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# "Singularities" in and as "the world": What Happens in Shakespeare

**Abstract:** Two possible interpretations of the notion of a "Shakespearean world" are considered; one for which the phrase connotes facts, processes and judgements which are taken by speakers to be provisional, unstable, morally "biassed", yet in some sense "realistic"; another for which a "singular" character, a character-type or a particular experience is perceived as not only coherent and intensive in itself but as, potentially or actually, the source of a larger coherence and intelligibility. A number of citations display the different features salient to each of these two lines of interpretation. It is argued that, for some "singularities", which take themselves and their powers and properties to be self-sufficient and self-legitimating, exposure to the "world" is in practice morally reductive or destructive. In other "singular" cases, such exposure amounts to, and offers an understanding of, Shakespearean versions of protagonism, heroism, and empathetic charm.

**Keywords:** singularity, bias, exposure, protagonism, charm

## 1. Introduction

Is there a "Shakespearean world"? Are there several such worlds? — and would a claim to that effect be meaningful? Such claims are not rare: 2016 saw the publication of an impressive *Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, in two volumes divided between *Shakespeare's World, 1500–1660* and *The World's Shakespeare, 1660–Present*, amounting to little short of two thousand large pages (Smith 2016). On a more localised but still substantial scale, it is common to read of (for example) "two worlds of Shakespearean comedy" (Hawkins 1967: 62–80). Bradley, among many others, discussed "the ultimate power in the tragic world" (of Shakespeare), identifying it as "a moral order" (Bradley 1956: 26). The History plays, focussing on the vicissitudes of the rulers and people of "Britain" over a century and a half, are often set over against a "Roman world of Shakespeare" (as in Vivian Thomas' *Shakespeare's Roman Worlds*) taken to be on show, whether in

tragic, historical or comic-Romance mode, in plays running from *Titus Andronicus* to *Cymbeline* (Thomas 1989). Rather differently and very influentially, Stanley Cavell's splendid and intense readings of Shakespearean drama focus upon the difficult or even impossible passages between that drama and any accessible "world" — he writes of "Shakespeare's measures of the withdrawal of the world" and of the repudiated "capacity of individual human passion and encounter to bear cosmic insignia" (Cavell 1987: 19). If there are, or were, Shakespearean worlds, can they also be ours?

In this essay I trace some possible senses, and critical deployments, of the phrase, and the notion of, "a/the world" within the body of Shakespearean dramatic texts. In a presentation of one set of citations of the word "world" in Shakespearean drama, I consider the idea of "the world" as the way in which things, as a matter of observable fact, may be said actually to happen; to put the point another way, "the world" is, on such a view, the sum of how people in general behave. Linked with this purportedly "realistic" attitude, or mood, are several further thoughts and feelings — that "the world" is changeable, that it is governed by Fortune, that it embodies a human craze for novelty; that it is predictable and dull; that it is insubstantial; that it is a "snare", or altogether "vile", or generally "wild". An important thought in this connection — important both to Shakespearean speakers and to a critical understanding of them — is that "things happen" in consequence of the pursuits, by an indefinitely large number of agents, of their own self-interest. One might refer to this notion as "the bias of the world", a resonantly Shakespearean phrase which will be discussed in due course.

Alongside such a notion of "worldliness", I consider the different thought that a single experience or, especially, a single person might be worth as much as the world, might embody a world, or might be the focus of what otherwise would be a chaotic or tedious world. Several considerations might lead to this idea — a perception of an individual as commanding a virtual monopoly of a certain positive quality; a sense of a person's powers to excite great and sustained desire; a belief that a wide and otherwise diverse range of powers is vested in just one individual; an acceptance that a particular person is in some sense unique; or the idea that a single person confers upon the whole world such value as it has (and would, that person being absent, lack). Such claims are most frequent in Shakespeare's "Roman plays", and the concluding step in such a train of thought might be that taken in Mark Antony's words, spoken over the body of Julius Caesar:

> O world! thou wast the forest of this hart,
> And this indeed, O world, the heart of thee. (*Julius Caesar* 3.1.209–210)

For Antony (or for his immediate rhetorical and political purposes) Julius Caesar was not merely unique within the world — he was the world's centre and animating principle, conferring upon it it any power or right it might claim to count as "a world" or as "the world"; such coherence or completeness as it had derived from him.

