

Dr Rowan Williams, Reflections on Shakespeare JUNE 2016

Your Royal Highness, Mr Dean and friends. It's an enormous honour to be invited to deliver this lecture and an enormous pleasure to be able to deliver it on this particular subject.

One of Shakespeare's earliest plays, *The Taming of the Shrew*, is among other things a play not only about the relation between the sexes but a play about plays. It's a play about the roles people adopt, and we're alerted to this from the very first moment when in the episodes sometimes cut from production, we see a drunken beggar, Christopher Sly, being taken up by an aristocratic group who pretend that he is one of themselves and made to sit through a play. From the opening moments of this drama we are warned that this is going to be a drama about dramas. That's one of the things which Shakespeare most distinctively brings into the literary consciousness.

If it's true as some people have unkindly said in recent years that most modern novels are novels about writing modern novels, Shakespeare is certainly one of those who uses drama to reflect on drama, and uses this reflection on drama as a way of reflecting on who and what we are as human agents. Think of the number of times in Shakespeare's plays when drama occurs within the action – not only the entire plot of *The Taming of the Shrew*, but also of course the famous play within a play in *Hamlet*, and the much more entertaining play within a play in *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Think of how the motif of theatricality is underlined in characters like Iago and Edmund and Richard III, those characters who compulsively keep turning to the audience to explain themselves, to invite the audience's complicity in their villainy. They know that they are enacting a role. Think too of those great speeches in *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*, where our entire human life is imagined as a stage performance: all the world's a stage, we hear in *As You Like It*; and much more bitterly and darkly in *Macbeth*, we are seen as poor players who strut and fret their hour upon the stage and then are heard no more.

Shakespeare's dramas tell us among so many other things, why drama matters. The first theme I want to reflect on this evening is how and why that works in Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare's looking at that dimension of our human understanding and interaction which has to do with the way we discover who and what we are by staging it. He confuses the boundaries between pretence and reality. He does it in *The Taming of the Shrew*, as I've already suggested, in a particularly marked form. And he does it of course in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where the comic subplot of the rude mechanicals is a kind of reflection of the bizarre role-shifting and relationship-shifting which goes on in the magical night in the forest.

There is something about our humanity which has to do with discovering who we are by testing out our identities. That acting, that pretence isn't necessarily insincere, or hollow. It may be a way of discovering what most matters to us. There's an exchange between CS Lewis and his great friend Owen Barfield which bears on this. Barfield read a poem which CS Lewis had written and objected strongly to it. He said, 'This is pastiche, this is insincere. This is *the kind of thing a man might say*, not what *you're* saying'. And Lewis replied, 'Sometimes it's only by testing out the kind of thing you might say that you discover what you actually do want to say'.

So in this exploration of the nature of the theatrical which Shakespeare undertakes, he's reminding

us of how in our development as maturing human beings, (and human beings failing to mature), we test ourselves out. We create our personalities. We *present* ourselves. And that's no evil or corrupt matter, but a matter of how we begin to discover something about ourselves. Yet it becomes corrupt in ways that again Shakespeare shows us very clearly.

It's all very well to test out for ourselves the roles we might want to occupy, the personalities we might want to grow into, the things we might want to say. It's rather different to write the scripts for those around us and to draw them into our dramas and make them serve our ego. And that of course is where you have the malign theatricality coming in of Iago and Edmund, and Richard III. They speak to us across the footlights to say in effect, 'Watch me write the script for these other characters. Watch me pull the strings of these figures, and place them in dramas of my making'. In other words, Shakespeare recognises not only the positive exploratory side of the theatrical but the destructive as well. I can find out something about myself through dramatizing my situation. The problem comes in when I draw other people in to my dramas and tell them who they are in terms of me.

So theatre as Shakespeare explores it is a very ambiguous thing, deeply creative, deeply stretching of our humanity, and underneath it something deeply problematic. When we stage our conflicts, our struggles and our aspirations, we don't necessarily at once solve the problems that they carry. Very often we're simply externalising the conflict and the chaos we suspect or fear. We don't derive certainty from it, but with luck or grace we may derive *understanding*. We may be reacquainted with selves we'd forgotten or hadn't begun to discover.

