

## PSYCHODRAMA IN SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare was writing from the late 1580s to 1614. This paper brings together discoveries I have made of forms of proto-psychodrama in his plays. Moreno was aware of Shakespeare and in his *Psychodrama* (First Volume, published in 1946) he presented a brief imaginary psychodrama between Shakespeare and Hamlet. He invited the prince to role reverse with his father's ghost, and other characters in the play, to explore his psychology. In fact Shakespeare himself used role reversal, doubling and the mirror technique in his plays. In several plays he used the "play within the play" technique: a meta-drama that shows he was thinking about the metaphor and meaning of theatre. Characters change their attitudes and behaviour in relation to such enactments, and in some of these instances there is an intention to heal, to seek help, to re-think. At the end of his career Shakespeare wrote a play (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*) in which drama is deliberately used to restore the sanity of a mad woman: this was the first of a series of six interconnected Jacobean plays in which drama was used for therapeutic purposes. (See Casson, 2006, 2007 a & b, 2009) Shakespeare's use of psychodramatic methods span his entire career so I will outline these in chronological order.

### *The Taming of the Shrew*

From the start of his career as a playwright, Shakespeare knew that theatre could have healing power. In his early play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, (written about 1589-92, first printed as *The Taming of A Shrew* in 1594, and finally appearing in the First Folio in 1623) he wrote:

... your doctors hold it very meet,  
Seeing too much sadness hath congeal'd your blood,  
And melancholy is the nurse of frenzy  
Therefore they thought it good you hear a play  
And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,  
Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life. (Ind, scene 2, 128)

This is addressed to a man who has just woken from a drunken sleep and finds himself, not in the gutter outside the public house but dressed as a lord and attended by servants: an elaborate practical joke. *The Taming of the Shrew* is a comedy which is then played out for his entertainment. The whole play could then be seen as an instance of the mirror technique. The drunkard, Sly, in the early version of the play (*The Taming of A Shrew*), states at the end that he has learned from the play within the play and sets off to put his lessons into practice with his own wife: a dubious first use of drama for role training!

### *Titus Andronicus*

In the early play *Titus Andronicus* (dated about 1593-4) Shakespeare created his first psychodramatic scenes. Titus is overwhelmed with tragic events: the play opens with him burying his sons who have died in the war. He then kills another son in a misunderstanding. Two other sons are arrested for murder (which they did not commit), tried and condemned to death despite Titus's pleas for mercy. His daughter, Lavinia, is raped and mutilated (her hands cut off and her tongue cut out so she cannot speak). Titus is then tricked into cutting off his own hand in the belief this will save his already executed sons. It is in this theatre of horror that the psychodrama appears.



He thinks, with Jove in heaven, or somewhere else,  
So that perforce you must needs stay a time. (4.3.38)

Publius is perhaps trying to buy time as he hopes time will “beget some careful remedy” (4.3.30). Titus asks Marcus to shoot arrows, onto which he has attached letters to the gods, into the sky. Marcus does so, sending the arrows into the Emperor’s court. He also keeps within Titus’s metaphor:

My lord, I aim a mile beyond the moon;  
Your letter is with Jupiter by this. (4.3.66)

As so often in psychodrama, such play evokes humour. Titus laughs and jokes with Marcus, perhaps gaining some relief from his misery. Then a “clown with a basket and two pigeons” happens to stroll by. Titus immediately conscripts him into the drama by enrolling him as Mercury, the messenger from the gods:

News, news from heaven! Marcus, the post is come.  
Sirrah, what tidings? have you any letters?  
Shall I have justice? what says Jupiter? (4.3.77)

The clown, not being warmed up to his role and not knowing what is going on, is unable to play his part. Marcus however seizing on the fact that the clown is a messenger, asks him to take a letter to the Emperor, in effect restoring Titus to a greater sense of reality and moving him from madness to revenge. The next psychodramatic scene involves Tamora in the personified role of Revenge. The stage direction states she comes with “her two sons disguised” and she introduces the scene:

Thus, in this strange and sad habiliment,  
I will encounter with Andronicus,  
And say I am **Revenge**, sent from below  
To join with him and right his heinous wrongs.  
Knock at his study, where, they say, he keeps,  
To ruminat strange plots of dire **revenge**;  
Tell him **Revenge** is come to join with him,  
And work confusion on his enemies. (5.2.1)

Titus recognises her: “I am not mad, I know thee well enough... proud empress, mighty Tamora.” (5.2.21/26) She replies in her role:

