

The Valor of My Tongue: Plath and Shakespeare

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I.

What if someone looked at a poem as a stage? And what if someone looked at the poem as not just any stage but a Shakespearean stage? And what if someone imagined herself as a speaker and character on that poem-stage? And what if someone took in Shakespeare at every level—the language, the conflicts, the songs, the humor, the monologues, the blood crimes—and sought to make it her own? Or it sought to make her its own because poetry chooses the poet as much as the poet chooses poetry.

To project one's self on a stage in a poem is perhaps absurd. The poet is writing a poem at her desk rather than acting on a stage. But there is an engagement in poetry that seeks to abolish all boundaries, including the social notions of self. There is a pull in poetry to submerge the self in the tides of magic and words. What emerges from that tide there is no saying. Or there is a great deal of saying—in the form of poems.

Sylvia Plath's ambition is commonly remarked about and she *was* ambitious. She wanted to write great poems. She was hell bent on writing great poems. But there is more to it than that. She was under a sort of spell that emanated from the whole hoard of poetry in English but especially from Shakespeare, because Shakespeare is the one who took the words the furthest. To write about Lady Macbeth one does not have to become Lady Macbeth, but it is not that simple. One has to enter into the spirit of the character. It is a door in drama that is controlled because the character exists in relation to the other characters in the play. In a lyric poem, however, there is no one else around—just the voice venting its feelings and perceptions. The silence that surrounds the poem is not comforting. There is no real audience in the sense that a playwright envisions an audience seated on benches or standing in the pit. The voice becomes uncomfortably aware of itself but goes on.

What if one was a character in one's own poem? This has nothing to do with sincerity or expressiveness. It is the opposite. It is a matter of making a voice one's own. It is acting, but who can argue with an actor who has become the role? What Plath hungered for was the overwhelming essence that figures and disfigures the tragedies, the feeling that life is so steeped in feeling that it is inexpressible—yet it gets said. The feelings come from conflict. People do not

get along, nations do not get along, lovers do not get along, kings do not get along. And perhaps at the root of Plath is someone who does not get along with herself.

Plath took on the primal force of poetry as manifested in the frightfully articulate, metaphorical manner of Shakespeare. It goes further than that though. She wanted to become the force. The force is physical and she wanted both sides—to ravish and to be ravished. This may sound far-fetched but I do not think it is. What is far-fetched is when poetry is denatured and made to seem a matter of academic wordplay. What we salute in Plath is a vitality that leaps at every emotional occasion and that shows remarkable control even as it seems to be spinning out of control. Shakespeare was in control of his characters; though I am sure they surprised him as he was writing their lines. The turns that occur in *Hamlet* possess an emotional logic but are nonetheless unpredictable.

Plath, however, became the characters. So in "Lady Lazarus" one hears the voices in *Macbeth*—the porter, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, the witches, Macduff, murderers—all mashed into one poem. What Plath is assuming here is the power that resides in the tragedies—the starkness, the sardonic wit, the eloquence, the pathos, the grief, the braggadocio, the confusion and the blindness.

Poets have been channeling Shakespeare into their poems for centuries. I do not think anyone, however, has tried to make a poem the equivalent of a Shakespearean play. Poets such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson or John Keats or Anthony Hecht have appropriated tones from the plays and insinuated them in their poems. Poets have written endlessly about Hamlet or Lear. But that is not what Plath is doing. Plath is going into the turmoil that is at the basis of the tragedies. Shakespeare apprehended that turmoil when reading his various sources. He came from a world where conflicts were palpable—severed heads were displayed on pikes and poles in his London. Plath sieved her own turmoil through the mesh of the most forceful language.

What I hear over and over is that Plath's language is often hysterical. Who can take "Daddy" seriously? How dare she appropriate imagery from the Holocaust? Who the hell did she think she was? We will never answer the last question, but part of the answer lies in her notion of herself as an artificer, someone who uses language to reach the farthest reaches of feeling. How one gets there may be bumpy. Poetry is not about manners. The anger in some of the poems feels Promethean. Plath has taken what belonged to men. Like fire it can burn you up. To say that it burnt Plath up would be hyperbole. There is that porter's humor in her work, that almost adorable

sarcasm, that willingness to make fun of herself. Though the tendency of our society has been to make her into a feminist heroine, that tendency seems, however understandable, to be far-fetched. She is ever the actor, ever trying on the clothes and making up the lines. She is pliant and willful at the same time. She takes on both male and female shapes. She never recoils from the deathly violence at the heart of life—the unbearable yet mundane accusation mortality levels at us. She embraces that violence. And she embraces the means she learned from Shakespeare to marshal that violence, to make it counterpoint good intentions, to make it swell until it swallows people whole, to make the fierce energy of the natural world swarm until it stings her into awareness.