And that of course is one reason why Shakespeare so often dramatizes extreme situations. *King Lear* is still a shocking play, shocking in its emotional and its physical violence; and it would have been shocking when it was first performed, shocking to the early 17th Century audience who knew the story of King Lear and knew that it ended happily. Those early audiences knew perfectly well that Cordelia became queen and reigned peacefully, that Lear died in his bed – and Shakespeare very deliberately sets out to dismantle that story, to confront us with a level of unredeemed, unhealed pain and loss which still makes this the hardest of Shakespeare's dramas to watch. In the words of one remarkable American philosopher and critic, Walter Davis, Shakespeare takes us into the 'crypt' of human experience, acquainting us with the extreme, the unconsolated. It was later and more nervous generations that imposed happy endings again on dramas like *King Lear*.

If drama has this character, this curious double quality of exploration and danger, then of course the dramatist himself or herself is going to appear as a dangerous figure. In what's probably the last complete play he wrote, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare famously dramatizes not only drama but himself as dramatist. He portrays an all-powerful magician who does indeed draw other figures into the drama of his own concerns, an all-powerful magician who is able to manipulate the characters around him, to lead them towards the goal he wants, to place them one-by-one as he wishes. And yet, at the end of the play he is of course left solitary, penitent and indeed desperate. You'll be familiar with the haunting, concluding speech of *The Tempest*.

'Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
 and what strength I have's mine own,
 which is most faint. Now, 'tis true,
 I must be here confin'd by you,
 or sent to Naples. Let me not,
 since I have my dukedom got
 and pardoned the deceiver, dwell
 in this bare island by your spell,
 but release me from my bands
 with the help of your good hands.
 Gentle breath of yours my sails
 must fill, or else my project fails,
 which was to please. Now I want
 spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
 and my ending is despair
 unless I be relieved by prayer,
 which pierces so that it assaults
 mercy itself and frees all faults.
 As you from crimes would pardoned be
 let your indulgence set me free.

The dramatist here is trapped in his own creation. The audience must literally put their hands together, in applause and in prayer, to set the dramatist free from the guilt of having created this world, manipulated these people, flexed the muscles of imaginative and personal and spiritual power in a way that is deeply dangerous.

From *The Taming of the Shrew* with its light-hearted and joking evocation of the blurred boundaries of rhetoric and reality, through to the darkness, even the anguish of that last speech in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare is reflecting again and again on the nature of drama; its constructive, enlarging role, its danger for dramatist and dramatized. The dramatist is complicit in human guilt. The dramatist is creating worlds – perhaps you might say, seeking blasphemously to rival God the creator of worlds. And yet that's what the dramatist does so that we may learn to inhabit the world we actually do live in. What a very complex picture the dramatist paints and what a very complex person the dramatist has to be. Shakespeare doesn't spare us any of that complexity.

But that final point about the dramatist's complicity or guilt leads on to my second set of reflections which have to do with the nature of power. Shakespeare is profoundly interested in power; it's not just that he writes many plays about kings, he's fascinated at every level by the power we exercise over one another. But through all the great plays, issues run through consistently which have to do with how power is legitimately, you might even say 'blessedly', exercised in public. The earliest plays of

course include his first experiments in historical drama. Those of you who watched the wonderful recent BBC dramatization, *The Hollow Crown* will have known from watching that how very skilfully Shakespeare can weave the complexities and detail of a historical story into a vivid drama. But *The Hollow Crown* of course did not show us some of the more – what shall we say, ‘journeyman’ style passages of *Henry VI parts I, II and III*, those endless scenes beginning with what reads like a railway timetable of great British cities or counties; ‘enter Gloucester, Exeter, Worcester’ and so forth, and that rather desperate stage direction in *Henry VI Part II* beginning ‘other plains in Picardy’, after a scene set in ‘plains in Picardy’. But even here Shakespeare is beginning a protracted exploration of some of the most complex areas of the political fault line of his day. These are plays – from the *Henry VI* plays right through to *Richard III* but also *Henry V* and *Richard II*, and *Lear*, and *Cymbeline* – plays reflecting on power and legitimacy. How is power grounded in society? Is it simply a matter of the sacred given authority of an anointed monarch? If that authority is abused, how is it challenged? If it is challenged, how is it reaffirmed? If it is reaffirmed, how is it justified and theologised and explained? And Shakespeare, very typically, doesn't give us one simple answer. What he does is to leave us with a series of unforgettable royal figures, most of them agonised in various ways about the legitimacy of their power. The *Henry VI* sequence takes for granted that there has already been a great disruption in the kingdom. Richard II is the last Plantagenet monarch who can claim an uncomplicated legitimacy. Henry V in the play of that name, is still agonised over the rebellion which has displaced the legitimate monarch. The overthrow of Richard II has set in motion an uncontrollable train of events. The disillusion of order and loyalty, of connectedness, has begun, and once it has begun it is rather hard to halt. A reflection which is not entirely irrelevant on this particular day.