I shall use the term "singularity" to refer to the case, or the possibility, just outlined; and I shall present, in support of its presence within the text of Shakespearean drama, a second set of citations. I shall then, within the limits of the present essay, consider a hypothesis about the relation between these two ways of understanding, within the body of Shakespearean dramatic texts, "the world". The hypothesis is this.

There is, in these texts, such a thing as "the Shakespearean way of the world". It is a perceivable pattern of dramatic and linguistic events. It amounts to the sequences and processes through which "singularities", focusses of intensity localised around individual characters and character-types, are encountered by, engaged towards, and diverted into a "biassed" world — a multiplicity of agents pursuing their own projects upon the terms of shared worldliness. This "way of the world", in Shakespeare's plays, also involves varying degrees and modes of wilful encounter with, and self-exposure to, a self-interested world, on the part of such "singular" characters. Such self-exposure, at its most extreme, may be projected by them, and may be perceived by others (within the plays or amongst their audiences and readers), as a willed and conscious absorption of ordinary everyday worldliness into the orbit and the self-directing energies and pleasures of just one "singularity" — a character, a relationship, or a society centred upon one or the other. In such a case there would emerge a putative, or hyperbolic, equivalence between "singularity" and "world".

The options sketched here are related in some ways to the differences between the genres into which, since the First Folio, it has been customary to divide the Shakespearean oeuvre. In comedies, the singular energies typically claimed by, or perceived in, lovers are somewhat more likely to be diverted into terms of worldly acceptability. In the English Histories, the extended prolongation of such acceptability, in the form of legitimate rule, amounts to a fundamental desideratum, which tests the energies and the charismas of even the most intensely projected "singularities". In tragedies there appear the most intricate encounters between exceptional protagonists and the "worlds" which they seek at once to hold at bay and fundamentally to reshape into terms acceptable to them. Yet in all three genres the claim of equivalence, or equal potency, between a singular intensity and a "world", is frequently made by characters who consider themselves or are considered by others to be "villains"; and several other individual "character-types", insofar as they are recognisable — say, the "critic" or "Fool", the "ruler", or the "victim" — exhibit or imply the projection of a singular intensity claiming the inclusiveness and resilience of a whole "world". Across all three genres, moreover, but most powerfully in the Roman Histories (and perhaps most subtly in the late "Romances"), are found characters, and relationships (between, say, a Cleopatra and an Antony, or a Coriolanus and a Rome), where "singularity" and some positive embrace of "worldliness" may be felt to overlap to a degree tending, for better or worse, towards equivalence.

The consciously "worldly" agents of the plays pursue definable projects, in modes that they take to be "realistic". In themselves and from each other they are

more or less attuned at once to routine and to novelty. They are often aware of "bias" — of, say, self-interest, manipulation and camouflage — in the personae and the actions of others, though less ready to accept the diagnosis of such things within themselves. The outcome of such patterns of "worldliness" may appear to them, for all its long-term predictability, as random or even chaotic. It is unlikely to move them to any resounding claims about the world's general goodness or excellence.

How different, from this "biassed" world, are those characters who are, within and yet beyond it, identifiable by its inhabitants or by subsequent audiences and readers as "singular"? Are they in their turn not driven, rather obviously, by forms of self-interest? Richard of Gloucester and Richard II, Falstaff and Hamlet, Iago and Cleopatra, Lear and Coriolanus — surely such characters as these, if any in Shakespeare, "pursue their own projects"?

Not altogether so. These (and other such "singular" Shakespearean characters) refuse, at the crises of their projects, any ultimate acknowledgement of "worldly predictability" or merely realistic morality as salient, either for their choices or their destinies. Villains — Richard III and Iago — find themselves driven by energies, and bound towards goals, far outrunning the practices of "worldly" efficiency or sustainable power. Rulers — Richard II and Lear — find themselves abandoning the disciplines of mere administration by which their realms might be safely governed in their own self-interest. Charmers — as one might provisionally call Falstaff and Cleopatra — find that their witty manipulations, of the "worldly" and powerful whose company they so assiduously keep, have to become their own reward. Lovers — one thinks most readily of Rosalind in *As You Like It* — find pleasure more in flirtatious verbal love-making than in any direct route towards physical consummation. Heroes — Coriolanus, in this category, can be aligned with Julius Caesar and the Mark Antony of *Antony and Cleopatra* — exist and find value less in the conduct of any particular actions than as a centre and definition of their whole (Roman) world, and with their disintegrations and deaths that world, around them, falls apart. A tragic protagonist — Hamlet — finds no stable and limitable self by whose standards he might measure either the pursuit or the abandonment of realistic self-interest or of worldly political security; and this instability is at once his curse and his singular glory.

