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SHAKESPEARE'S LABYRINTHS

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Abstract: *This paper shows how Shakespeare's luxurious, enchanting, and yet disturbing imagination is derived from a specifically labyrinthine imaginative matrix, in a mannerist or, perhaps, even baroque way.*

Key words: *Baroque, imagination, labyrinth, mannerism, Shakespeare.*

1. Introduction

We like to think of Shakespeare as a "genius", a "barbaric genius" according to Nietzsche, who meant that the playwright borrowed from all sorts of sources, without filtering them through the established higher education, since he had never been to University. We are familiar with the idea that his imagination feeds on all kinds of things which he transforms and welds into a unique piece of work, mixing medieval traditions and classical culture, the music of the spheres and a bawdy sense of humour, the noblest faculties of the soul and the strong fragrance of earthly scents, all in a subtle and mysterious circular movement that is inspired by the cycle of the seasons, the wax and wane of nature and the recurring colours of Time. This aspect of Shakespeare's imagination has been thoroughly commented on and analysed. But the specifically labyrinthine matrix in which Shakespeare's imagination originates is not so frequently described. We will try to point out its most prominent features here.

For Shakespeare seems to have a liking for a rather precise type of artefact: he puts everything into "a" perspective, so to speak. He introduces a diagonal, some depth, and some distance into the picture. In other words, he revels in embedded frames or, as we also say in literature, in *mise en abyme*. Moreover, as a matter of fact, *a-byssos* is the Greek etymology of *abyme* and means what is fathomless, or an interval, a difference, or the edge of something, its extremity, its farthest point. Or a mystery, something obscure and only dimly seen. Shakespeare is indeed very good at guiding us along oblique and vanishing lines, setting our thoughts and imagination into motion. *Mimesis, on the contrary (or Cratyism), the idea that there is a natural link between what is given and the way it is expressed*, puts them to a halt and reaches, or believes it has reached, an end, a destination. The primary quality of Shakespeare's plastic capacities is manifold and provides us no longer with mere "appearances" but with the sheer movement of coming to light, of becoming manifest. So we are going to run counter to the notion that Shakespeare manipulates appearances that the public or the reader has to interpret in order to find a more substantial reality (an idealistic sort of reality that art is supposed to reveal), we are going to see how conquering the autonomy of art in a mannerist or pre-baroque opposition to *mimesis*, is in fact the correlative of more exact reunions with the given terrestrial world than any kind of naturalism can ever dream of. In the way Shakespeare binds forms with one another, in the way he guides us through a maze, from one corridor to another, from one Platonic cave to another, right to the heart of the labyrinth, he actually goes against the notion that there is a divide between the real world and the world of appearances. Eventually, both

worlds seem to proceed from one single opening, one single “ecstasy” (the Greek word *ekstasis* means such an opening, a standing out) which art is to reveal.

2. Subplot and diversions

Jean-Pierre Maquerlot (Maquerlot 1995) and Gisèle Venet (Venet 2002) have shown that it is possible to think of Shakespeare as a Mannerist or even as a Baroque artist, in spite of the problems raised by the use of the visual arts’ vocabulary and concepts. Before them, Heinrich Wölfflin (Wölfflin 2000) had shown that the Baroque style, which is prefigured by Mannerism, had been a reaction to classical art and had been striving for movement and metamorphosis everywhere in contrast to the idea that perfection lay in motionlessness. Mannerism and the Baroque style preferred the process of a transformation to the shape of what is. They preferred bursting volumes and bulks, or chiaroscuro, to the beauty of proportion and absolute clarity. They invented a new way of looking at the world. They did not improve on the previous one, nor did they “progress” at all, because the classical way of looking at things was perfect in its own way. However, the world they showed was different. That was a complete paradigm shift that had started at the beginning of the 16th century, by the 1530s. As a man of Letters, Shakespeare was among the avant-garde, although he was long viewed as a Classicist. Just as Michelangelo refused to continue working according to criteria that tended to reduce nuances as much as possible and to freeze what was fleeting in order to endow it with a sense of eternity, Shakespeare deliberately drifted away from formalistic rhetoric and Petrarchan rules that had become dogma. Not so much because he had a liking for novelty *per se* but because new forms were necessary to the art of a new world being born – a world more troubled by scepticism than ever before, a world in which Montaigne can write his *Essays*, a world where the disquieting complexity of things, their multidimensionality even, is stirring the interest of the sharpest minds. And, as Mannerism can be said to be a fundamentally anticlassical movement (Maquerlot 1995:15), Shakespeare’s art can be said to try to free itself from rhetoric and formal codes that are no longer able to express the world. But such liberation has to go through the affirmation of some kind of disharmony and some kind of irony towards the established codes.