And yet, Shakespeare is not someone who simply maintains that the revolt of Henry Bolingbroke should never have happened. Richard II, (we sometimes forget this), in that singularly beautiful play, is a deeply unpleasant character. He becomes paradoxically royal, transparently authoritative as he is stripped of his arbitrary power. How is one to think about that? How is one to make sense of it in the society Shakespeare lives in? The great Shakespearean scholar Jonathan Bate points out that Shakespeare was close to circles in late Elizabethan England which were very fascinated by precisely this question, of how imperial or royal authority was morally justified and how it could be morally challenged.

It's as if in these long explorations of power in his plays, Shakespeare feels his way towards saying that power in a working and healthy society is neither an unchallengeable sacred thing, nor is it simply something which arises from popular pressure. It is rather something which establishes itself in very paradoxical ways, when those who believe they have power learn the shadow side of that power, learn how to give it away or to live without it and so strangely exhibit a kind of moral transparency.

King Lear in the storm tearing off his clothes speaks about his own ‘stripping’, aware of the stripped vulnerable nature of the human beings around him, those ‘wretches whereso'er you be who bide the pelting of this terrible storm’. And he cries to himself, ‘O, I have ta'en too little care of this! Take physic pomp! Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, that thou may'st shake the superflux to them’.

Lear becomes royal in the moment where he understands the depth of solidarity and compassion he has to enter, and the possibility that he has of changing how power works, and wealth and privilege are distributed. He has, throughout the first part of the play, been struggling desperately to hold on to the signs of power, the ‘addition of a king’ as he says. And when all that ‘addition’ has been taken away and he's left with his naked humanity, that's the point at which he understands something about authority.

I won't go at length here into the complex debates about Shakespeare's religious identity and convictions. I have a strong suspicion that they changed from week to week; but there's no mistaking the fact that what he has to say about power and royalty is very deeply and very subtly inflected by a Christian narrative of power resigned, power effective and transformative precisely at the point when the powerful let go of it. Lear is only the most stark example of that narrative but it can be found elsewhere in quantity.

This is part, as I've suggested of the continuing conversation Shakespeare is undertaking. He doesn't begin with an ideology. True to his own interest in drama he sets out again and again ‘the sort of thing a man might say’. Imagine yourself to be this kind of powerful person, imagine yourself to be Henry V, a man not without conscience and not without intelligence, who has been successfully manipulated into a futile, bloody and inhuman war, and is aware in the background both of the questions around the legitimacy of the war, and questions about the legitimacy of his own royal position. He wants assurance: and, as you'll remember, in that wonderful scene on the eve of Agincourt, Henry disguised wanders around among his soldiers trying to persuade them to tell him that he's right. He wants legitimacy and he wonders whether his own common soldiers can give it to him. And in the bare prose of that scene (some of the most powerful prose dialogue that Shakespeare ever wrote), the extraordinarily patient, tough and thoughtful British soldiery tell him the truth. ‘Not many die well that die in war’. What happens at the end of time when all the dismembered limbs and heads of those who've fallen war are reassembled? Who's to blame? Henry is left complaining rather inarticulately to the heavens: ‘upon the king’, he cries, everyone piles their responsibility, their guilt, their hope, their fear, on the king.

Shakespeare is skilfully leading us to imagine the mind of those who are powerful and intelligent, those who know the ambiguity and the difficulty of the power they exercise. He's helping us to see from inside the dilemma of holding or abandoning power, clinging to it or sharing it. And he does it not by theoretical exposition but by that extraordinary intuitive flair that takes him inside so many different hearts, so many different minds. He will not leave us with the theory of how to run states, he will leave us with the important questions we have to ask of anyone who claims to run states.

So what Shakespeare has to say about power is connected, as I've suggested, with his own uneasy awareness of the dramatists’ power, the ambiguity of drawing other people into your own fantasies; but it's connected also with his extraordinary and powerful sense of why theatricality matters. You dramatize in order to understand. You test out by empathy and imagination the mind of another to discover something of how power works in you as well as in your society. Shakespeare lays out the case (you might say) both for and against sacred monarchy. He shows us why Richard II needs to go, he shows us

the consequences of that going, he shows us, generation after generation, the chaos that's created. He shows us in those late plays the tragic, haunted and yet also sometimes, sometimes, absolved and healed figures who understand how to let go of the kind of power they've been used to.

