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The Play is a Prison: the discourse of ‘Prison Shakespeare’

Abstract

The relationship between Shakespeare and prison was brought into sharp focus during Shakespeare’s recent quad-centenary with a succession of works exploring Shakespeare’s value among and/or for the prison population (e.g. Atwood 2016; Lloyd 2016; Pensalfini 2016; Striano 2016). In this paper, we take this spike in activity as a point of departure for examining the discourse of Shakespeare in prison projects. This discourse, we argue, is underpinned by several intertwining and sometimes paradoxical accounts of social being: (i) psychoanalytic accounts; (ii) postmodern accounts; (iii) humanist accounts bound up with the idea of cultural unfolding; (iv) neoliberal accounts that champion heroic individualism. In our analysis, we respond to Pensalfini’s (2016, 53) call for ‘assertive critical debate’ in light of ‘concern about the universalizing message of Shakespeare being used to teach and liberate’ in the prison context and the ‘evangelic fervour’ that sometimes accompanies this message. We note how prison Shakespeare is always in a struggle to escape the institutional power of both Shakespearean drama and the prison context itself and the tendency of this work to provide a model of socialization into, rather than resistance against, what Bristol (1990, 195) calls the ‘the mode of subjectivity brought into being by bourgeois political economy’. In doing so, we question Shakespeare’s presumed ‘timelessness’, suggesting that this implies fixity and a lack of scope for change; and also examine the voyeuristic dimension of prison theatre: what Paul Heritage calls ‘the performance of punishment’ (in Thompson 1998, 31).

Key words: ‘prison Shakespeare’; prison education, Foucault, Freud, Margaret Atwood

Introduction

Shakespeare’s 400th centenary celebrations were accompanied by a marked increase in what Ramona Wray (2011, 346) describes as the ‘efflorescence of Shakespearean work’ in the prison context, including Phyllida Lloyd’s (2016) all-female version, of *The Tempest* set in a women’s prison; Salvatore Striano’s (2016) autobiographical reflection ‘on his criminal experiences redeemed through Shakespeare’ (Cavecchi 2017, 6) *La Tempesta di Sasà* (2016); the publication of the first comprehensive account of the practice of Prison Shakespeare by Rob Pensalfini (2016); and Margaret Atwood’s (2016) reworking of *The Tempest* set in a men’s correctional facility, *Hag-Seed*, as part of the Hogarth Shakespeare series. These works offer in various ways an interesting take on what O’Connor and Mullen (2011, 136) have described as ‘the chaotic and paradoxical domain’ of prison theatre, a domain where discourse draws upon paradigms including the arts therapy tradition of correction and

rehabilitation (see for example Johnson 2008; Case & Dalley 2014); humanist ideas about literature enriching personal-growth and social empathy (see for example Shailor 2011, Pensalfini 2016), and progressive ideas that see theatre as a means of raising consciousness and social intervention (see for example Thompson 1998, Boal, 2000, Atwood 2016).

In this paper, we use the recent flurry of interest in Shakespeare in prison projects as a point of departure for examining the discourse of prison Shakespeare. This discourse, we argue, is underpinned by several intertwining and sometimes paradoxical accounts of social being: (i) psychoanalytic accounts; (ii) postmodern accounts; (iii) humanist accounts bound up with the idea of cultural unfolding; (iv) neoliberal accounts that champion heroic individualism. We question the value proposed by some prison educators of Shakespeare's presumed 'timelessness', suggesting that this implies fixity and a lack of scope for change; and also examine the voyeuristic dimension of prison theatre: what Paul Heritage has called the performance of punishment (in Thompson 1998, 31).

As Pensalfini (2016, 169) notes 'despite claims that programmes can create an alternative space within prison, these spaces are still embedded in the prison, and prison culture can impinge and be enforced as much as it is challenged'. As such, Prison Shakespeare projects 'may actually collude with punitive practices and behaviour modification in the name of personal growth and self-actualization' (Pensalfini 2016, 169) insofar as they align themselves 'with correctional system goals and seek to create well behaved citizens' (Pensalfini 2016, 170). We are thus attentive to the problems of this work, accepting Pensalfini's (2016, 170) assertion that in order to have value Prison Shakespeare 'must function as a door into another world not a door into another cell'. Similarly, following Pensalfini, we are mindful of how Shakespeare projects risk bringing with their 'cultural capital' baggage that may 'contribute to the oppression of the marginalized . . . perpetuating the idea that the culture of the colonizer has superior qualities' (Pensalfini 2016, 170). In this

regard, we argue that Prison Shakespeare is a domain where the structural conditions are so overdetermined that the natural tendency of this work is to serve as a model for socialisation into rather than resistance against what Bristol (1990, 1995) calls ‘the mode of subjectivity brought into being by bourgeois political economy’. In light of this, we argue that re-reading the practice of prison Shakespeare in conjunction with its underpinning discourses provides an interesting dialogue with the presumed and often declaimed value of prison theatre work (to educate, to build empathy, to rehabilitate, to re-socialise, etc.) noting how the value of Shakespeare’s work for those who are disenfranchised lies not necessarily in its power to socialize or rehabilitate but rather in its edgy, festive, subversive and transgressive potential.