The subplot, for example, which Shakespeare begins to experiment with as early as *The Comedy of Errors*, makes it possible to create diversions and offer alternatives to the unity of action. It is more of a farce than a comedy, though, drawing inspiration from classical formal conventions indeed (unity of place and time), but already moving away from them by adding a complication to the structure of the original Greek play (*The Menaechmi* by Plautus). A young citizen of Syracuse leaves for Ephesus, accompanied by his servant, and sets out looking for his twin brother, who disappeared years before during a shipwreck. From the minute they set foot on firm ground, misunderstandings follow one another frantically because Shakespeare changed the Greek model for the play by giving the servant a twin brother, too, who was lost during the same shipwreck. The pace of the play is therefore accelerated and its plot, which is deftly diverted, may recall Bach’s art of the fugue or the early explorations of the diagonal by Breughel in his *Hunters in the Snow (Winter)*. The play indeed develops on different levels, cunningly linked together by a specific device that Shakespeare will later return to in order to expand it. In *The Comedy of Errors*, the possibility of presenting multiple points of view to elicit different, and perhaps conflicting, reactions in the audience is already present. Such formal innovation will later, in Shakespeare’s career, develop into multiple plot lines intertwining more and more fluidly in plays such as *Twelfth Night* or *Much Ado About Nothing*. So the subplot introduces some sort of disparity that runs counter to the classical conception of a unified plot or complicates the itinerary towards the resolution of the dissonance. It jeopardizes the harmony of the main plot and demands that the playwright be much more ingenious in the making of his play if he wants nothing unclear to remain between the elements

of his construction. And as a matter of fact, formalism relies on the idea that there must be logic in the organization of forms. But as Shakespeare's contemporaries seem to believe in such logic, one senses in his own works a kind of distance, a kind of scepticism towards the notion that a coherent and clear style should reflect a superior and supreme coherence ruling the universe. Reading him, one gets the feeling that reality is intrinsically equivocal, and, paradoxically enough, this feeling comes with a play composed in the most formally rigorous way. Eventually, such architectural rigour is the very element that counterbalances the ambiguities of subplots and of irreducible points of view.

Romeo and Juliet follows the same symmetrical pattern as *The Comedy of Errors* and, at the same time, brings together reputedly irreducible points of view: the general and the particular (more precisely, the feud between the two families and the love between the two children). For the radical antagonism between society and the individual to be exposed and performed on stage safely, Shakespeare has to devise a perfect piece of work, a systematic network of symmetries. And only that way can the subversive message be smuggled into the play, because the average spectator or reader is too busy enjoying the tropes he is being fed with to realize that there is something shocking and unacceptable in claiming that society and individuals are at war. This is why Benvolio is the exact counterpart of Tybalt: he is Montague's nephew and embodies the goodwill which is suggested in his very name. At the same time, Tybalt is Lady Capulet's nephew and is known for being impetuous and violent. The nurse is to Juliet what Mercutio is to Romeo: they are amical accomplices who can nevertheless prove sarcastic if need be. Romeo spurns Rosalind (who is never seen on stage) and Juliet spurns Paris. Romeo embodies a kind of disobedience to his clan out of love, while Paris is obedient and says nothing against a marriage of convenience. The parallels in this play are endless, but such keen interest in Form is not at all meant to structure a logical argumentation harmoniously but to counterbalance an irrational and perspectivist element in the plurality of irreducible points of view. Shakespeare can arguably be said to move away from rigid formalism, but he does not do so by rejecting formalism. He does not wallow in a formal theatre but escapes from the formal prison by finding a way out inside.

