

Shakespeare As a Scholar

U.S. Politics As Tragedy

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The frequent attempt of academics, and others, to deprecate the authority of Shakespeare's scholarship, must confront itself with such little details, as in *Julius Caesar*; for example, as the character Casca's famously ironical reference to his auditing of a referenced address by the historical Cicero: "It was Greek to me." In actual history, the manner and circumstances of the death of Cicero, are a crucial turning-point in the history of Rome, as such history may be traced from that point until Rome's ultimately inevitable doom. How many relevant academics who claim to be authorities, actually understand this history as well as Shakespeare did; or, instead, follow Coleridge, Bradley, or the like, on such matters? The evidence is, that a rare few of today's academics or political candidates, are qualified in the practice of history as a science, to the degree Shakespeare was.

As I shall emphasize here, Shakespeare's essential advantage over most contemporary historians is, that he adopted the notion that the subject of history is the nature of man, that which sets man apart from and above the beasts. Most contemporary historians are Kantian Romantics or even worse.

A similar, more profound implication of Shakespeare's work is expressed by Shakespeare's Cassius's "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves, that we are underlings." I would that my sometimes errant protégé, former President, and sometime "underling," Bill Clinton, would finally learn the import of that latter passage.

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Football Sunday: A nation of consumers.

Shifting from *Julius Caesar* to *Hamlet*, we find among several crucial, additional points of similar specific kinds of relevance to our report here. Add to the excerpts from *Julius Caesar*, “What’s Hecuba to him . . . ?” from the Second Act soliloquy of *Hamlet*, and, most emphatically, “Thus, conscience doth make cowards of us all,” from the Third Act soliloquy. The latter two are examples of passages whose deep meaning I would have Bill Clinton take more seriously, when dealing with the aberrant impulses in national politics by his often recklessly ambitious, and often ill-advised wife.

My subject, you see thus, is politics for a time of crisis; the real, no longer postponable political issues facing our nation’s approach to the 2004 general election today. That subject is one which could never be understood competently, except from the vantage-point of a deep insight into the essential role of Classical art in the education of the modern

statesman. The contemporary, even urgent relevance of these references to Shakespeare, will be emphasized in the course of the following portions of this report.

I would also include the following, relevant, thematic observation: my impassioned desire is that the common implication of this and related lessons from Shakespeare be taken as caution against recklessly Romantic misinterpretations, by those who drive me almost to despair by hearing their supposedly cultured recitations of Classical poetry! Ugh! The failure of those who take personal pride in imagining their recitations to represent expertise, is always astonishing to me at first hearing, and, yet, not really astonishing when my reflections on some correlated features of manifest, Romantically-inclined shortfalls in their political judgment are taken into account.

The form this problem of performance often takes, is an echo of seven-year-old Miss Cecily Nicey’s recitation and

apposited curtesy, during the coming-out party held at the premises of Miss Sarah Lockjaw's School for Girls. Ugh! In the Cecily's of this world, there is an unavoidable prescience of the spirit otherwise expressed by the parade of super-skinny, "morphed-like" Milan models (who would be virtually invisible below the head, unless they were draped, in awfully bad taste, with a scattering of pathetic, often almost threadbare rags). Ugh! The performance in such cases has the aroma of tombstone art. Fat, skinny, squat, or tall, the effect of the performance is the same: an experience from which the thinking spectator is happy to escape. It is all in the same awful class of things as disgusting as the late Sir Laurence Olivier's narcissistic conception of the actor's dedication to his or her self-entertaining himself, or herself, before the actual, or merely imagined admiration of foolish audiences: "Look at me! Look at me!" (His filmed appearance in *Richard III* was notably disgusting. Who, one might ask, was Hecuba to him?) Ugh!

The essence of all good drama, and the reference-point for the notion of the "sublime" unique to great Classical art, is the experience of the member of society sitting in the theater and seeing a great Classical drama enacted on the stage of the imagination, rather than as merely the sensual experience of the drama as presented to the senses. Here, as in the points I have referenced from *Hamlet*, is the key to serious political thinking, as we may appreciate our sharing that precious knowledge with Shakespeare.

On this, politics must learn from those principles of Classical artistic composition and performance, of which today's typical would-be "artistically-inclined person" expresses no comprehension whatsoever. The stage is never merely fiction, merely entertainment; the working principle of, and model for today's typical popular entertainment is to be found in houses of prostitution, not the world of Classical artistic composition and performance. Herein the pathologies of so-called intuition are typified in the soul-dead performance of the poor childish Miss Cicely Nicely, expressed by a person wearing the body of an adult, but the pathetic mind of a Jane Austen.