Shakespeare in prison projects: origins of practice

Pensalfini (2016) locates the point of origin for Prison Shakespeare in the work of Cicely Berry in a series of educational workshops for inmates in Her Majesty’s Prison Long Lartin (1982) and Her Majesty’s Prison Dartmoor (1984), and notes the steady growth in the phenomenon of prisoners working with and/or performing Shakespeare in an ever more varied range of contexts across the UK, US, Australia and Canada. Pensalfini (2016, 130) identifies a remarkable consistency ‘in the claims made by practitioners and proponents of Prison Shakespeare projects’, with these claims covering a range of issues including Shakespeare’s ‘benefits to the individual prisoners, benefits to artists, impact on prison culture, impact on the broader community’.

While it is clear that there are a significant range of outcomes attached to various prison Shakespeare programmes, as Pensalfini notes, all programmes to some extent make claims to bring about positive ‘benefits to the individual prisoners who participate in them’ (Pensalfini 2016, 54):

. . . some [programmes] are arguably didactic, in the sense that they are attempting to consciously impart moral or ideological knowledge, or to consciously change behaviour. Others have no such explicit agenda, but *all projects have related claims that changes in behaviour may and do result, even if epiphenomenally*. (Pensalfini 2016, 54 emphasis added)

Pensalfini concludes that ‘even among programmes that do not claim to rehabilitate, many have a strong focus on explicit reflection by participants on their own experience, informed by Shakespeare’s texts’ (Pensalfini 2016, 172).

In addition to charting the history of Prison Shakespeare in his book, Pensalfini (2016) also provides a compelling account of his own work with the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble (QSE), and identifies what he considers to be the particular benefits that adhere when working in prisons with Shakespeare. Here, despite his reservations about the uses of Prison Shakespeare identified above, Pensalfini locates positive outcomes in ‘some combination of Shakespeare’s cultural capital and aspects of Shakespeare’s writing that are inherently prone to provoking empathetic responses in actor and audiences alike’ (Pensalfini 2016, 7). Pensalfini claims that Shakespeare’s ability to provoke social empathy among prisoners is unrivalled, and outlines in particular the advantages of this material for violent offenders, arguing via Gilligan that ‘engagement with dramatic tragedy . . . can be a means of investigating the individual and societal causes of one’s own violent behaviour [as] it forces the routing of violent impulses into words and conscious thoughts’ (Pensalfini 2016, 189).

At the core of Pensalfini’s methodology when working with prison Shakespeare is language. Pensalfini (2016, 217) whose home discipline is linguistics, argues: ‘the boldness of Shakespeare’s writing evokes a boldness in those who would speak it [and that] this boldness is especially notable in the prison context where stuckness is the norm’. Arguing that language provides ‘a crucial component in how we build our identities’ (Pensalfini 2016,

226), and that ‘Shakespeare uses language masterfully when it comes to thought and affect, and models the linguistic expression of the inner self’ (Pensalfini 2016, 226), his company’s mission is ‘to explore Shakespeare’s language fully embodied and spoken by contemporary actors in their own voices’ (Pensalfini 2016, 58):

A core belief of QSE is that Shakespeare’s words resonating through actors’ voices and bodies has the capacity to awaken the sense of a contemporary audience and engage them with the complexities of the human condition as depicted in Shakespeare’s texts. (Pensalfini 2016, 58)

In this respect, again in response to Gilligan, Pensalfini claims that the gift of language may liberate:

. . . most murderers are incapable of stating the meaning of their action in words, which is why they are limited to expressing themselves by means of action. The richness of Shakespeare’s language, and the embodiment of characters that verbally explicate their actions, can lead a person’s experience of articulating the meanings of their own actions, and of verbalizing their own experiences. Shakespeare serves as a kind of guide in these situations, leading the performer out. (Pensalfini 2016, 215)

Pensalfini’s account of the benefits of using Shakespeare to ‘guide’ prisoners is compelling, yet brings to mind his own warning that Prison Shakespeare projects ‘may actually collude with punitive practices and behaviour modification in the name of personal growth and self-actualization’ (Pensalfini 2016, 169); an issue discussed in some depth later in this paper.

Pensalfini (2016, 18) restricts his study to Anglophone countries and to ‘programmes that involve the investigation of Shakespeare by prisoners through speaking the text’. To fully understand the Prison Shakespeare discourse, it is therefore instructive to refer to another point of origin, the Shakespeare in Broadmoor Project, (1989-1991). Referring to this project, it becomes clear that a significant proportion of the discourse on Prison Shakespeare

cited by the Prison Shakespeare canon derives from this non-prisoner-based, Royal Shakespeare Company project.