Beyond a defence of the relative "unworldliness" of such characters as these, it needs to be stressed that claims to "singularity", whether made by others about them (as is often the case) or by them on their own behalf, form part of the verbal and conversational fabric of Shakespearean drama. That is: such claims about "singular worlds", and about the characters in whom they may be vested — just like the different utterances about predictable and "biassed" worldliness — are in themselves a central part of the process which my initial hypothesis seeks to indicate — a process involving "encounter" and "engagement", "diversion" and "self-exposure" and putative "identification". These terms amount, in practice, to a variety of upheavals. "Singular" projects are diverted into unintended paths with

incalculable effects. Groups pursuing collective concerns — or routinised mutual bickering — find themselves, by the impact of singularity, torn apart into intransigent and opposing parties. In and through all this a recognisably "Shakespearean world" pursues its "way", as collective units ("biassed worlds"), sundered and re-disposed, come to recognise that they draw its energies largely from just those singularities ("worlds unto themselves") which, in turn, they undermine and absorb and recycle. This — at the most general level — is "what happens in Shakespeare".

## 2. The world and its bias

I now present, as proposed in the Introduction, a set of citations in support of the claim that the Shakespearean dramatic text exhibits a sense that "the world" is available, for representation and for understanding, as both mutable and predictable; as self-interested, biassed, and even immoral, yet still somehow insubstantial; as potentially though randomly destructive.

> DON PEDRO The fashion of the world is to avoid cost... (*Much Ado About Nothing* 1.1.78)

> EDGAR World, world, O world!
> 　　　But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee,
> 　　　Life would not yield to age. (*King Lear* 4.1.11–13)

> ROSALIND Fortune reigns in gifts of the world, not in the lineaments of Nature.
> 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(*As You Like It* 1.2.36–37)

> JAQUES All the world's a stage,
> 　　　And all the men and women merely players. (*As You Like It* 2.7.139–40)

> DUKE Novelty is only in request...Much upon this riddle runs the wisdom of the world.
> 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(*Measure for Measure* 3.1.455, 459–60)

> PISTOL And tidings do I bring, and lucky joys,
> 　　　And golden times, and happy news of price.
> FALSTAFF I pray thee now, deliver them like a man of this world.
> PISTOL A foutre for the world and worldlings base!
> 　　　I speak of Africa and golden joys. (*2 Henry IV* 5.3.86–91)

> CLEOPATRA Lord of lords!
> 　　　　O infinite virtue, com'st thou smiling from
> 　　　　The world's great snare uncaught? (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.8.16–18)

> CLEOPATRA Shall I abide
> 　　　　In this dull world...? (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.15.62–63)
> CLEOPATRA What should I stay —
> 　　　　([She] dies.)
> CHARMIAN In this wild [or "vile" — Capell's conjecture] world?
> 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(*Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.309–310)

Two points are clear about this list (which could be extended at much greater length). Firstly, not all the speakers have in view an identical — nor, indeed, necessarily a clear — notion of "the world". Secondly, all the speakers nonetheless conceive of it, at least in the moment and the circumstances of their utterances, in ways that are rather negative, while evincing little or no surprise at such negativity.

A third point may emerge. The lack of conscious emphasis, in most or all of the occurrences above, upon the word "world", coupled with the regularly and casually depressive tone of its usage, may imply that any one occurrence of the word, whichever the individual sense ("mutable", "biassed", "routinised") upon which it most clearly draws for its intelligibility, could be extended so as to take into its range of connotation any or all of the other senses as well. To put this point, in a certain sense, more simply: these usages sustain the hypothesis that "world", in Shakespeare generally, is a word of "Empsonian" ambiguity. Any one of its senses may invoke an awareness of any one or more of its other senses.

Moreover, the salience of such ambiguities need not be (though it often can be) explicitly demonstrated, either by modern critics or by the Shakespearean speakers in their dramatic contexts. Rather, any apparent contradictions between the word's "negative" senses — those which I have so far reviewed — may be readily attributed to plausible, even if illogical, associations of ideas within the consciousnesses of the speakers. Thus — to start from *As You Like It* — a "world" where gifts are disposed unequally, between humans, and with no relation to perceived merit, is likely to engender both double-dealing and novel attempts at moral revaluation among those who take themselves, as far as concerns their "fortunes", to be disadvantaged; they, and also their victims, are likely in turn to find this situation more or less acceptable insofar as it is more or less open to reversal — and also insofar as, reversible or not, its emergent inequities are minimally sustainable; hence what from one point of view may seem "wild" in its unfairness may from another seem merely, and even bearably, "vile". Worldly unfairness — one might say — is tolerable if one can find it simply dull.