Plath seems to me, in terms of the English language, to be the lone poet of genius in the second half of the twentieth century. By "genius" I mean someone who is possessed by the spirits. This is not to denigrate anyone. It is to suggest the remarkable nature of her achievement. I do not feel that I am overstating anything. Try to imagine her as a character in a Shakespearean play and many roles will come immediately to mind. The simplest spectrum would be to imagine someone who could bring together in the same body/mind Iago and Ophelia, who understood both of them. I think Plath had that kind of grasp. It grasped her too.

II.

Here is an exchange in *Macbeth* between Lennox and Macbeth. It occurs right before the news of Duncan's murder has become known.

Lennox. The night has been unruly. Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down, and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i' the air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
New-hatched to the woeful time. The obscure bird
Clamored the livelong night. Some say the earth
Was feverous and did shake.

Macbeth. 'Twas a rough night. (Act II: sc. 3, lines 59-67, 31)

Macbeth's reply may be one of the darkest half lines in English literature. Long before the phrase "black humor" entered the vocabulary, Shakespeare was writing black humor. To say that Plath was alert to this aspect of Shakespeare's work would be an understatement. She thrived on it. It allowed her to propose whatever she wanted to propose and yet simultaneously undercut and

mock it. (Shakespeare of course was part of the quotidian moments of her life. One thinks of Hughes reading Shakespeare to her while she cooked supper.) However wrought the situation might be—and *Macbeth* is nothing if not wrought—mundane comment can challenge the hysteria. Of course the hysteria is mingled. Duncan's people have every right to be freaked out. When, however, Lady Macbeth is carried out after fainting upon hearing of Duncan's death, we are in the world of performance rather than emotion. She, after all, contrived that death. When Macbeth makes his unremarkable remark about the night, he too is performing. He is also dealing with his own feelings, almost talking to himself, almost freighting the words with meanings that Lennox could never grasp. But his remark exists in the world of social discourse too. Macbeth can comment on the weather.

Poetry is what I like to call "both/and" mind. It can entertain contraries. Indeed it thrives on them. In "Lady Lazarus" Plath creates a world rife with the mythical and the ghastly. Part of the energy of the poem is the explicit creation of a voice that will have its imaginative way, yet is alert to its own impossible puissance. The voice in the poem is a sort of macabre carnival barker yet capable of sober statement. "It was an accident," Lady Lazarus says of her first suicide attempt (245). The remark is bald, common, sober, trustworthy. It is one of those anchoring lines that exist in contradistinction to the "big strip tease," as Plath puts it (245). It alerts the reader to the tonal shifts of which the speaker is capable. We are not in merely one overwrought register—far from it. The voice can draw back at any moment if it chooses. Or the voice can continue to career down an emotional hillside.

Shakespeare never writes in one register. Part of the fascination of his art is how many registers he can bring to bear in a given scene, exchange or monologue. The rough and ready of the theatrical world in which he practiced is the opposite of a playwright like Jean Racine, where all is purified and stylized. Shakespeare's is a mongrel art, a supremely adaptive art, an art able to seize the genius of the extemporizing moment and run with it. It is as alive to the pitfalls, hazards and blind alleys of communication as any written and spoken art ever has been. And it is as alive to the ways of self-deception too.

When, in his famous "If it were done when 'tis done," monologue, Macbeth reasons with himself about the course of murderous action that he is entertaining; he is imagining the realities that surround the situation (Act I: sc. 7, line 1, 19). It is so upsetting a prospect—a "horrid deed" in his apt words—that he cannot choose but to revel in the details and bring them to hideous life

(Act I, sc.7, line 24, 20). Poetry is close to dread yet dread for Macbeth cannot be evaded. It is a sort of tax that emotion levies on his ambition. Macbeth is a fool for the prescient power of poetry where "tears shall drown the wind" (Act I: sc. 7, line 25, 20).