One of the very last plays is *Cymbeline*. It has notoriously one of the most preposterous plots in the whole of Shakespeare; and as you know there's a lot of competition for that. Its final scene, as has often been pointed out, has 37 successive revelations of concealed facts and plots details, coming one after the other with such rapidity that audiences almost always find it hilarious. But it's a drama which ends, curiously, with Cymbeline King of Britain, accepting the position of a vassal of the Roman Empire. Now what exactly is going on here, how that connects with the complicated euro-politics of King James I, and indeed the ecclesiastical relationships of the Church of England and the Church of Rome at the time, who knows? But in the context I've just outlined, it's not accidental that this late play ends with a surrender of power into sharing. Britain and Rome will now work in harmony. Cymbeline to be royal does not need to be alone. And perhaps that's where the entire trajectory of Shakespeare's thinking about power and royalty prompts us.

But in what I've just said my third theme begins to appear; and that is the way in which, appropriately, the Shakespeare who thinks about drama and thinks about power, thinks about them in terms of dialogue and polyphony. We discover by dialogue, and what we discover is a many-voiced, symphonic rather than monodic story. These are plays which *talk to each other*; they're not only plays containing talk. *Richard II* and *Timon of Athens*, *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*, the *Winter's Tale* and the *Tempest* talk to each other. And that's perhaps one of the rather frustrating things about Shakespeare; you learn very little about him by reading or watching one play only. Shakespeare's plays are set up to reflect light on and from one another, backwards and forwards, throughout his extraordinarily brief career (barely 20 years of writing). Within that period, it's as if, whenever Shakespeare has written something he needs instantly to explore what else might be said. He can't leave themes alone. I mentioned just now some of the late plays; and you'll have noticed one of their most poignant and haunting features, the recurring interest in the relation of fathers and daughters. *King Lear* is a play about fathers and daughters, and it contains of course one of the most moving of any of Shakespeare's scenes, the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia as Lear after sleeping awakes to see Cordelia, not at first recognising her.

'Thou art a soul in bliss but I am bound
upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
do scald like molten lead'.

And Cordelia responds not in judgement, not in retribution, but with that extraordinary monosyllabic line, 'No cause, no cause'. 'Your sisters have, as I remember done me wrong. You had some cause, they had none'. 'No cause, no cause', she replies, a moment of absolution, as supreme and complete as any Shakespeare ever wrote.

And yet Shakespeare couldn't leave the theme alone. The reconciliation with or meeting with a lost daughter is something he returns to in the *Winter's Tale*, in *Cymbeline* and of course in that odd, but

under-rated drama *Pericles*. When Pericles is meeting once again with his long-lost daughter Marina, it's like a reworking of Lear's reconciliation with Cordelia. Those of you who know the poetry of TS Eliot will recall that his *Marina* in the Ariel poems of 1927 represents one of the most intense lyrical mediations in Eliot's entire work on some of these themes of loss and guilt and absolution.

Shakespeare can't leave themes alone. But, that of course is one of the things which sets him alongside every other serious poet. Poets don't characteristically write everything they know about a subject and move on; that's why (although there are some academics who are poets) they do have to keep their practical policies on different sides of a boundary. Poets don't say, 'I've now said all I have to say about fathers and daughters, let's think of something else'. Poets are quite rightly and quite properly *obsessional* people, they nag away at things. But that also means that poets are people who go on reinventing themselves, and reinventing their style, reinventing their music. Think of the greatest poets of the 20th Century alone; think above all of Yeats, and Yeats' three radically different voices at different stages of his poetic career. Think of the early and the late TS Eliot, not to mention the early and the late Geoffrey Hill. Poets work with a high style, a lyrical style, a musical style and then perhaps discover that it's become too easy and they need to make it difficult for themselves again. So they find another way of speaking, another music. Shakespeare is emphatically one of those great poets, who continues to re-invent. Once again, we can turn to the early history plays, and enjoy the slightly rollicking effect of fine, spirited, fresh and imaginative verse. But we need to listen to the Shakespeare who himself is listening to that verse and hearing what it doesn't say, to the Shakespeare who at moments of deep emotion and crisis and transformation, so often turns to the simplest, the most blindingly prosaic expressions. Rather like George Herbert, he knows how to use his monosyllables to good effect. 'No cause, no cause'. Or – in what I'm sometimes tempted to think is the greatest line he ever wrote – 'Oh she's warm', at the end of *The Winter's Tale*.