What has just been said about *Romeo and Juliet* can easily be said of *Hamlet*. The play both explores formalist aesthetics and moves away from them. According to the tradition of literary criticism, *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's most "problematic" play. To be sure the work seems inexhaustible, with all due respect to rationalist readers who claim that it is absolutely transparent (see Girard 2000), but we should not be bothered by its being off-centered, or by the fact that it does not solve things in the way we would expect. For therein lies something central, and therein lies the solution. What gives *Hamlet* its depth and what makes it different from the flat "revenge play" genre is the fact that its plot is forever diverted and that its supposedly natural outcome (a revenge on the father's murderer) is always postponed. *Hamlet* is not a revenge play at all. It is a play whose hero knows perfectly well that he should take revenge, but who does his utmost not to. Far from whining and procrastinating, Hamlet uses his superior force of character to stray from the traditional and tribal code of conduct. Inertia is his strength.

It is an admitted fact that prolepses and symmetries are rife in this play, and that its structural coherence is never at fault: Hamlet kills the king who murdered his father and his mother (although Claudius killed her involuntarily because she drinks the poison that was not meant for her); Laertes kills Hamlet who murdered his father and involuntarily lead his sister Ophelia to drown herself (since she becomes mad from being rejected by the prince). Gertrude, the prince's mother, dies by mistake by drinking the poisoned wine that was meant for Hamlet, while Laertes also dies by mistake, poisoned by the blade that was meant to kill Hamlet during the final duel. Hamlet has four monologues inserted at regular intervals in the play, and

according to the logic of alternating themes (melancholia in acts I and III, rage against his own indecision in acts II and IV). But once again, there is no point in opposing the play's obvious formal clarity to the actual anti-formalism at work in its deeper layers of meaning. For the "vanishing point", if we may use an expression belonging to the visual arts, is constantly pushed further away into the background. Hamlet's supposed aim – revenge – is constantly made less attainable by some new situation or incident. Shakespeare will spare us no detour, no deflection, no digression (just like Montaigne liked to do a few years before Hamlet was written) to reach the climax of his play. The best way to go from one point to another is certainly not a short straight line, here. We know that Hamlet must take revenge, but we cannot see it coming. The pace of the play does not correspond to what is legitimately expected of a revenge play.

In fact, Shakespeare is trying to make us ponder the language of his art (which is the theatre but which is also language itself), not so much in order to uncover the real, moral, intelligible, rational, and ideal world, but to expose us as beings who are locked up in language. We may suspect a nominalist element here. Such emphasis on artefacts, on artificiality, allows for a radical reconsideration of any suprasensible reality. If acknowledging that signs point only to other signs, not to an objective reality, seems to sever us from the illusion of reference, it paradoxically brings us closer to a renewed relation to reality, to everything that is *not* a word. *Hamlet* is a play about artificiality that denounces itself as such, not as make-believe. Every diversion in the plot introduces more discontinuity into an assumed linear progression. The play does not really get ahead but halts here and there, zooming in on such or such episode, on such or such instant: by putting so much emphasis on artefacts, Shakespeare emphasizes irreducible instants to the very detriment of a temporal line that was supposed to unravel until a culmination.