The Broadmoor project is widely recognized as a seminal event in establishing the reputation of Shakespeare as socially and therapeutically useful in the institutional context (Mangan 2013) with the book which records the project via the reflections of psychotherapists, actors, directors and patients: *Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor* (Cox 1992) becoming a canonical text on Shakespeare in penal and health settings (see for example, Shailor 2011; Landy & Montgomery 2012; Mangan 2013). Born out a conversation between the actor Mark Rylance of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), and Murray Cox, consultant psychotherapist at Broadmoor Hospital, a high-security psychiatric hospital in Berkshire, England, the project began as a relatively modest enterprise that saw the RSC add Broadmoor to the touring schedule of its 1989 production of *Hamlet*. In many respects, the benefits of the project were to be derived from encounter with new cultural experience. As Cox has it, ‘the opportunity of experiencing great drama in the heart of the hospital’ (Cox 1992, 9) was “‘therapeutic” in the widest possible sense’ (Cox 1992, 4). In addition to this broad intention, Cox however also cites some much more substantive claims for the value of the work. Far more than a diversion or passing entertainment, the event offers a considerable contribution to Broadmoor’s mission: ‘to restore and rehabilitate those with broken minds’ (Walt in Cox 1992, 19). The Shakespeare brought to Broadmoor is even rendered a type of psychotherapist. Shakespeare’s profound grasp of the human predicament and unequalled capacity ‘to express what needs to be said’ (Cox 1992, 163) is held to facilitate the therapeutic process and augment ‘conventional clinical observation and discernment’ (ibid, 133).

A detailed insight into this account of Shakespeare’s significance in therapy is provided by consulting Cox’s other works, most notably his 1994 publication written with

Alice Theilgaard: *Shakespeare as Prompter*. Here we find Shakespeare's value twofold: on the one hand, Shakespeare can prompt therapeutic engagement with 'inaccessible' patients who might otherwise be 'out of therapeutic reach' (Cox & Theilgaard 1994, 3), and on the other, he 'can enlarge the therapist's options when formulating interpretations' because his image-laden and metaphorical language can be used to 'reach the deepest levels of experience' (ibid, 3). According to Cox and Theilgaard (1994), there is a technical element to this: the imaginative precision of Shakespeare's poetry is such that it has the capacity to prompt clinical precision. Shakespeare can be considered a source of 'Depth Activated Aesthetic Imaging' - a method that is 'analogous to ultrasound techniques used in organic medicine and echo sounding processes familiar to the oceanographer and geologist' (ibid, 364). Depth Activated Aesthetic Imaging is defined as 'a heightened form of focal aesthetic access, in which the depths of the personality are assessed without stirring the surface' (ibid, 4) and is argued to have 'the quality of a benign depth charge' (ibid, 364). According to Theilgaard, after an encounter with Shakespeare, readers or spectators are likely to experience the surroundings charged with meaning and even to 'see the world in a new way' (Theilgaard in Cox 1992, 168). Thus Shakespeare is constructed as having a considerable contribution to make to the general aim of psychotherapy: facilitating 'a process in which the patient is enabled to do for himself what he cannot do on his own' (Cox & Theilgaard 1994, 3).

Shortly after the completion of the Broadmoor project, the longest running and most influential project involving prisoners working with Shakespeare's plays was launched by Curt L. Tofteland in Kentucky, USA. Tofteland's work was developed in isolation from the Shakespeare in Broadmoor project but shared with it a concern with using Shakespeare to access the prisoner's interior and foster the prisoner's well-being. It is, however, distinct from

the Broadmoor work in its focus on inviting prisoners to practically explore Shakespeare's text.

Tofteland was teaching middle school students and adult males in Lockett Correctional Complex when he persuaded Curtis Bergstrand, chair of the Sociology Department at Bellarmine University, to introduce the works of Shakespeare to his Books Behind Bars program (SBB 2016). Inspired by what he saw as the ability of Shakespeare's plays to enable inmates to 'go deeper and inhabit the character' (Petra Foundation 2015), Tofteland created an offshoot of the programme Shakespeare Behind Bars (1996) housed within the psychology department of Luther Lockett Correctional Complex. Hank Rogerson's 2005 documentary film about the theatrical activity at Lockett Correctional Complex, *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, raised awareness of the programme, and a significant number of related projects thus followed including Frannie Shepherd-Bates Shakespeare in Prison (SIP) program in 2012, who after being mentored by Tofteland subsequently developed her own more structured method of working with prisoners in the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility in Ypsilanti, Michigan (Detroit Public Theatre 2016). Tofteland's work also inspired Jonathan Shailor, who launched The Shakespeare Prison Project (SPP) at Racine Correctional Institution in Wisconsin in 2004 (SPP 2016), which is informed by the emancipatory practice devised by Brazilian theatre activist, Augusto Boal. Other important reference points in the discussion of prison Shakespeare include the work of Jean Trounstein (2004), who directed some of Shakespeare's plays with female prisoners in Massachusetts Correctional Institution – Framingham from 1987 to 1997, Laura Bates's (2013) memoir *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard*, and, as already noted, Rob

Pensalfini's work in Australia with the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble's Shakespeare Prison Project.¹

Shakespeare in prison: some key ideas in the discourse

i. Psychoanalytical accounts of transgression

The theoretical underpinning of Shakespeare's association with the psychotherapeutic tradition can be traced back to the work of Sigmund Freud. In his ground-breaking study, 'Freud on Shakespeare', Norman Holland (1960) notes that Freud was an ardent admirer of Shakespeare and believed that his plays offer the psychoanalyst a valuable tool for modelling human behaviour. According to Holland:

Freud's method was to take a pattern of mental life (which had been established scientifically) and hold it up, as it were, against the play to discover a congruous pattern. (Holland 1960, 172)

Freud believed that poets were particularly sensitive to unconscious attitudes (Holland 1960), and on this basis matched the pattern of what he describes as the Oedipus complex to *Hamlet*, and notoriously declared Hamlet to be a depiction of 'the poet's own mind' (Freud in Holland 1960, 166). Freud indeed took Shakespeare's model of human behaviour and the verisimilitude of Shakespeare's characterization so seriously that it caused him some anguish when Shakespeare's depictions were at odds with his theory. For example, he was bemused when realising the characterization of Lady Macbeth appeared to contradict his theory that neurosis is the product of frustration (ibid), and Holland tells us that it was thus with some relief that Freud eventually 'understood' that Lady Macbeth's derangement arose from the

¹ There are also several other important reference points for this work in Australia and the UK that might be acknowledged, such as the London Shakespeare Workout's Prison Project (2016), launched in 1988 in HMP Woodhill, a high security prison in England. QSE locates its work amongst a number of international programs using Shakespeare in penal settings, such as the Independent Theatre Movement of South Africa, which runs the Shakespeare Collaboration With Young in Prison (YIP) and Bonnytown.

act of killing a man who ‘resembled’ her father – thus supporting his theory of repressed desire (ibid, 170).

The Freudian identification of correspondence between our scientific understanding of mental health and Shakespeare’s depiction of unconscious attitudes is evident in Cox’s analysis of Shakespeare in *Broadmoor*. Cox’s collaborator, Alice Thielgaard, asserts that:

The universal human life is portrayed in Shakespeare’s plays as it is in therapeutic space. Even though the setting is different, both acting and therapy try to ‘hold the mirror up to nature’. (Theilgaard 1992, 172)

It is a short step from using Shakespeare’s plays as a means to consider our mental life to using Shakespeare’s plays to *enhance* our mental life; a possibility, as noted, explored in Cox and Thielgaard’s publication: *Shakespeare as Prompter* (Cox & Thielgaard 1994). According to Cox and Thielgaard (1994, 17), Shakespeare, ‘recalls us to our roots, which can be buried in the unconscious mind of the individual’ (ibid, 17). As Landy and Montgomery (2012, 155) identify in another similar context, those attending the Shakespeare performance are invited to grapple with Shakespearean themes ‘as parallel elements of the play and of their personal lives’.

In recent projects in which prisoners perform Shakespeare’s plays, we see the same interest in offenders’ ostensibly heightened ability to identify with Shakespeare’s characters. For example, in his observation of a Prison Performing Arts (2016) project at the Missouri Eastern Correctional Center (Glass 2002), Jack Hitt praises one inmate’s performance of Laertes in *Hamlet*, saying that he ‘channels Laertes’ character in a way that should make any method actor cringe with jealousy’ (Glass 2002); and in the prisoner’s words:

‘[Laertes] was very angry, violently angry. And I can identify with that and I can play that role very well because I've been playing that role all my life... I am Laertes. I am. I am.’ (Glass 2002)

For Mark Rylance (1992), the RSC actor who played Hamlet in the Broadmoor Project, the appeal of using Shakespeare in a high-security psychiatric hospital is his hope that in Broadmoor he may find “brothers of Hamlet”; ‘people who really have experienced some of the things that we as actors pretend to do in plays’ (Rylance in Cox 1992, 27). Hitt also finds this prospect exhilarating, and claims that ‘each actor used his past, in dense psychological ways, to understand his part’ (Glass 2002). In seeking evidence to support this claim, Hitt researched the background of the prisoners with whom he was working only to find a catalogue of child rape, sodomy, incest, armed robbery and murder stories. The anguish this provokes in him is notable. He reports both suffering a nightmare and a strong sense of moral ambivalence: ‘It didn’t take Freud to figure out what it meant. Someone I knew and liked was a murderer’ (Glass 2002).

Hitt’s emotional distress over his ‘discovery’ that prison inmates are violent offenders, rather than extremely good method actors, is illustrative of the problems that may arise when using Shakespeare as a tool for identification. The idea that the spectator (or in Hitt’s case, the actor) might have first-hand experience of Hamlet’s ‘anarchic cruelty’ (Ward 2017, 20) is out of kilter with Freud and the theory of illusion he presents in his essay ‘Psychopathic Characters on the Stage’ (Freud, 1960). According to Freud, the spectator’s ‘enjoyment presupposes an illusion’ (Freud 1960, 145) that it is *he* who is suffering the hero’s dreadful fate, when in fact he knows that ‘it is only a play, whence no threat to his personal security can ever arise’ (ibid). Freud thus claims that watching a play enables us to satisfy our longing for excitement and the realization of our desires through our identification with the hero, safe in the knowledge that we are not experiencing the hero’s grief and suffering. As such, Freud’s theory, however, raises problematic implications for violent offenders when viewing or performing acts of violence in Shakespeare’s plays. Rather than ‘blowing off steam’ (Clarke 2016, 1) they may instead be being immersed in the steam and

identifying with and re-experiencing the release of desire. The shadow of this tendency is apparent in *Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor*: for one patient *Hamlet* is said ‘to express every fear and pleasure that I experienced when I committed my crime’ (Cox 1992, 135), and another patient claims that ‘Having killed and abused ourselves, we are able to understand the madness and violence and the many ranges of emotions in Shakespeare’s tragedies because it is *close to our heart*’ (Cox 1992, 140; emphasis added).