The Theater, for Example

No Classical drama was ever composed as mere fiction, or as a study in personal morality in the small. Only functionally illiterate louts, or victims of a loutish secondary and higher education, do not know this distinction. Rather, any great Classical drama was a lesson in either real history, or the history of a legend embedded in the tradition of a people's culture. It is through such drama, and poetry, that great composers, and actors faithful to the composer's intentions, teach real history, real politics to populations in the large.

"Facts about history" are the nourishment of foolish minds, as Jonathan Swift might have intended to refer to the educational processes of his not-exactly-fictional Laputa. History can be known only to the degree it is relived as an impassioned reality, real history as recreated on the stage of the audience member's living imagination. *For what is he to Hecuba, that he might weep for her?* What and where is the passion which provides those transformations which superficial opinion mistakenly regards as the statistical, linear connection among the apparent dots?

Thus, in *Don Carlos* and *Wallenstein*, as in his study of the Netherlands war, Schiller enabled people to relive the real tragedy unleashed upon 1511-1648, post-Renaissance Europe by the Venice-controlled Habsburg dynasty of Spain and Austria. We may thus relive with passion, the wish that whoever were in a relevant position of power, would not fail to betray the Habsburgs on suitable occasions. Those Habsburgs, as seen on the stage of his or her imagination, were, admittedly, only the principal among the malefactors in that real-life history, malefactors who had worked to betray all modern European civilization of that time.

The function of Classical drama, in particular, is to educate the people in real history. It is not the history of dates, names, and places, as such. The Classical drama seats the member of the audience, the small citizen in particular, in an ensconcement from which to witness the impassioned unfolding of the follies of monarchs and populations alike. This acquired overview, and the impassioned insight it prompts in the member of the audience, is displayed, by aid of the Classical drama, on the stage of the audience's imagination, not the physical stage before his eyes. The use of true irony in Classical poetry works to the same effect, if it were delivered with that intention in the mind of the reader, or speaker.

The essential "trick" which distinguishes the successful performance of a Classical form of poetic, dramatic, or musical composition, from the well-meaning failure of the artist or director, is to woo the attention of the mind of the audience, from the start, from the view of the stage, to the stage of the cognitive imagination. The mind of the audience, so captured, must remain fixed on the stage of the imagination, until the equivalent of the closing curtain has occurred, and, after a moment of ominous silence, the applause may be permitted to burst forth, were that sequel suitable for the occasion.

What must be evoked by the performance of Classical drama, or Classical poetry, is not, absolutely not, merely a documentation of interpersonal relations. What must be accomplished, is to lift the member of the relevant audience upwards, away from the pathetically small-minded immoralities of so-called "morality plays," to pass judgment upon the impassioned, historical unfolding of processes of entire societies, rather than social interactions

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The blinded Earl of Gloucester “sees” the unfolding tragedy, in Shakespeare’s “King Lear,” Shakespeare Theatre, 1991.



The Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger

in the small. The purpose is to shift the focus of the audience’s intentions, away from a masturbatory, soap-opera sort of morbid fascination with more or less anecdotal portrayals of social interrelations in the personally small; to direct focus upon the great forces of those histories as such, which are revealed to cognition only in their social expression within the images of the complex domain.

So, for example, we must include the following attention to the referenced excerpts from Shakespeare.

The transition from Cicero’s attention to the Classical Greek of Plato, to the relative bestiality of Roman culture, reveals, through the reference to ignorant babblings from the mouth of poor, brutish Casca—an all-too-typical Roman of his times—a forewarning to the sentient member of the audience, that the drama as a whole is situated within an ironically, ultimately self-doomed culture. This shifts attention from the interpersonal matters of action in the small, to the controlling implications of a long sweep of forces of history, reflecting the same universality in Shakespeare’s art which we encounter in Schiller’s drama and reflections on the history of European civilization since Solon as such.

“That we are underlings,” works to similar effect. Julius Caesar’s role is changing history; Brutus and Cassius are reacting in the interpersonal small, while the unseen Cicero, like the Queen in Schiller’s *Don Carlos*, speaks prophetically, as if off-stage, of the principle bearing upon the universality of that time, whose violation defines the tragedy as a whole.

Today, we have silly self-styled candidates for President, with morals and minds which often seem to be as small as those of gnats, with no sense of the peril of our republic, nor actual concern for any of those things which have ruined our nation, or which will determine the outcome of the present for even the relatively immediate future of both our republic or the world at large. Similarly, Posa is described by Schiller as evil, because he knows the principle which his wrongful, opportunistic actions violate; whereas the real-life King Philip II of Schiller’s drama, who misled Spain to its virtual doom, is predominantly a pitiable, stupid sort of lout. That poor lout is one terrified into cowardice by the image of the pure evil represented by the Grand Inquisitor, as Isabella I had been induced by her inquisitor to perpetrate the crime of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain; that King, poorly disguised as to his true nature, is reduced to a quivering, sly lout, by the deception implicit in his adoption of royal trappings.