The general structure of feeling here is most fully enunciated, in *King John,* by the Bastard Falconbridge:

> Commodity, the bias of the world,
> The world, who of itself is peised well,
> Made to run even upon even ground,
> Till this advantage, this vile-drawing bias,
> This sway of motion, this commodity,
> Makes it take head from all indifference,
> From all direction, purpose, course, intent...
> And why rail I on this commodity?
> But for because he hath not wooed me yet. (*King John* 2.1.574–580, 587–88)

Already in the play he has followed the "wooing" of "commodity", exchanging a safe, dull and proper inherited identity for the perceptions open to, and the risks incumbent upon, an acknowledged bastard enjoying the powers of a royal

henchman and confidant. His "even" world may or may not have pursued some "direction" or "intent"; his own chosen course exposes him to a "sway of motion" — and exposes equally, to his own bias, the world around him which he has voluntarily joined.

Similar perceptions of "the world" are voiced by two characters who are not only reluctant to join it but arguably never entirely do so. One is Coriolanus:

> O world, thy slippery turns! Friends now fast sworn
> …shall within this hour,
> On the dissension of a doit, break out
> To bitterest enmity. So fellest foes
> …shall grow dear friends
> And interjoin their issues. So with me. (*Coriolanus* 4.4.12, 16–18, 21–22)

The other is the Achilles of *Troilus and Cressida,* who comes to feel himself a "slippery stander", despite his initial use of this powerful phrase to characterize not himself but others:

> ...not a man, for being simply man,
> Hath any honour but honoured for those honours
> That are without him, as place, riches or favour —
> Prizes of accident as oft as merit,
> Which, when they fall, as being slippery standers,
> The love that leaned on them, as slippery too,
> Doth one pluck down another, and together
> Die in the fall. But 'tis not so with me:
> Fortune and I are friends. I do enjoy
> At ample point all that I did possess
> Save these men's looks... (*Troilus and Cressida* 3.3.80–90)

In his ensuing conversation with Ulysses, the lessons of "the world" — albeit without any use of the word itself — are amply borne in upon him:

> ULYSSES Oh, let not virtue seek
> Remuneration for the thing it was,
> For beauty, wit,
> High birth, vigour of bone, desert in service,
> Love, friendship, charity are subjects all
> To envious and calumniating Time.
> One touch of nature makes the whole world kin,
> That all with one consent praise new-born gauds... (*Troilus and Cressida* 3.3. 167–174)

Ulysses is perhaps Shakespeare's most impressive spokesperson for worldliness. He picks out, as being evident to all yet all too easily neglected, the world's unfairnesses, its resistance to the exceptional, its taste for novelty. He does all this, moreover, without any demonstrative emphasis, let alone glee; if anything his tone is rueful. One might almost think him in love with the Achillean "singularity" he seeks, with mingled subtlety and banality, to dismantle and, into the terms of "the bias of the world", to recycle. Indeed such "recycling", of alleged singularities into

the terms of the everyday world, is frequently taken to be the main business, or demonstration, of *Troilus and Cressida* as a whole.

## 3. The vulnerable worlds of singularity

Here again I present citations from Shakespearean dramatic texts, demonstrating this time the availability of the word "world" in contexts where what is in question is a sense of extreme and purportedly unique value – value identified with and perhaps enclosed within a particular person and place and time, yet nonetheless fundamental to any wider world that could be conceived as substantial, extant or valuable.

> BOYET Be now as prodigal of all, dear grace,
> As Nature was in making graces dear,
> When she did starve the general world beside
> And prodigally gave them all to you. (*Love's Labour's Lost* 2.1.9–12)

> VIOLA Lady, you are the cruellest she alive
> If you will lead these graces to the grave
> And leave the world no copy. (*Twelfth Night* 1.5.222–24)

> FRIAR LAURENCE Here from Verona art thou banishèd.
>              Be patient, for the world is broad and wide.
> ROMEO There is no world without Verona walls
>      But purgatory, torture, hell itself;
>      Hence banishèd is banished from the world,
>      And world's exile is death. (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.2.15–20)