Following through the logic of this raises the prospect, outlined by Tom Magill of the Educational Shakespeare Company (in Pensalfini, 2016), that violent offenders performing in Shakespeare may be being encouraged to read their violent acts back through Shakespeare and even to conflate their experience with that of the tragic hero. Furthermore, it is a short step from this to the fetishizing transgressive or criminal acts and, as for Magill himself a former prisoner, rendering personal experience of violence an asset to the Shakespeare performer.

‘At the beginning I denied my experience and my criminal past . . . Then the more parts I played, the more I realized that I could draw upon it as a strength. My first-hand experience of violence and imprisonment was my unique selling point and I began to respect it and stop being ashamed of it’ (Magill in Pensalfini 2016, 60)

ii. Postmodern accounts of transgression

Despite Freud’s (1960) theory on the psychopathy of drama and the potential for the prison Shakespeare performers “immersion in Shakespearean steam”, the concept of social and moral development is a prominent feature in much of the literature on the use of Shakespeare in prison. For example, in his reflection on teaching Shakespeare to inmates of Hampshire County Jail, Massachusetts, Amherst professor Illan Stavans (2016) positions such development as foundational to his work, saying:

The common, mistaken, perception is that penal institutions are where felons go to rot. Somewhere in the future there is a promise of redemption, but it is just a promise. In my experience, inmates, for the most part, recognize themselves at fault for their present condition. That isn't the issue. The issue is how not to rot, how to mature while in confinement. (Stavans 2016)

The idea that crime originates in individual failings, rather than social conditions, is compatible with an individualistic reading of Shakespeare that places 'excessive concentration of interest and causation on the central character's mind and motives alone' (Heinemann 2003, 239). As we have seen, prisoners may in some cases be being called upon to read themselves back through Shakespeare's work, to identify, and to assign cause and effect to the actions of Shakespeare's heroes. This practice is consistent with Foucault's theory that prisoners are 'managed' by being made the targets of authority's gaze (Foucault 1991). According to Foucault, discipline over prisoners in contemporary society is achieved 'through a series of "quiet coercions", working at the level of people's bodies, shaping how they behave and how they "see" the world' (Danaher et al 2002, 62). This faith in our ability to be re-shaped and reoriented is powerfully articulated in a study of a London Shakespeare Workout prison project, where Shakespeare's art is said to have the 'power to influence my sense of who I could become' (Trounstine 2004, xiii). Likewise, in her analysis of the staging of *Julius Caesar* in Rebibbia District Prison, Rome, Maria Valentini (2016, 193) claims there is a "therapeutic" effect, or rather a process toward self-awareness' amongst the inmates that 'cannot be denied'. Although we might be comfortable with some of the resulting insights such as that gleaned from *Hamlet* by one prisoner that 'We're cowards. When we're criminals, we are cowards' (Glass 2002), this whole area of practice requires significant interrogation.

Shailor (2011) reflects on the difficulty of using Shakespeare's plays to socialize or rehabilitate offenders. Recalling a conversation with Curt Tofteland, founder of the Shakespeare Behind Bars prison theatre program at the Luther Lockett Correctional Complex he states:

Curt Tofteland once told me that he did not believe in rehabilitation for the simple reason that prisoners who have come from broken homes and from the streets have never been habilitated in the first place. I suppose the same thing could be said for the corrections mission of reintegrating into the community. In our segregated and class stratified society, where real communities are fragile and hard won achievements, where an individualistic consumer driven culture alienates most of us from each other on an ongoing basis and where people who are arrested may be those who are most alienated of all, what can reintegration possibly mean? Ex-offenders cannot be reintegrated into a community that does not exist or in a society that has no place for them. (Shailor 2011, 27)

Despite Tofteland's misgivings about the use of Shakespeare to rehabilitate prisoners, the potential of Shakespeare's plays to reduce recidivism continues to beguile academics. For example, in her thesis on Shakespeare Behind Bars, Karen Davis (2014) states:

In a panoptic society like ours, prison arts programs can guide us in the task of revitalizing human values and building ethical communities. The quasi-ritual practice of theater, especially, has the potential to develop community among its participants. (Davis 2014, ii)

Such optimism is endorsed by Shailor (2013), who puts to one side his memories of Tofteland's scepticism in order to report on the success of Shakespeare Behind Bars as a means to reduce rates of re-offending:

The national recidivism rate is 67%; the Kentucky recidivism rate is 29.5%; and the Shakespeare Behind Bars program at the Luther Lockett Correctional Complex has a current recidivism rate of 6.1%. (Shailor 2013, 2)

Shailor's claim that prisoners who study Shakespeare are less likely to re-offend is compelling, yet such evidence fails to answer Tofteland's question: what does it mean to reintegrate into a segregated and class stratified society?