Repeatedly Shakespeare, as he matures, works with and in a language which doesn't seek to impress or distance, which seeks often to make things more difficult, and yet as a vehicle is more and more simple. Or he can, as he does at the beginning of *The Winter's Tale*, fracture people's language. The language of jealousy, both in *Othello* and in *The Winter's Tale*, is typically a language that is broken; as human trust and human love are broken, so the language reflects it and Shakespeare, with an exceptional sensitivity to the union of medium and message, delivers in terms of a fractured, pained, incoherent language for fractured and incoherent experience.

Shakespeare once again takes us *inside*. Any good dramatist will do that, any dramatist whose voice is credible, plausible, will take us inside an experience, inside somebody's idiom, somebody's words. But we go on returning to Shakespeare because of the *distance* inside he takes us, because of the variety of insides that he takes us to, and because of the way in which he draws out those insides in all their depth, to speak to one another. He's a dramatist who is still capable, as I've said, of shocking. Lear remains shocking, *The Winter's Tale* remains shocking in its strange way. There are shocks of another kind, the shock of recognising that a near-psychotic murderer may speak tenderly, Macbeth to Lady

Macbeth ('Be innocent of the knowledge dearest *chuck*, till thou approve the deed'). And if we've been paying attention while watching *Macbeth* we ought to be somewhat shocked that a Macbeth can say to a Lady Macbeth, 'Dearest chuck'; at that, – what should we call it? – that deflation of rhetoric, that sudden reduction to the human scale, the essential human voice, something he will do in so many contexts. That's one of the more startling ones. But famously of course in *Antony and Cleopatra* we once again have Antony saying casually to Cleopatra, 'Chuck', at one point; just as we have Charmion's epitaph on Cleopatra as 'A lass unparalleled'.

Shakespeare is not somebody who, as one or two scholars have ambitiously said, 'invents the idea of humanity', but in his capacity to manage the polyphony of prosaic local credible human voices as a way into the universal, shows us what drama is for. He is notoriously working in an age where there are a lot of dramatists around with notably better claims to education than he has. He is up against the Marlowes and the Jonsons, up against the intensely polished intellectual world of a drama which saw itself as poised between entertainment and intellectual game. Shakespeare draws on older traditions; it maybe that indeed he draws on the medieval mystery plays, as some have suggested, and he obviously knew something about them. But he also draws on a whole long tradition of vernacular writing which in its simplicity, its earthiness, allows for more than just the polished exchange of epigrams, allows for conversation, allows for real insight to emerge in real dialogue. That no doubt is one of the reasons why he is himself interested in writing dramas about dramas. He wants us to understand why talking to each other matters, he wants us to understand why talking to each other is how we discover who we are. He wants us to understand that this is dangerous, *and* that it is life giving. He wants us to understand that shot through all of this are the risks of power and power misused. He wants us to understand that in conversation we are always led to ask whether what we've just said is true, and to understand other ways of saying it. And somewhere in and through all this, – although I said I wasn't going to talk about theology – is what can only be called a pervasive sense of *grace*; grace effected in that willingness to let go, grace effected in the miracle of human conversation and listening, drama not as the performance of the dramatist but the dramatist sharing his or her listening with an audience so that they will know and listen more profoundly. The reason we go on listening to Shakespeare is that he is a good *listener*; a good dramatist has to be a good listener. Unless a dramatist is in that sense a good listener, why after all should *we* listen? We need to recognise what we hear, and as we recognise what we hear and recognise the problems emerging in dialogue, in conversation, through the trajectory of these plays, recognising these are our issues still. It would be a very rash commentator who suggested that these days we could absolve ourselves from worrying about the legitimacy of power, worrying about the manipulative use of words, worrying about the distortions of drama, and the self-dramatizing of some at the cost of others. We need perhaps as never before in modern culture to recover something of that sense, that paradoxical sense, in Shakespeare of the sheer sacredness of human exchange, vulnerable and immediate and sometimes monosyllabic. A Shakespeare who lasts and who continues to enlarge and challenge our hearts is not simply a Shakespeare who could coin a phrase like 'the multitudinous seas incarnadine', but the

Shakespeare capable of holding us up, stopping us in our tracks, opening doors and windows simply by saying, 'Undo this button', 'No cause', 'Oh she's warm'.