The third of my referenced examples from Shakespeare, “Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all,” goes to the essence of all competent historiography, statecraft, and great Classical drama: the essential distinction, residing in the complex domain, between man and beast.

I shall continue to write more and more, in my subsequent writings, on this same general topic, since that is a view of the way in which the sane mind views matters of both science and art, and also history and serious politics, from a common vantage-point. Here, I limit the discussion to the goal of a particular, politically relevant focus

on a current strategic problem of political life.

That is, the more obvious distinction of the individual human mind from the beast, is the human individual's potential for adducing experimentally demonstrable principles of the universe, principles not directly accessible to the senses, as Socratic hypotheses. These hypotheses are formed by the cognitive powers unique to the individual human mind, hypotheses generated, with passion, in response to the paradoxes of sense-perceptual experience. In this case—that of the practice of physical science as such—the individual mind, with its uniquely individual conceptual powers, is acting in direct relationship to what we call “nature.”

In Classical artistic composition and its competent performance, that same capacity of the individual mind is focussed upon adducing hypotheses respecting the special set of principles which govern the way in which the individual members of society are enabled to cooperate in ways by which to apply discovered physical principles to the increase of society's power, as society, over nature, over successive generations.

In the first case, the mind is focussed upon the set of discoverable universal physical principles pertaining to both the abiotic, and the domain of living processes in general. In the second case, that of Classical art, and the related scientific comprehension of history and principles of political organization of society, it is man's relationship to nature through the mediation of the principles specific to social processes, which is the immediate object of the focussed attention of our innate cognitive powers. The key to all elementary issues of this second domain of inquiry is the principle of Classical forms of artistic irony.

I explain.

On the Subject of Irony

The central feature of social relations' known origin of literate speech, is irony, a meaning within communication which can not be located within a literal, dictionary-like reading of the text, nor among the notes of a musical score. The function of irony in literate prose or poetry, is a reflection of the same principle of communication represented by Carl Gauss's 1799 exposure of the frauds by Euler and Lagrange, in Gauss's first formal definition of the complex domain of mathematical physics.

The greater part of the literal aspect of language is a reflection of the direct experience of sense-perception. Just as experimentally validated discoveries of universal physical principles, such as Kepler's uniquely original discovery of universal gravitation, reflect the efficient, but unseen intention expressed by the otherwise insoluble paradoxes of sense-perception, so Classical art—in this case, non-plastic art—expresses the principles of social relations in the provocative form of the paradoxes con-

veyed by use of literal speech.

In non-plastic art, such as Shakespeare's or Schiller's dramas, there are two explicitly expressed forms of action at work: literal forms of language; and the natural musicality expressed in such forms as that Florentine *bel canto* mode of voice-training which is the foundation upon which J.S. Bach developed the science of the well-tempered system. Only in rare cases, as in Ludwig van Beethoven's reference to the musicality of Schiller's poetry, is poetry not improved by recasting the poem in the mode of well-tempered counterpoint, as the song settings of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms typify this accomplishment. On this account, there is a reciprocal interdependence between dramatic utterance and musicality on the stage of Classical drama. The use of this principle of musicality, as demonstrated by great performance of Classical German or Italian song and opera, is the key to the expression of the same *passion* in drama which is met in appropriate performances of great instrumental forms of musical compositions.

These modes of communication are the most appropriate instruments for imparting a sense of the motive forces at play in history to the imagination of the audience experiencing a Classical drama. Tension and emotion are interchangeable terms for this purpose.

The function of this tension, so crafted, is to impel the mind of the audience to focus upon the paradoxes behind the apparent literal meaning of terms employed. In this way, the motive for the behavior portrayed is conveyed.