Know, thou sad man, I am not Tamora;  
She is thy enemy, and I thy friend:  
I am **Revenge**: sent from the infernal kingdom,  
To ease the gnawing vulture of thy mind,  
By working wreakful vengeance on thy foes.  
Come down, and welcome me to this world’s light;  
Confer with me of murder and of death:  
There’s not a hollow cave or lurking-place,  
No vast obscurity or misty vale,  
Where bloody **murder** or detested **rape**

Can couch for fear, but I will find them out;  
And in their ears tell them my dreadful name,  
**Revenge**, which makes the foul offender quake. (5.2.28)

Titus then decides to play along with her and takes up her possibly unintended suggestion that she is accompanied by “bloody **murder** or detested **rape**”: he immediately casts her two sons in these roles.

Titus: Art thou **Revenge**? and art thou sent to me,  
To be a torment to mine enemies?...  
Do me some service, ere I come to thee.  
Lo, by thy side where **Rape** and **Murder** stands... (5.2.41)

Having thus implicated the sons in these roles Titus invites Tamora to stab them. Tamora plays along with Titus, stating the boys are her ministers and naming them as **Rape** and **Murder** because they avenge those crimes. Out of earshot she instructs her sons to play along in these roles. Thinking to manipulate Titus she falls into his trap. He teases the trio ironically but they stay in their roles thinking him mad. Tamora leaves. Titus has his friends arrest and execute Demetrius and Chiron. This bloody psychodrama thus has people playing symbolic roles in a struggle to take control of the action. The protagonist, Titus, has his mad fantasies played out by auxiliaries, but he is in control and knows this is a role play.

In this extraordinary play Shakespeare had begun to explore the power and potential of role-play for destructive and creative purposes.

### ***Richard II's Monodrama***

Monodrama is a form of psychodrama wherein the protagonist takes all the roles. Deposed, alone, imprisoned and facing death, Richard has no auxiliaries and tries to create a drama in which he explores his ambivalence and the different aspects of his situation, his roles, his feelings. He says, “Thus play I in one person many people...” (5.5.31). He is trying to find a sense of acceptance but is troubled by conflicting feelings as he shifts from the role of powerful king to that of powerless prisoner. It is a poignant monodrama that ends in his murder.

### ***Henry IV part 1***

In Act 2, scene 4 Falstaff and Prince Hal role play an encounter between the King and his son: ostensibly this is a rehearsal for Hal who has been summoned to court. This is also a comic tour de force as Falstaff plays the king and then they role reverse, with Hal as the king and Falstaff as the prince. The role reversal is prompted when Hal sees that Falstaff's portrayal of Henry IV is not accurate: as an auxiliary Falstaff is playing the role to his own advantage, from a distorted perspective. When Hal steps into his father's role he confronts himself with his own irresponsible behaviour. Begun as fun it becomes an exploration of their relationship, of Falstaff's character and his influence on the young Hal. It ends because they are interrupted but not before Hal has realised that he will eventually banish Falstaff from his side. By playing the role of his own father Hal has integrated some of the gravitas and responsibility that he has been avoiding during his wild times and from this point on a new seriousness enters the prince's character.

### *Hamlet*

In *Hamlet* the prince arranges a drama to present an image of the murder of his father to Claudius: he hopes thereby to test the veracity of the ghost's account: to see if the fictional murder story entitled *The Mousetrap* will trigger a reaction from a guilty Claudius. This can be likened to using the mirror technique in psychodrama. Hamlet says:

I have heard  
That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,  
Been struck so to the soul that presently  
They have proclaim'd their malefactions. (2.2.584)

When the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *Hamlet* was the played to patients in Broadmoor Hospital, amongst the statements Murray Cox reported from members of that audience was the following:

“When you picked up the skull it really got to me; hit me right in the stomach; I've killed a person and I've done a lot of work on how the relatives must feel, I've played the role of the relatives; but it never crosses my mind until now that there is a corpse somewhere of the person I killed. I have never thought about the corpse before.”  
(Cox, 1992, 148)

Hamlet speaks of “the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was, and is, to hold, as 'twere, **the mirror up to nature**; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure.”  
(3.2.22)

### *King Lear*

There are two psychodramatic scenes in *King Lear*. Lear uses an empty chair, or rather a “joint stool” to put Goneril and Regan on trial. He enroles poor Tom and the Fool as judges, taking the role of prosecutor himself. The trial collapses when Lear thinks Regan has escaped, leaving just an empty space. Lear rages and hallucinates dogs. Whilst the elements of psychodrama are emerging there is no healing. In the next psychodramatic scene however the drama is used for healing purposes. Edgar uses a guided fantasy (of climbing to the edge of the cliffs at Dover) and enactment to help his suicidal father (Gloucester). He states:

“Why I do trifle thus with his despair is done to cure it.” (4.6.33)

He plays two different auxiliary roles (Poor Tom and a man at the foot of the cliffs) in this psychodrama. Although the play is deeply tragic there is nevertheless a sense of emergent healing, a state of grace, towards the end of the play.