> SECOND SERVINGMAN He had, sir, a kind of face, methought — I cannot tell how to term it.
> FIRST SERVINGMAN He had so, looking as it were — would I were hanged but I thought
>              there was more in him than I could think.
> SECOND SERVINGMAN So did I, I'll be sworn. He is simply the rarest man i'th'world.
>                      (*Coriolanus* 4.5.154–60)

> FALSTAFF Banish plump Jack and banish all the world. (*1 Henry IV* 2.4.437)

> ANTONY O thou day o'th'world,
>      Chain my armed neck. (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.8.13–14)

> EROS Turn then from me that noble countenance
> Wherein the worship of the whole world lies. (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.14.85–86)

> CLEOPATRA It were for me
> To throw my sceptre at the injurious gods
> To tell them that this world did equal theirs
> Till they had stol'n our jewel. (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.15. 79–82)

Empson long ago remarked, with a possibly reductive and certainly ironic tolerance, that for a lover

> to say that his mistress is the whole world is not witty and satisfying merely because the complete hyperbole; if you take the world not as the universe but as this planet it becomes something one might conceivably get outside but which it would be absurd to try to get outside; there are more than one of them, but each creature is right in giving an absurd importance to his own. (Empson 1966: 67)

The idea here is, I think, that ascriptions, by lovers to their beloveds, of extreme and "world-challenging" beauty or virtue or power can be perceived in positive dramatic terms. Since "singularities" are, precisely, singular, there may be no one intelligible overall structuration of universal value or beauty or even truth; yet such structurations are nonetheless felt to be desirable or in some sense indispensable (one notes Shakespeare's brilliant articulation of the inarticulacy of the two Volscian Servingmen).

Still, such excitingly local intensities, however rewarding for those who frame and nurture them, have their dangers. As with earlier formulations of worldly "negativity", it is important to note the fact, and the effects, of these more positive and euphoric speakers' involvements in their own "hyperbolic" claims of singularity. The isolation of the Princess in *Love's Labour's Lost,* from the everyday world and its claims, which might seem to follow were she to accept Boyet's terms of praise, would all too closely echo the isolation willed upon themselves by the manifestly inept and thoughtless males whom — to the dismay of both parties — she is about to encounter. Olivia's isolation in *Twelfth Night* will, in this same scene, be plausibly diagnosed by Viola not only as endemic to her great beauty but sustained wilfully by her pride. Romeo's petulant exclusion of a world outside Verona plays, arguably, into the hands of the Friar's equally undue insistence on ensuring he leaves the only "world" where diplomacy, not to mention good fortune, might allow to Juliet's and Romeo's love some option for survival.

In these cases, and several others, the singularity of a "lover" or "beloved", actual or potential, is at stake. Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* conveys well the vulnerability of the lover projecting upon a beloved such singularity:

> Nor doth this wood lack worlds of company
> For you in my respect are all the world. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.1.223–24)

The "private world" she desiderates is, as the play's action shows, all too exposed to the rivalries and the competitive parallel "world" — constructions of other lovers. Othello's sense of Desdemona as "his world" has more disastrous consequences —

> Had she been true,
> If heaven would make me such another world
> Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,
> I'd not have sold her for it. (*Othello* 5.2.138–41)

Emilia's very different takes on the issues here are revealing:

DESDEMONA Would'st thou do such a deed for all the world?
EMILIA The world's a huge thing; it is a great price
      For a small vice...
      Why, the wrong is but a wrong i'the world and, having the world for your
      labor, 'tis a wrong in our own world, and you might quickly make it right!
                                      (*Othello* 4.3.64–66, 75–77)

She makes two points; first, in the "worldly" world, an act of adultery would be a matter of relative normality; second, even in the world of "lovers' singularities" one would do well to act advantageously, for oneself and others, given that such worlds are (as Empson says) constructed, with some degree of conscious absurdity, to accommodate one's own feelings.

While lovers may project upon each other, or upon their putatively shared relationship, the sense of a singular and enclosed world, another character-type, recurrent in Shakespearean drama, can be seen as doing something similar in relation to its own identity; that is, the "villain". Some Shakespearean villains have invited discussion of their motivations. Others have excited appalled admiration on account of their operational techniques. Iago, pre-eminent on both counts, is less easy to categorize in terms of his aims — where other "villains" (Richard of Gloucester, Claudius, Edmond, Macbeth) explicitly or discernibly seek supreme power within a kingdom, Iago represents to himself no such goal of notional stability. What he shares — it may be suggested — with other villains is a double sense of a singular world.

RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER HOPES AND EXPECTS THAT THE REMOVAL OF HIS
PURPORTED ENEMIES WILL
...leave the world for me to bustle in. (*Richard III* 1.1.151)

Three Acts later, seeking in vain to establish for himself as King some minimal credibility, he offers to Queen Elizabeth, his potential mother-in-law, to swear "by the world", only to elicit her immediate reply "Tis full of thy foul wrongs". His villainous (while seemingly good-natured, worldly and bonhomous) "bustling", over those three Acts, has turned the accepted worldliness of his peers and associates into a world satiated by himself — the world where his earlier stipulation, "I am myself alone" (*3 Henry VI* 5.6.83), will be fulfilled at his last midnight in his awareness that

There is no creature loves me,
And if I die, no soul will pity me.
And wherefore should they, since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself? (*Richard III* 5.3.198–201)

Such villainy goes beyond matters of motivation, technique and specific aim. It proposes to itself a homology between the singular villain and the world which it comes to define. Yet it is also the case that Shakespearean villains consistently fail. No less than lovers comic or tragic, they are tripped up by the refractory biasses — as they encounter them — of the everyday world.

The case of Claudius here is striking and exemplary. His aim, it would seem, is "merely" to retain and safeguard the Danish court and world which he has made in his own image. Yet this is a "slippery" world, exposed both to the inroads that an unpredictable Hamlet may make upon it and to such "worldly" chances as the accidental killing of Polonius and the absence of alternative princely heirs. Claudius finds himself driven to magnify the scale of the lies and half-truths on which his seemingly rational, albeit admittedly self-interested, legitimacy is based. At the final crisis the real "way of the world" emerges, in the stand-off between Claudius' drive to preserve, at all costs, the claustrophobic and poisonous world of his deceits, and Hamlet's "readiness" (*Hamlet* 5.2.194) for the test of his imaginations in worldly action, even at the price of early death —

> ...the interim's mine
> And a man's life's no more than to say "one". (*Hamlet* 5.2.67.6–7)

Whereas the singularity of Shakespearean villainy is displayed most intensively in the "Tragedies", "the English Histories" regularly represent versions of a different kind of singularity — that of the supposedly "absolute" King, legitimated not by administrative competence but by blood, ruling not by process of law but by absolute and inappellable fiat. The exemplary case here is of course Richard II. Even if his singularity as ruler had lacked the divine guarantee to which he appeals —

> The breath of worldly men cannot depose
> The deputy elected by the Lord. (*Richard II* 3.2.51–52)

— still, like the sun, it would be for him a sheer fact of nature, "the searching eye of heaven", whether hidden from or whether all too devastatingly lighting up the "lower world" (*Richard II* 3.2.33–34). Later, isolated and victimised in captivity, he remains ineluctably singular:

> I have been studying how to compare
> This prison where I live unto the world,
> And, for because the world is populous
> And here is not a creature but myself,
> I cannot do it. Yet I'll hammer't out. (*Richard II* 5.5.1–5)

A world, yet not of "the world", possibly "comparable" to the world — Shakespeare's Richard comes to feel himself, by the end of this soliloquy, all too much part, and a suffering part, of the single world which soon, in Edward Bond's words, he will "prove real by dying in it" (Bond 1978: 12). Yet, as the last fully "legitimate" Shakespearean English king, his singularity is preserved, in subsequent plays, in the mode of "victim" — a singularity perhaps invulnerable to mere worldliness while being, against its uses and abuses, effectively powerless.

## 4. Singularities and the world: encounter, flirtation and embrace

For a "singularity", the biassed and routinised "world" may appear as an enemy. It erases or minimizes the distinctiveness upon which lovers found their identities and relationships. It poses to absolute rulers problems, specific in time and space, which their charisma can only suffer in even the mere attempt to resolve. To villains it offers itself, for exploitation and possession, with a vulnerability which proves, for them, delusive — for truly "worldly" power can only be shared, not monopolised.

Yet there are other paths open for singularities in Shakespearean theatre. They may be associated with the "figures" — understanding by that term at once a set of individual dramatic characters and the pattern of intensities associated respectively with them — of "the protagonist", "the hero", and what I shall call, inadequately, "the charmer". The protagonist encounters the world; the charmer flirts with it, now in self-identification now in professed repudiation; the hero seeks to take it upon his or her self.