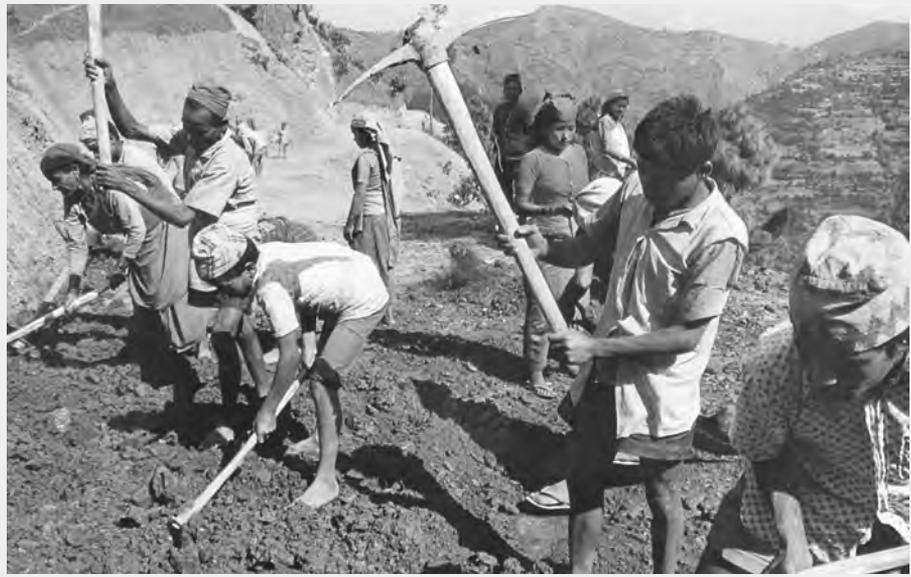
This sense of paradox teases the mind of the audience, impelling that mind to apply the power of hypothesizing to discover the “hidden meaning” behind the paradoxes presented. Those hidden meanings correspond to the motivation which connects the dots of the accounted transformations—the accounted actions which seem to connect those dots—as the intention which Kepler recognizes as the way in which gravitation moves the planet through the dots of astronomical observations of an orbital pathway, in physical science. This sense of motivation informs us of the motive which provokes tears for Hecuba.

Once we have acknowledged the function of such Classical artistic devices, the principal remaining question is, to what degree is the adduced motivation a truthful account of the historical process depicted? The question so posed is of the same general significance as the experimental validation of an hypothesis in physical science. Which kinds of adduced principles, for which kinds of occasions, correspond to the invisible motivations which actually move the processes of history in one direction, or another?

The most common fallacy introduced at that point in criticism of such a work of artistic composition, is to fail to recognize the distinction between human motives and

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Pick-and-shovel labor, illustration to a United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization educational presentation.



FAO/United Nations

those of mere animals such as Thomas Hobbes or John Locke claim themselves to be. On this account, there is a reciprocal relationship between the notion of Classical irony and the distinction of the human species from the beasts. What is the lawful human motivation which moves the action? Or, therefore, what is the nature of man, that he should be subject to the power of such motives?

All great Classical art therefore yearns toward what is called the *Sublime*.

In physical science, the principle of the Sublime is expressed as the discovery of an experimentally validatable universal physical principle, such as Kepler’s discovery of universal gravitation, Fermat’s discovery of the principle of quickest path, or Leibniz’s discovery of the catenary-cued principle of universal physical least action. The solution to paradoxes of sense-perception which implicitly increase the human species’ power in and over the universe, is the prototype of the Sublime solution to the problem of mankind which that discovery solves. The same kind of notion of the Sublime applies to social processes, as the discovery of the principle of the modern nation-state republic, as defined during the Fifteenth century, provided the needed escape from those imperial traditions of Rome and its successors which condemned the great mass of humanity to the status of human cattle.

Today, the world is gripped by the threat of a plunge into a prolonged new dark age of humanity as a whole. The typical cause for this affliction is the implications of the dogma of so-called “free trade,” and that dogma’s relevant correlatives. The need to free mankind from the

implications of the presently bankrupt form of the I.M.F.’s world monetary-financial system, is the need for the Sublime as expressed at this juncture. All attempts to find a more agreeable accommodation within the bounds of the set of rules associated with submission to the present “free trade” system, lead to nothing but destruction. Hence, my recurring criticism of former President Bill Clinton’s potentially fatal propensity for what he manifestly treats as “practical political accommodation” to the presently reigning state of U.S. affairs.

The desire of the great mass of humanity for escape to a higher state of organization of national and world affairs, free of the oppression a continuation of the present world “free trade” system represents, is the impulse, the passion for the Sublime. This is counterposed to what appears as the manifest greed of those financier and related interests who demand the preservation of their power over mankind, at whatever cost this represents for the human species in general.

It is conflicts so defined, conflicts between a ruinous old tradition and the need for the Sublime, which define the passions of real history in an elementary way. These passions exist within the population; the function of serious politics is to ennoble the one by freeing it from the shackles of acquired other traditions turned evil in their effects. The rule must be, that the true nature of man, as a higher species, must be served.

That was Shakespeare’s passion, and Schiller’s. It is mine. Let it become yours, while humanity could still be pulled back from the present brink of a global new dark age.