VI*, *Richard II*, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Romeo and Juliet* among them. Much of what is interesting me with these plays is the phenomenon of theatrical fashions—specifically, of styles of writing that become immensely popular to playgoers and playwrights of the period. Part of what I am arguing is that Shakespeare learns to create his own fashions by following others, those of

Marlowe and Lyly in particular. So this section on Marlowe will provide something of a foundation for my analyses of Shakespeare's early plays, since they will begin by tracing eminently Marlovian and Lylyan moments in Shakespeare's works.

20.

I had the immense pleasure today of finally meeting Professor Stanley Wells after several earlier, failed attempts. It is truly an honor to meet a figure of such venerable accomplishments, to discuss my own work with him, and to compare impressions of some of the plays I had been able to attend at the RSC. Professor Wells was kind enough to invite me into his office and to give me a tour of the Shakespeare Institute, as well as to direct my attention to several works of criticism that will be of incredible value for my current dissertation chapter.

Scholarship is always, by necessity, a solitary activity. This is one of its pleasures, but also one of its pitfalls; when one is alone, it can become easy at times to lose sight of the value of your projects. But meeting with a critic of such standing as Stanley Wells affords a wonderfully grounding experience—a chance to see your ideas, as it were, in motion, as they can be appreciated not just by another critic, but by one of the most venerable critics in the field of Shakespeare studies. This is a roundabout way of saying, I suppose, that meeting with Stanley Wells reminded me of the many pleasures and many rewards of scholarship—of why I wanted to pursue a Ph.D. in the first place. I have no doubt I will remember this as one of the most important encounters of this fellowship.

21.

A long day today pouring over the many Marlovian moments of 3 Henry VI, and re-reading several of the plays to succeed it, followed by another walk along the River Avon.

22.

Company. Carla, my friend and colleague, as well as another Stanley Wells Fellow, has just now arrived in Stratford. We don't overlap by too many days, but it's a pleasure to have her here. Just as it was so worthwhile to find in Professor Wells a helpful influence to whom I could talk about my own work, it's exceptionally helpful to have a colleague here with whom I can discuss the frustrations and pleasures of my research. It's only too bad that we are not overlapping more!

23.

Last day in Stratford has come and gone too quickly. As I walked through the wooded areas surrounding the River Avon on either side, it struck me as only fitting that I have now moved on in this dissertation chapter to *Midsummer Night's Dream*—a play that seems, in its unbridled wonder at the natural world, to brim with much of Shakespeare's upbringing, with the provincial town I have had the pleasure of seeing for myself.

24.

My last day in London brought me back to the British Library and then, again, to the Globe, where I watched a truly remarkable performance of *Measure for Measure*—a play I have written on extensively, but have never seen performed. Like *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure* is traditionally hailed as a “dark comedy” or a “problem play,” and those monikers are not without merit. Most likely the last of Shakespeare's comedies, this is a play that laughs darkly at our tenuous procedures of justice and absolution. At the same time, it is a play whose sexual politics make it difficult to laugh at all. But the real wonder of the Globe's production of *Measure for Measure* was the way it drew out the audience's laughter again and again. Central to this accomplishment was the performance of Duke Vincentio, who emerged as a hilariously, parodically bumbling version of the

disguised king who populated so many plays of the period. Even the final scene—in which he effectively coerces Isabella into marrying him—produces a laughter that radically revised the way I have come to think about this most elusive of comedies. It has prompted me to wonder, even, if “problem comedy” remains even the right word for such a play.