A subtle taste for the aesthetics of fragments, a rejection of linearity, a dislike for the denouement's prevalence over the other moments of the play, a consumed art of introducing digressions, a liking for variety... Everything concurs to suggest that Shakespeare, just like Hamlet, was not very fit for tunnel vision. Why would such a man of the world ("*un homme mêlé*", as Montaigne would say), such an aristocrat of the mind and heart, keep the blinkers on that ordinary people have to wear in order to stick to the only purpose of their desire for revenge? He is much too sentient to relinquish diversity. He puts off what he could very easily do immediately – most remarkably when Claudius is on his knees praying, just one step away from Hamlet's dagger, and that the fallacious perspective of a more complete vengeance stops him. Procrastination is not the thief of time, but, on the contrary, provides Hamlet with a discontinuous and expanding sort of time. Hamlet revels in the labyrinth. At the end of the day, he will be avenged indeed, but only at the very last minute, only after having been from one point of view to another, from one tunnel to another: from reason to passion, from action to procrastination, from the One to diversity, from freedom to servitude... Moreover, eventually, the play seems to abandon the classical criteria of harmony in order to focus on that character, that single conscience, which it aggrandizes out of proportion. Just as Michelangelo's *David* seems to have an unusually large head, or Parmigianino's *Madonna* seems to have too long a neck, *Hamlet* is an asymmetrical work of art.

2. Artificiality and incompleteness

So, Shakespeare uses disharmony, dissonance, diagonals, or sideways, to tackle what we assume to be reality from a critical point of view. And as a matter of fact, this artistry, which is halfway between Mannerism and the Baroque style, is compatible with a form of anti-idealism. Therefore, there is nothing surprising about the fact that what is often referred to as Shakespeare's "most artificial play" (Bethell 1967:74), *Love's Labour's Lost*, actually contains one of the most explicit criticisms of what Nietzsche called the "ascetic ideal" and which

Shakespeare knew in the form of Puritanism. The play seems to aim its sarcasms and irony straight at Plato's Academy since Navarre and his courtesans pledge to remain abstinent and to study for the next three years, in order for the court to become "a little academe / still and contemplative in living art" (I, 1, 13, 4). And yet, as soon as the third scene of Act I, they perjure themselves for the eyes of a French princess and her ladies-in-waiting. The vow of abstinence was short-lived indeed. These valiant heroes of the Ideal and of Neo-Petrarchan studies will turn themselves into ridicule for the rest of the play. So the humanist intellectuality of our would-be coenobites is challenged early in the play. How indeed to keep one's word, stick to a vow of withdrawal from the mundane world, and at the same time host a princess and her ladies-in-waiting according to etiquette, which requires precise gallantry, witty conversations, and wooing? The play derides artificiality only to pile up yet more artefacts since Shakespeare does not in the slightest relinquish the distancing effects on which his art relies. And here we are, reading or watching a piece of work unanimously labelled unreal in its atmosphere, precise in its language, a play ending artificially by a twist, ironic, whirling, and choreographed like a quadrille.

When the lovestruck men (or so they would appear but this is just another role, another code), dress up as Moscovites in order to woo the ladies without revealing their perjury, the ladies who also wear a mask for the party have swapped the rings they were offered a little earlier by the courtesans to fool the gallants (denounced by a spy), which entails eloquent sermons on faithfulness... given to the wrong person. For a ring (a signifier) only arbitrarily points to the loved person (the signified). Everything was an artefact from the start. And if the play ends indeed with the abjuration of "taffetas phrases, silken terms precise, / Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation" (V, 2, 406-7), if the songs of winter and of spring are sung eventually, it is only because the ultimate *factum* for Shakespeare cannot lie in moral or rhetorical sublimities, nor in the separation from this world. Yet again, this is another artefact, since these songs are about the cuckoo and the owl, a comic symbol of the cuckold and a symbol of death, which alludes to the gentle war of the sexes that just happened and to the death of the princess's father. When this event is announced, festivities that were being prepared are called off, as in one last mannerism. For this is one more change of plan, one more deliberate delay, as if to counter the sudden irruption of reality, of the end that death puts to life. *Love's Labour Lost* shows us that art's most complete autonomy may yield open forms contradicting the perfection in closure that characterized classical pieces of work.