### *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

This play is dated 1613 or 14: after *The Tempest* (1611) and probably after *Henry VIII* (during a performance of which, in June 1613, the Globe burned down). This makes it the very last play we know Shakespeare wrote. Scholars have been able to determine that he wrote about half the play and specific scenes, which are highly significant for this paper. The play is based on Chaucer's *Knights Tale* and this is specifically acknowledged in the prologue. However the scenes that concern us are not in

Chaucer: their interpolation as a subplot is the creative invention of Shakespeare and Fletcher.

I will briefly sketch the story of the play. Palamon and Arcite are the two noble kinsmen who find themselves imprisoned. They declare their friendship and loyalty to each other but this is tested when they see Emily, with whom they both fall in love. Arcite is banished, leaving Palamon in prison. The Jailer's daughter falls in love with Palamon and so helps him escape. She follows him, helps him and yet he does not return her love. She then goes mad. Whilst the main business of the play is the working through of the story of Palamon's and Arcite's struggle for Emily's hand, the scenes of the Jailer's daughter's love and madness are a significant and moving subplot. The play's central themes are love and compassion: the compassion we feel for her is a vital element that integrates the two plots.

### **The Jailer's daughter's madness**

This unnamed young woman's decline into madness is progressively and carefully charted. She first appears in Act 2, scene 1, when her father is agreeing her marriage to a man named only as 'The Wooer'. She admires the princely prisoners, Palamon and Arcite, as long-suffering and noble gentlemen. In Act 2 scene 4 she has her first soliloquy in which she speaks of her love for Palamon as developing over time: she is clearly sane and analyses her feelings in a realistic way: first she admired him, then she pitied him, desired him, and finally loved him. She brings him water to wash in the morning: he is pleasant and polite. She reveals that:

Once he kissed me;  
I loved my lips the better ten days after. (2.4.25-6)

In the hope of gaining his love she helps him escape. In Act 2 scene 6 she soliloquises that she loves him beyond reason: however at this point she appears sane and is planning how further she can help him, realising however that he does not reciprocate her love. In Act 3 scene 2, a scene attributed to Shakespeare, we witness the first unhinging of her sanity. Wandering in the woods, she has not slept for two nights, nor eaten. She is deserted and in danger, bewildered and fearful that her father is to be hung for the escape (whilst initially rational enough, this fear develops into a delusional certainty). She begins to despair, thinking of self-harm and suicide. When we next see her (Act 3 scene 4) she goes mad before our eyes. She witnesses (or hallucinates?) a shipwreck. I have written elsewhere of the prevalence of water imagery and the experience of being overwhelmed in psychosis (Casson, 2004, 114-117). She imagines herself sailing in a cockleshell. She sings and (in Act 3 scene 5) is discovered by a band of Morris dancers who co-opt her. When asked if she is mad she replies, "I would be sorry else" (3.5.75).

She knows that underlying her madness is grief and regret. Finally she is discovered by the man who was her original 'wooer': he describes finding her in an Ophelia-like plight in a lake reed bed, sitting in the water, weeping and singing. He rescues her but she runs away from him, later to be captured by her uncle who brings her home. We see her reunited with her father but clearly she is still deranged. He fears, "She's lost past all cure" (4.1.137). On the uncle's advice the father and friends do not challenge her but play along with her nautical metaphors and her wished-for marriage to Palamon. The next time we see her (in Act 4, scene 3: a scene believed to be by Shakespeare) a doctor is assessing her madness. He first guesses her disturbance might be linked with the moon. (It's not clear whether he is thinking of 'lunacy' or

her menstrual cycle.) Like the doctor in *Macbeth* he fears he cannot help, “I think she has a perturbed mind, which I cannot minister to” (4.3.54).