In "Lady Lazarus," Plath takes on the energy and duplicity of the Shakespearean monologue. She is a fool for the prescient power of poetry—that is rightly part of her legend—but she is *not* a fool. She is a calculating author who has taken on one of the highest challenges that her art afforded to her—to assay the depths of Shakespearean speech. In Macbeth's monologue we see all the attributes of that speech: the metaphorical richness, the self-probing, the lure of the hypothetical ("If the assassination / Could trammel up the consequence..."), the emotional reasoning, the turns that hinge on the likes of "but," the unhappy lucidity, the aggrandizement of human agency and the folly of human agency (Act I: sc. 7, lines 2-3, 19). As is so often the case with a monologist, Macbeth pictures situations—"He's here in double trust"—and plausible outcomes "'twere well / it were done quickly" (Act I: sc. 7, line 13, 19; Act I: sc. 7, lines 1-2, 19). We know, however, that outcomes are never what the monologist pictures. Knowing is inevitably swallowed up by unknowing, by the chain reactions that actions set off. No one triumphs over happenstance, much less fate.

Lady Lazarus is a monologist, *par excellence*. She comes right at the reader in the first line—"I have done it again"—and never lets up (244). This is the monologist's task—to not let up and to portray whatever emotional situation the character finds her or himself in. The monologist's task is at once to confront herself, to inquire and plumb and challenge, and to confront what other forces there are that impinge on the monologist. The monologist's task is to make the incredible credible—be it murdering a king sleeping in one's castle or the bitter ways of suicide.

It goes without saying that Plath revels in these tasks. The great question she faces is whether she is up to the fullness of imaginative vision. Can she go there? "Lady Lazarus" is as convincing an answer as any poet has framed. Again, what is remarkable is Plath's refusal to back down from the gruesome and ghastly, from all that is "horrid," that goes against social sanctions. The references to "a Nazi lampshade" and "Jew linen" that have offended so many seem to me to pick up the welter of terrible feelings and announce categorically that all perspectives are at once being ruined and celebrated, much the way Macbeth admits ambition's awful consequences and vaunts ambition (244).

I do not think Plath is toying with the Holocaust. It seems the opposite to me. She is accessing these references to demonstrate how violent the speaker of the poem is and yet how true she is to a hideous emotional tenor. As is the case with *Macbeth*, the poem oscillates between the nightmarish and the plain spoken, between "the sour breath" and the frank statement that "These are my hands..." (244, 245). And as is the case with *Macbeth*, Plath's poem is grounded in its nightmarish way in historical reality—inhuman things happen and become part of human reference. That too is ghastly. The realm of murder that Shakespeare reveals in *Macbeth* is, for its age, bottomless and senseless—"wife, children, servants, all / That could be found" (Act IV: sc. 3, lines 212-213, 70-71). So Macduff is informed. We are in the world of mass murder. We are in the world where we must try to "Give sorrow words" (Act IV: sc. 3, line 209, 70).

Part of the darkness that Plath and Shakespeare evoke is that such darkness invites parody. If we lineate the opening lines of the porter's initial speech, we find ourselves looking at something very like Plath:

Here's a knocking indeed!
If a man were porter of Hell gate,
He should have old turning the key.

Knock, knock, knock!
Who's there,
I' the name of Beezelbub?

Here's a farmer
That hanged himself
On th' expectation of plenty. (Act II: sc. 3, lines 1-5, 29)

We are in the realm of the "low" voice, the common man who knows nothing of the ambitions of kings and queens but has plenty of opinions nonetheless and who is tending to his job in his fashion. This voice is precious to Plath because it allows her to walk the tightrope between taking herself seriously and mocking herself. Within a poem such as "Lady Lazarus," she can be the porter and she can be a tragic figure. She can be brusque yet poetic, parodic yet earnest, obsessive yet inclusive. The gibes the porter is fond of are part of her poetic strategy: "What a trash / To annihilate each decade" (245). Plath's speaker is at once overbearing—no one is going to dissuade her—and disabused. Since they have not risen to fall, commoners can be disabused. Illusions are for their betters. There is in Plath a rage against illusion.