These figures are not entirely mutually exclusive; Falstaff and Prince Hal alternate, as a pair and interchangeably between themselves, worldliness with ostentatiously showy "encounter", and Falstaff also has a nice line in repudiation of the "worldly" corruption which, in the eyes of everyone else, he himself embodies. Some similar doubling obtains, for much of *Antony and Cleopatra,* between Enobarbus and Antony, Enobarbus and Cleopatra, and especially Cleopatra and Antony, each of them ministering, alternately, to the others' sense of singularity, by the offering of themselves as, in changing but appropriate terms, a world. In this play, moreover, if anywhere, the "world" is staked upon the powers, and limitations, of "charm" — a term notably used by Antony as he discerns the approaching end of his business in the world:

> Bid them all fly,
> For when I am revenged upon my charm,
> I have done all. (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.12.15–17)

Stanley Cavell has written, on this topic in this play, outstandingly well, and I shall turn in conclusion to some of his remarks. But first it is worthwhile to consider what I am calling the path of the "protagonist".

Here the figures, and the characters, of Hamlet and Lear command attention. Initially, both of them, at once melancholic and exultant within the worlds of their imperious singularities, they come voluntarily to expose themselves to something more biassed, mobile and incommensurate. Thus it is said of Lear that he

> Strives in his little world of man to outscorn
> The to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain. (*King Lear* 3.1.7.4–5)

At one level of the play's action, Lear has incurred the worldly outcome predictable — as the Fool rather wearily reminds him — for one who, without guaranteed

recompense, exposes himself to the clamant and previously frustrated self-interest of others. Moreover, in the "biassed world", no shield against wanton self-dispossession could be expected to provide adequate protection. Yet at another level Lear's "unburdening" of himself equips him uniquely for a no-holds-barred confrontation with the powers that lie beyond mere human and social bias (the "little world of man"); the target of his self-exposure, for identification as much as for provocation, is wider and higher.

> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
> And show the heavens more just. (*King Lear* 3.4.35–37)

Such exposure, for the protagonist, may have to be its own justification and reward; in this spirit Empson commends George Orwell's claim concerning the subject of *King Lear* — "If you live for others, you must live for others, and not as a roundabout way of getting an advantage for yourself." (Empson, 1969: 125). The advantage perceived by Edgar, the play's other "protagonist", in his own self-exposure as Poor Tom, is certainly paradoxical:

> World, world, O world!
> But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee,
> Life would not yield to age. (*King Lear* 4.1.11–13)

Hamlet, in worldly terms, has many more options than Lear — retreat to Wittenberg and its world of critical learning, acceptance of the Danish court's biassed but probably necessary acceptance of him as its only available prince and heir, or forceful championship of the cause of a murdered father against a worldly but uncharismatic king. His evasion of any one of these paths amounts to a self-exposure to the relative weight of each of them, and other options, within the court of his singular moral and active consciousness — his "capability and godlike reason" (*Hamlet* 4.4.37). The deliverance of that "court" of judgement, in turn and in the end, is, simply, that he makes himself ready; ready, beyond the world of time and space and what, in and by them, may be possessed; yet ready towards that world, ready for it, ready to deliver himself to it.

> Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows, what is't to leave betimes? (*Hamlet* 5.2.194–95)

Falstaff, deaf to the self-exposing "honour" of a Walter Blunt or the heroism of a Hotspur, may seem to embody, as much as any Shakespearean dramatic character, "the world", self-serving corrupt and "biassed". His exchange with Pistol, quoted earlier, in a late scene of *2 Henry IV*, implies a more nuanced reading; standing at first for the "man of the world" over against Pistol's singular and intoxicated rhetoric, he is soon enough won over by the prospect of "golden joys" at the court of the new king "Harry the Fifth". His banishment from that court follows two scenes later — and it has been sketched much earlier, in the great tavern scene of the previous play. But it is possible, even compelling, to feel that the terms still stand,

as between him and the former Prince, of what amounted to a wager — "Banish plump Jack and banish all the world". Hal, earlier still, had claimed "I know you all"; Falstaff in effect responds "without me you will not know the world" — equally, then, to know him in his singularity is to know, at once, the worldly world and the fact, and power, of its encapsulation within a singular (albeit large) person. This is a strong claim — amounting to something like a magic charm:

> If the rascal have not given me medicines to make me love him, I'll be hanged. (*1 Henry IV* 2.2.15–17)