3. Embedded frames and masks

To unity at all cost, Shakespeare opposes diversity (counterpoint, parallel plots, the independence of various parts), to absolute clarity he opposes relative clarity (the plot constantly changes its course, points of view are irreducible), to the straightforward language of forms he opposes an element of slant and perpetual progression (open forms, deliberate incompleteness, absence of a final word). Such innovations in art are not to be mistaken with a mere new kind of artistic charm, but are the signs of a new idea of what the world is about. Shakespeare no longer intends to show how things really are but how they appear to us. He no longer conveys the feeling that reality lies in itself, somewhere beyond our grasp, and that we can only imagine it. He provides us with an opportunity to be part of a kind of reality that is freer than before, to discover new ways to enjoy what is there. For example, we need not fear decentred and unbalanced structures in art, or the charm of an instant singled out of time. He wants us to be able to enjoy a sharper sort of rhythm, that of life itself. He wants us to stop striving for a stability that is not adapted to our world anymore. He invents a new way to gaze at the world. And there is no better evidence of Shakespeare's denial of a true, suprasensible

world than the way he embeds frames into one another. His virtuosity makes us dizzy and brings us to the brink of an abyss, the bottomless abyss of irreducible appearances.

Embedded frames are evident in Shakespeare's liking for the theatre as a metaphor for the world. He did not invent this trope, but he puts it to more use than anyone else, and he actually elevates it to a far-reaching reflection on his art. Let us recall this cue, declaimed by Jacques, the amusing, pessimistic philosopher in *As You Like It*:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts (II, 7, 138-41).

And we also know what Antonio, the Venetian merchant, tells Shylock, who wants to take a pound of his flesh:

I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,
A stage where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one (*The Merchant of Venice*, I, 1, 77-9).

Both embody a disenchanted philosophical attitude, a distancing from people on the world stage. Such pessimism, both Christian and pagan (Democritus' *kosmos skenè*), sometimes sounds funny in Shakespeare's plays, as is the case with Jacques. It says the world is an illusion and that there is an illusion in the power of two. Yet, there is nothing funny when Macbeth gives his final monologue, his last funerary meditation:

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing (*Macbeth*, V, 5, 23-8).

The structural use, thanks to a network of keywords (such as play, feign, act, role, stage...), of the theatre and the actors as metaphors of the world and the audience has a remarkable consequence. As it beckons to its illusory nature, the fictive world of the play forbids any realistic effect. Yet, the realistic effect is precisely what, from the point of view of *mimesis*, must create an analogy between audience and play on the one hand, and this earthly world and the supernatural world on the other hand. Shakespeare, therefore, makes his art completely autonomous and independent from the mimetic reference. But, since the spectator is watching his own double, so to speak, on the stage, a subtle, abstract, yet real contact is established between his world (this world) and the fictive world. To such good purpose that, far from drawing a separation between the artistic world and the non-artistic world, as he severs the theatre from what is not the theatre, Shakespeare reinvents a new form of communication with the audience: a form of communication in thought. The continuity between reality and imagination is effectively established, despite art's autonomy, because the public can now enter the fictive world much more easily than if they had to contribute to it physically, for instance. Anybody can identify with the actors without having to be an occasional actor, as was the case in medieval theatre performances. The stage provides a *metaphor* which, literally (according to etymology), *transports* from one world to another. The fictive world opens up and takes us one degree of illusion further, into the telescopic hall of appearances.