The "low" voice is implicitly a criticism of the high voice that thinks itself more important because it has social status of one sort or another. The "low" voice is the voice of the body—farting, fornicating, drinking, snoring, belching. It is the voice that will out eventually because every human being is a body. Its rudeness is comic but compelling because it is so real. It is the voice of "the peanut-crunching crowd," to quote Plath (245). It is a voice that allows her to not just let her proverbial hair down but to get down and dirty. That high voice is usually the voice of men with their important matters—wars, governments, finances, religious edicts. The list is a long one. The common man is one thing but the common woman, who adds a few bodily functions of her own, is another.

Who is the speaker of "Lady Lazarus?" She is a person with a history but also a spirit. Her famous closing lines are not to be trifled with: "Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware. // Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (246-247). She addresses two notable male spirits and announces she can—to put it mildly—hold her own. Only a fool would doubt such a spirit. Only someone who meets witches in "a desert place" or "a heath" would dismiss them (Act I: sc.1, setting, 3; Act I: sc. 3, setting, 7). The witches and Lady Lazarus come from the land of the uncanny, the prescient, the preternatural. They have no traffic in the putative reasons that keep kings and their counselors busy. They traffic in spells and charms, incantations and riddles, the underside of reason where all that humans do not know but cannot avoid teems with gnomie life.

"Fair is foul and foul is fair. / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (Act 1: sc. 1, lines 11-12, 3). I imagine that most poets who have read Shakespeare have envied him such couplets—their pungency, their riddling directness, their unrepentant physicality. Plath made good on her envy. She invented a context for such speech and then went to it with great relish. She embraced those witches and made their spirits hers. "For a charm of powerful trouble / Like a Hell broth boil and bubble": that is what Plath is writing—a charm that is a hell broth (Act IV: sc. 1, lines 18-19, 55). It is a poem but only a handful of poems go as far into the realm of utter spellbinding spirit as "Lady Lazarus." I think of "Kublai Khan" and passages in *The Waste Land* and some of Hart Crane. I am sure other poems could be adduced but there cannot be many because the imaginative leap the poet must make is so vast and there must be some context for the poem in the first place. The "Hell broth" of suicide gave Plath that context: "I do it so it feels like hell" (245). It is not one that anyone would begrudge her. That had to make for a bitter gratitude on

her part. The sheer wildness of the poem would deter almost any poet. "Howl" seems relatively tame compared to "Lady Lazarus." Ginsberg relies on emotional suasion and the hammer of anaphora ("who bared," "who cowered," "who passed," etc.) to make his metaphorical case. He is clearing a space in which to live; Plath is clearing a space to die. The voice in her poem is truly a fearsome one.

Finally, as one ponders the congruencies between Plath's poem and Shakespeare's play, there are the ladies—Lady Lazarus and Lady Macbeth. Neither lady is lady-like. Lady Macbeth's readiness to have "dashed" her own infant's "brains out" is chilling and unforgettable (Act I: sc. 7, line 58, 21). She will not truckle to any notion of female delicacy. "Infirm of purpose!" she chastises her queasy husband (Act II: sc. 2, line 52, 28). Those words haunt Plath's poem where the tie between life and art is more than palpable. Lady Lazarus is resolved to not be infirm of purpose. There is no stopping her, unless she chooses to stop herself. But that is what the poem is about. Lady Lazarus is in a no-woman's land, one where will has resolved to go as far as it can go. Lady Lazarus is at once at war with herself and at one with herself. Whatever she is, she is the author of her own being and her own ending.

That authorship matters enormously. It hurts the reader to recognize how ferocious that authorship must be. It sobers the reader to think how much deprivation there must be for Lady Lazarus's claims to be so strident. It appalls the reader to enter into the very maw of death where Plath writes in perfect Shakespearean meter: "They had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls" (245). The image could have come from a Shakespearean play.

Lady Macbeth goes mad and dies. She is willing to discount her own imagination: "the sleeping and the dead / are but as pictures" (Act II: sc. 2, lines 53-54, 28). It comes back at her with terrible force. Lady Lazarus makes no such mistake. She dwells in poetry, the great revenge, even greater than death, which in her poem is more of a show than anything, a performance, an "art" (245). When we apply the workaday ruler of verisimilitude, Plath's poem crumbles. She should be calling a mental health counselor, not creating a character that "eats men like air" (247). But Plath wanted to go to that place where the words become magical, not merely sensitive or powerful but *magical*. It is easy to call such wanting a delusion but we should be wary. Torment may have both eloquence and wit. Such torment cannot be fathomed but one of poetry's steepest tasks is to fathom it. Plath did.

Works Cited

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