The focus on developing self-awareness among and/or reforming prisoners through exposure to Shakespeare can be a convenient means of deferring collective responsibility for wider social ills. A Foucauldian reading of the penal system positions the perversion of the cast of *Hamlet*, as recorded by Glass (2002), as 'the product and vehicle of power' (Dollimore 1990, 180). For Foucault, the condemnation of perverse behaviour legitimises power by displacing violence from the dominant to the subordinate; a theory that Dollimore contrasts with Freud's belief that perversion is innate, and is repressed or sublimated by civilization: 'one does not become a pervert but remains one' (Dollimore 1990, 179). This contrast between the psychoanalytic model and the postmodern reading of perversion muddies the issue of the use of Shakespeare in prison. Are the murderers encountered by Hitt (Glass, 2002) experiencing a 'quiet coercion' that reshapes their worldview, or are they identifying with perversion? Dollimore (1990) argues that the psychoanalytic model, discussed previously, has been largely displaced by the postmodern reading of perversion. However, Foucault's philosophy raises troubling questions about our desire for prisoners to 'perform' their redemption to an audience of sponsors, theatre practitioners and academics, and the motivations of those who gaze upon them. This issue is particularly troubling if we consider statistics relating to prisoners in the UK, which suggest that people on the margins of society are at an increased risk of incarceration:

70 percent of prisoners have literacy and numeracy problems; 66 percent are substance abusers; 40 percent suffer from mental illness; and 34 percent were in foster care as children. (Wray 2011, 360)

The ‘objects’ of our gaze are, it seems, stigmatised by phenomena beyond their control.

In his analysis of Hank Rogerson’s 2005 documentary film, *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, which showcases the work of Curt L. Tofteland in Luther Luckett Correctional Complex, Kentucky, Niels Herold (2008) argues that:

Corporate leaders and correctional inmates are flip sides of a tossed American coin – the heads committed to a motivational ideology of self-determination, the tails to a coercive life of self-surrender and erasure. (Herold 2008, 153)

Herold’s analysis suggests that corporate leaders need prisoners to perform their self-surrender in order to sustain the ideology of self-determination that justifies their exalted social standing. Hitt’s account of a prisoners’ after-show party, held in a bullet-proof visiting room at the Missouri Eastern Correctional Center, appears to support Herold’s theory:

The audience tonight is a mix of St. Louis’ artistic elite. It’s a theater crowd - polite, well-dressed people. Many of them have helped fund this production.

They want, and fully expect, to meet the talent afterwards. (Glass 2002)

This desire to meet the cast of deviants and murderers – the ‘talent’ – is reminiscent of the focus on conflict and violence in the Shakespeare in Broadmoor project. As one of the Broadmoor patients puts it, ‘Every time there is a Shakespeare play on, there’s sword-fighting, mad people’ (Cox 1992, 152). In this regard, the contributors to *Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor* (Cox 1992) acknowledge that Shakespeare’s subject matter invites prurience; that gore functions as entertainment and ‘keeps the crowd going’, and that ‘it is quite clear that Shakespeare’s audiences, both then as now, were titillated by mental disorder and by violence and death’ (Trethowan 1988, 189). However, literature on the use of Shakespeare in

prison is often reticent about the satisfaction that may be derived by members of the elite from witnessing the playing out of the ideology of self-determination by socially marginalised or mentally disturbed inmates.

In her 2016 novella *Hag-Seed* Margaret Atwood riffs on this theme and suggests her disdain for the prurience risked by Shakespeare in prison projects. In a scene that is the antithesis of the after-show party held at the Missouri Eastern Correctional Center, in which the glitterati of St Louis are exhilarated at the prospect of meeting the incarcerated ‘talent’ in a bullet-proof room (Glass 2002), her theatre director, Felix Philips, holds an after-show party exclusively for his ‘Hag-Seeds’, in which he distributes contraband cigarettes concealed in twenty bags of potato chips. In Atwood’s novella, lynchpins of the patriarchal order are *not* invited to the party.

iii. Shakespeare and cultural unfolding

It may be impossible to disentangle *Prison Shakespeare* from the deferential worship of Shakespeare described by George Bernard Shaw as Bardolotry (Shaw 2000, xxxi). The tendency of these projects to draw parallels between widely different eras and social conditions is also problematic. As Heinemann (2003, 239) compelling explains, productions of Shakespeare’s plays that focus on ‘what the past has in common with our own time’ position our present social arrangements ‘as fixed and inevitable’. Danaher, Schirato and Webb (2002, 28) use Shakespeare to illustrate Foucault’s theory that ‘modernity’ thinks of itself as the heir to a long tradition of ‘ideas, values, principles and practices’ that reach far back into past, and presumably far into the future. They state:

The English Renaissance writer, Ben Jonson, in eulogising Shakespeare, said that he was ‘not of an age, but of all time’ – the point being that, while lesser writers

might be appreciated for a while, Shakespeare would ‘speak’ to everyone across the ages. (Danaher et al 2002, 28)

Arguably the use of Shakespeare in prison is another testament of Jonson’s claim that his work speaks to us all. As such, re-tellings of Shakespeare in the prison setting risk normalising the contentious notion of cultural unfolding.