Masks and the theatrical possibilities that they make possible are also an opportunity for Shakespeare to comment on his own art. This is not to deny that they may be negatively connoted, but the passages where masks and disguises take on a positive and redeeming

function are more numerous, perhaps even more important than the other ones. Interestingly enough, women are more likely to wear such masks or disguises. For instance, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia dons a disguise and embodies the positive powers in a scene that becomes a whirlwind of frames within frames, for Julia loves Proteus, who requites her love. On his leaving for Milan to meet up with his friend Valentine, she gives him a ring as a token of her affection. In Milan, Valentine is in love with Silvia, with whom Proteus immediately falls in love. Julia decides to join Proteus and, disguised as a Page (Sebastian), discovers that her lover loves someone else. Proteus asks Sebastian (he does not recognize Julia) to give Silvia the ring that he received earlier and to swap it for a portrait of her. "Sebastian" therefore goes to Silvia (IV, 4) and ends up revealing that "he" once played the role of Ariadne (since young men on stage interpreted women), hurt by Theseus' perjury and flight. So when Sebastian-Julia re-enacts this very scene so as to prevent Silvia's suspicion with the tears that he-she is shedding, we are faced with a stunning series of receding illusions. Since Shakespeare was not allowed by law to let women go on stage, his audience was necessarily watching a boy playing Julia. Nevertheless, Julia disguises herself as Sebastian. Sebastian, in turn, plays Ariadne until, suddenly, fiction and reality (Ariadne and Julia's tears) merge in the *tears* shed. The degrees of illusion are embedded until the tears of pain supposedly caused by Sebastian coincide with Julia's real pain. Four levels of reality have been superimposed and fused, eventually, into the liquid element: the public's (watching a boy actor), Julia's (playing the page), the page's (playing Ariadne), and Ariadne's.

Something similar is remarkable in *As You Like It*. The play's very title suggests that meaning is not awaiting at the end of the straight path of rightful interpretation. In this pastoral comedy, Rosalind disguises herself as a young man called Ganymede and starts looking for her lover Orlando, who has been banished from court. When in the forest, Ganymede-Rosalind finds Orlando longing for her. She does not reveal her identity but asks him to come back every day so "he" can enact Rosalind (herself) spurning him, pretending that this might help with his despair from being far from his beloved. One day, Orlando misses the meeting. Ganymede is then told that Orlando has saved someone from a fierce lion and sent a messenger to excuse his absence. The messenger shows a bloody handkerchief as proof of the fight against the lion, which makes Ganymede-Rosalind faint.

In this scene (III, 2), Rosalind is still only Ganymede for Orlando. She is a girl dressed as a man (in reality, a man dressed as a girl dressed as a man) playing cruel little games, toying with him, so to speak. But just as Julia melted fiction and reality in her tears, Rosalind reveals reality (the fact that she is a woman) when she faints *at the sight of Orlando's blood* on the handkerchief. Four levels of reality are superimposed again and melt as blood appears. Therefore, Shakespeare never loses sight of reality in the most concrete sense of the word – the body (blood) and the emotions (tears) – from which his art is derived, so much so that one should never confuse the whirling jubilation of his embedded frames with sterile mind acrobatics.

4. Conclusion

Diversions, incompleteness, embedded frames, masks, and disguises in Shakespeare's play do not therefore mean that what seems true is in fact illusory, but that illusion and truth are coextensive. The idea that reality is two-dimensional instead of being one (which would corroborate the idea that there is a rift between the immanent world and the true world), is not relevant to reading his works. There is nothing to look for beyond the labyrinth, beyond multiplicity, equivocity, and whatever it manifests. Shakespeare demonstrates that he can make good use of this labyrinthine world, which, as a matter of fact, is the emerging modern world. He shows us that playing in the labyrinth, regardless of any superior point of view, can be

supremely enjoyable, not just a blind and straightforward journey out of Eden, through a fallen world, and towards hoped-for salvation. The peculiarly labyrinthic matrix of Shakespeare's imagination is like unto a morphogenetic power that does not so much represent something as it actually *does* it, as it becomes one creative power among all the interplaying forces of the world.

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