He diagnoses her as suffering from a profound melancholy. Learning that she has been distracted from her impending betrothal by seeing and falling in love with Palamon, he then prescribes the following treatment:

“This you must do: confine her to a place where the light may rather seem to steal in than be permitted. Take upon you, young sir, her friend, the name of Palamon; say you come to eat with her, and to commune of love...Sing to her such green songs of love as she says Palamon hath sung in prison...Learn what maids have been her companions and playferes, and let them repair to her with Palamon in their mouths, and appear with tokens, **as if** they suggested for him. It is a falsehood she is in, which is with falsehoods to be combatted.” (4.3.70-88)

He is in effect following on from the uncle’s prescription that they play along with her metaphors and delusions. He is deliberately using the dramatic ‘**as if**’. The doctor then reveals that this is not an innovation but normal clinical practice: “I have seen it approved, how many times I know not, but to make the number more, I have great hope in this” (4.3.91).

The next time we see the doctor he asks, “Has this advice I told you done good upon her?”

The Wooer replies, “Oh, very much. The maids that have kept her company have half persuaded her that I am Palamon. Within this half-hour she came smiling to me, and asked me what I would eat, and when I would kiss her. I told her presently, and kissed her twice” (5.2.1-6).

The doctor encourages the continuation, indeed the intensification, of the role playing, encouraging the wooer to take her to bed, somewhat to the outrage of the father. When she appears she is still rambling but playfully, and her father plays along with her. She talks with her Wooer about marriage but is still convinced her father is to be executed and that her Palamon does not care for her: there is still some way to go in the cure. Interestingly she puts the Doctor into the role of Arcite and he immediately responds, with appropriate spontaneity, as such (5.2.91). She asks him if Palamon (the Wooer) will have her and he confirms her hope. She then notices that the doctor is taller than Arcite: “Lord, how you’ve grown!” (5.2.96) The doctor stays in role as Arcite, even suggesting he has to go off to the coming tournament. He is now confident that within three or four days she will recover. The scene ends in tender, playful intimacy between her and the Wooer. We don’t see her again but hear (in 5.4.27) that “she’s well restored and to be married shortly.”

These scenes are amongst the very last Shakespeare wrote in his career. Their message is of compassion, therapeutic optimism, playfulness, humour and hope.

### **Therapeutic drama**

We can compare *The Two Noble Kinsmen* to a real clinical case of the therapy of a woman with a delusional lover. In 1945 Dr. J. L. Moreno described the treatment of a paranoid woman, Mary, searching for an imaginary lover, ‘John’. With Mary and professional auxiliaries, Moreno co-constructed a psychodramatic fantasy that reflected her delusion: he actualised her inner and interpersonal worlds on the therapeutic stage. The auxiliary actors gradually replaced the delusional figures with their real human presence. The final of Mary’s series of psychodramas was one in which, like the scene in Shakespeare and Fletcher’s play, a young man, who was

actually attracted to Mary and had given her persistent attention before she fell ill, was invited to take part. A shift of her affections to him, from the professional playing the central role of friend and 'John', began to take place: she now accepted a real partner rather than a hallucinated one. Moreno worked from fantasy towards reality. His aim however was not to disillusion the person but to give them an experience of being able to create at will: to feel in control, empowered to own the products of their imagination, express the feeling contained in the hallucination, to play with them and to develop satisfying interpersonal spontaneity, rather than be controlled by the products of psychotic spontaneity (Moreno, 1945; also in Moreno & Moreno, 1975, 181-197).

### **Conclusion**

Shakespeare's scenes anticipate Moreno's technique by 340 years. He suggested that the metaphors of madness were meaningful; that people can be helped by compassionate support and play; that their fantasies may be explored and fulfilled by other people playing roles and that this treatment will support their recovery. Furthermore Shakespeare seems to have shared his ideas so that John Fletcher went on to write three more plays in which drama was used as a form of therapy: *The Mad Lover*, 1616; *A Very Woman*, between 1619-22 with Philip Massinger; *The Nice Valour* or *The Passionate Madman*, 1615 – 1625 with Thomas Middleton. These were followed by John Ford's *The Lover's Melancholy*, 1621-5 and by Ford and Thomas Dekker's masque *The Sun's Darling*, 1624-5 (see Casson, 2007 a & b, 2009). Sadly it was 150 years before therapeutic theatre re-emerged in Europe with Goethe's *Lila* (1775-7) which Moreno later acknowledged as a psychodramatic play (Diener & Moreno, 1972). Just as in *The Two Nobel Kinsmen*, the heroine is suffering a psychotic grief reaction when Dr. Verazio directs her friends in a series of therapeutic scenes (see Casson, 2004, 55). It was a further 150 years before Moreno developed the psychodrama.

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