As stated previously, there is a tendency to encourage prisoners to adopt essentialist readings of Shakespeare’s plays and to imagine, as Harold Bloom (1999, xvii) puts it, that ‘Shakespeare will go on explaining us, in part because he invented us’. According to this reading of Shakespeare, to understand Shakespeare’s heroes is to understand our personal motivations and flaws. Historical evidence, however, contradicts this idea. The social relations of Renaissance England certainly seem to problematize the idea that Shakespeare’s plays foster empathy (Pensalfini, 2016) or might help prisoners ‘examine and change their lives’ (Wilcox in Pensalfini 2016, 221). As noted by Heinemann in her analysis of how Brecht read Shakespeare:

Beneath the surface of Shakespeare’s reassuringly happy ending lurks a very nasty underworld of sexual and commercial exploitation of inferiors, which is never cleaned up, only played down and obscured. (Heinemann 2003, 244)

According to Dollimore (1990, 194), ‘death, mutilation, and incarceration have been, and remain, the fate of the pervert’. If Brecht is correct in his assertion that Shakespeare’s plays convey a subtle sense of exploitation, then the use of Shakespeare in prison risks cementing the fate of those whom Foucault (1991) claims are the recipients of the displaced violence of the elite, as they identify with characters dealing with ‘immutable’ social forces. We might note how this displacement of violence is explored by Shakespeare in his play, *Measure for Measure*, in which the Duke of Vienna, disguised as a friar, attempts to shape the conscience of an incarcerated ‘sexual deviant’ so that he will welcome his own execution. The Duke-as-

friar thus strives to simultaneously annihilate the pervert and be thanked by him for this task. To praise the ‘timelessness’ of such abuses of power may thus leave us with some discomfiture.

iv. Neoliberal individuality

There is also the danger of historicizing the neoliberal discourse of individuality that has little, if anything, in common with the ideas explored by Shakespeare in his plays. This is a likely by-product of holding fast to the belief that Shakespeare’s work is bound up with a timeless, universal process of cultural unfolding, and that he ‘speaks’ to our current neoliberal condition. This historicizing of the present and de-historicizing of the past is particularly problematic when considering ideas such as perversion and rehabilitation. In his analysis of the contrast between Freud and Foucault’s theory on perversion, Dollimore (1990) describes the medieval outlook that informed Renaissance thinking during the crafting of Shakespeare’s plays. For St Augustine, says Dollimore, the essence of evil is ‘the perverse turning away from good’, and perversion is thus the ‘negative energy within privation’ (Dollimore 1990, 183). If we subscribe to Augustine’s view that the ‘power of evil is only the power of the good it perverts’ (Dollimore 1990, 183), then Shakespeare’s depiction of flawed heroes, such as Hamlet, derives its potency from the strength of goodness that is displaced in the particular tragedy of each man’s fall from grace. Under this medieval reading of perversion, the default position in nature is one of goodness, and it is the *desire* to turn away from this position that is considered perverse. When Hamlet says ‘Denmark’s a prison’ (2.2.243) he speaks as a man condemned by his desire to commit the ‘unnatural’ act of regicide, yet in contemporary society the mystical aspects of Shakespearean drama are often obfuscated by the clamour to recognize how Shakespeare ‘invented’ modern subjectivity (Bloom 1999, xvii).

Friedrich Hayek, the chief architect of neoliberalism, considered the Renaissance to be the starting point of modern subjectivity based on the recognition of one's individual talents and proclivities (Ward, 2017). Certainly, Shakespeare seems to explore this concept of agency in *Hamlet*, which is widely considered to be the first psychological drama (ibid). It is, however, disingenuous to propose that Shakespeare's depiction of Hamlet's fall from grace has anything in common with the neoliberal ethic. For Hayek, goodness is not a natural state from which the pervert turns away, but is instead the pragmatic outcome of the quest for 'what works'. Hayek saw himself as 'pragmatic, rather than unprincipled' (ibid, 49), and viewed life as a series of choices that have better or worse outcomes for the individual, rather than a correspondence with, or deviation from, a divine or natural order. The calamitous resonance between the natural world and crime depicted in plays such as *Macbeth* suggests that Shakespeare was at least interested in the possibility of there being a natural order, yet literature on the use of Shakespeare in prison tends to engage with the depiction of crime as though it were based on Hayek's theory of choice, rather than Augustine's theory of perversion.

By insisting that Shakespeare's plays are 'secular Scripture' (Bloom 1993, 3) that convey timeless truths, and simultaneously disregarding the Augustinian and Aristotelian philosophy behind Shakespeare's depiction of natural law, we risk distorting his work to promote a neoliberal model of personal agency. Indeed, in order to support the claim that Shakespeare's art is 'timeless' we must wilfully disregard the extent to which the contemporary neoliberal concept of agency is absent from his plays, and ignore what Brecht (in Heinemann 2003) describes as his characters' God-given nature, tragically contending with unalterable personal fates. For Brecht, the implication of this God-given nature is that the hero is essentially passive:

His character is built up by showing what happens to him...Lear reacts to the ingratitude of his daughters...Hamlet to his father's demand to avenge him...The people act under compulsion, according to their "character", their character is eternal - it has no causes that human beings can understand. (Brecht in Heineman 2003, 237)