Cavell has, as I have said, discussed magnificently, with explicit reference to another great "charmer", Cleopatra, the thought which seems to be at stake here — that a person (say Hal once made King Henry, or say Antony) might be burdened by a "sense of the world's withdrawal" (Cavell 1987: 28); and that, in response, another person might offer "a return of the world through the gift of herself, by becoming, presenting herself as, whatever constitutes the world." (Ibid.) He takes such a process to involve not so much a "representation" of the world, in its spatial and temporal extent and with the acknowledged "bias" therein incumbent, but rather an act of "presentation". In fact "the return of the world...has required the *theatricalization*" (Cavell's italics) "of the world" (Cavell 1987: 31). He takes it that, in this process, "the ridiculous and the sublime, or the common and the ecstatic, seem interfused, or rather interfering". At this point — where I leave these "charmers" Falstaff and Cleopatra — I would want to add another adjective to point up the interplay, within their operations, between the singular and the worldly; the effect, in them and for both their on-stage targets and their modern audiences and readers, is flirtatious.

I turn finally to the relation, between singularity and world, of the "hero". This relation seems to be raised in both of Shakespeare's last "Roman" plays; negatively in one, in the other perhaps positively.

> There is a world elsewhere. (*Coriolanus* 3.3.132)

In banishing a Roman world of bias and self-interest in favour of a "world elsewhere", a world inhabitable by himself if nobody else, Coriolanus comes none-theless to find his own way (as in my earlier quotation) "slippery" and subject to "seemings" and self-division. His virtues come to "lie in th'interpretation of the time" (*Coriolanus* 4.7.50), as his "fellest foe" and newly "dear friend" Aufidius later observes, concluding,

> When, Caius, Rome is thine,
> Thou art poor'st of all; then shortly thou art mine (*Coriolanus* 4.7.49–50, 55–56)

The logic here seems to be that both Coriolanus and Rome at once know and refuse to know their identity with each other. His heroism has amounted to his claim that he and he alone can sustain Rome, in face of attacks from an "outside world". His abandonment of Rome, for a hypothetical "world elsewhere", is at once a self-abandonment and a failure by Rome to acknowledge its own self and its status

as a "world". Rome's division from itself, in his absence, is identical with his own self-division. His singularity is indistinguishable from the singularity of his "Roman world", and they meet in the play's ending — where Coriolanus is eliminated and Rome is nowhere. It is not "Rome" that embodies the "way of the (Roman) (Shakespearean) world", but rather that very process wherein self-assertive singularity, weakened by its own efforts and settling for opportunistic advantage, appears as what it already also was; self-cancellation — as of a Coriolanus so of a Rome.

In *Coriolanus* this process is magnificently staged and worded, in singular tragedy (as has often been observed, only one man, in the play, dies) and frequent bizarre comedy; could it be spun more positively? Could the way of a Roman Shakespearean world be found co-extensive with the way of one singular man, "all things to all" yet, unlike Coriolanus, faithful, generous, integritous, at least in his fashion? Someone perhaps like the imaginary Falstaff flattered by "Signor Fontana", the disguised Master Ford, in Boito and Verdi's opera *Falstaff* —

> Voi siete un'uom di guerra,
> Voi siete un'uom di mondo — a man of war and A MAN OF THE WORLD?

Such a possibility is raised by the "heroic" figure of Mark Antony, and differently by the relationship with him of Cleopatra. The promise remains only dubiously and hypothetically redeemed. Yet it does not go for nothing. "It takes two" (the catch-phrase of a song in Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's musical *Into the Woods)*. The play's name, its best available version of the world and its ways, and its true protagonist — these all are not Antony or Cleopatra but "Antony and Cleopatra". Between singularity and the way of the world, and remodelling both of them — remodelling also the gap between them — stands a relationship:

> ANTONY The nobleness of life
> Is to do thus, when such a mutual pair
> And such a twain can do't, in which I bind —
> On pain of punishment — the world to weet
> We stand up peerless. (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.1.37–41)

This claim needs development; it needs reflection; it needs, that is, a further distinct essay. All these processes may appropriately begin in scepticism — taking up Cleopatra's immediate rejoinder "Excellent falsehood". For the moment, two concluding remarks; *Antony and Cleopatra* far surpasses all other Shakespearean plays in the frequency and intensity with which "the world" is invoked, projected, and for that matter dismissively rejected; and, *Antony and Cleopatra*, W.H. Auden's favourite Shakespeare play, is the one in which, at his most explicitly "Christian" in the impressive Shakespeare lectures of the mid-1940s, he locates a certain mode of tragedy in its most pervasive and insidious form: the tragedy of worldliness (Auden 2000: 241–242).

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