The neoliberal idea that our sense of self is constituted through the exercise of rational choice (see for example, Buchanan 1975) is at odds with Shakespeare's depiction of chaotic reactivity as the basis of self-hood in plays such as *Antony and Cleopatra*. In this play, the choice to deviate from nature is shown to be perverse, yet the characters' choices appear to be bound up with their human relationships, and are not the property of the individual as an autonomous economic unit, as neoliberal theory suggests (Ward 2017). To imagine that Shakespearean drama has the ability to socialize, reform or develop empathy in offenders who find themselves incarcerated in 'the warehouse of human waste in which Shakespeare is promoted as the opposite' (Scott-Douglass 2007, 20), is then, to reject the subtly of Shakespeare's depiction of the limits of our ability to control our destinies.

Thus far we have identified some of the problems cogent of the psychoanalytical and postmodern discourses of Shakespeare as therapy, or as a source of empathy and identification. It is also worth noting how some of these points relate to the individualistic 'hero narrative' of early applied theatre, which 'positioned applied theatre as a magical tool' for social change (O'Connor & Mullen 2011, 134) and identified the applied theatre practitioner as a kind of saviour. This conforms to the template of the hero as a man of *virtù*, defined by Augusto Boal (2000, 62) after Machiavelli as someone who takes advantage of every opportunity; tries to 'eliminate every trace of emotion', and lives in 'a purely intellectual and calculating world'. Boal (2000, 64-65) describes Shakespeare as 'the first bourgeois dramatist' who depicted the new 'extraordinary individual' of nascent capitalism,

and he argues that while Shakespeare was careful to reveal the negative consequences of the Machiavellian liberation from moral values, the exceptionality of characters resides in their pursuit of self-interest rather than the collective good. The prisoners' roles as performers submitting to the will of the director in a Shakespeare production defines them as what Boal (2000, 65) describes as the 'masses' who serve the man endowed with *virtù*, and the implication of this theory is that prisoners who perform Shakespeare's plays undertake the role of 'mediocre people' (ibid, 64) to offset the brilliance of the theatre director; a criticism levelled at some real-world Shakespeare in prison projects (see for example, Snyder-Young (2013). According to Boal's theory, as long as the applied practitioner is held to be an exceptional individual, then it is the director, rather than the directed, who most benefits.

Conclusion

In his ground-breaking study, *Shakespeare's America*, Michael Bristol (1990, 6) argues that the patriarchal order routinely 'misidentifies a culturally produced inequality as a natural difference'. Such misidentification is an ever-present risk in Shakespeare in prison projects. The idea that Shakespeare's plays 'provide the dramatic equivalent of a colossal Rorschach inkblot test' (Kaufmann in Theilgaard 1992, 170) used to reveal prisoners' 'sympathetic stance' (ibid), that they can rehabilitate, or that they provide a basis for building social empathy all require considerable interrogation. Correspondingly, we must note, these projects run the risk of relativizing social and historical conditions, of encouraging the identification of crime with the individual rather than with the culture environment, and placing responsibility for 'aberrant' action firmly on the shoulders of the autonomous, free-will functioning subject.

Boal (2000, 73) identifies Shakespearean drama as 'a double-edged sword' that can be used as a weapon both for and against the expansion of bourgeois power. The yearning for

praxis in prison Shakespeare is, in this regard, always in tension with what Boal (2000) identifies as the appropriation of Shakespeare by the elite as a weapon of bourgeois empowerment. As some of the reference points we have cited suggest, much prison Shakespeare may be said to embody the practice of Bardolotry. On the one hand, obfuscating the individualistic neoliberal appropriation of Shakespearean drama, and, on the other, drawing on the psychoanalytical discourse of prison Shakespeare as a means to heal ‘natural’ disorders that are, in fact, social ills. In her analysis of what theatre can and can’t do, Dani Snyder-Young (2013) states:

Institutional power cannot be escaped and this power often works to consolidate itself. As artists look to use performance as a tactic, these hegemonic forces cannot be ignored (Synder-Young 2013, 138).

In considering this last point, there is some value in returning to Margaret Atwood’s 2016 novel *Hag-Seed*. As noted, the topic of institutional power is an issue Atwood both riffs upon and inverts in this work.

The subversive, and anti-establishment nature of this riffing is brought into particularly sharp focus at the climax of the novel when an audacious prison-based production of *The Tempest* transforms the space, objects and relationships of the prison into an immersive spectacle. Notably, this *Tempest* is a production driven neither by a therapeutic nor a socially-ameliorating agenda, but rather by a desire for vengeance against all those who have wronged Atwood’s ‘hero’ Felix Phillips. Establishment figures and dignitaries who attend the production are refused the role of voyeuristic spectators, and instead rendered *dramatis personae* in the theatrical world created in the prison. The inmates, meanwhile, are placed firmly in control of the ruling class’s fate with their production of *The Tempest* comprising a series of crimes against the prison hierarchy including kidnapping, imprisonment, drink-spiking and assault.

The prisoners' production thus, at once, turns on its head, the power dynamic of the institutional forms of Shakespearean drama, the prison environment and the practice of Prison Shakespeare itself. The inversion in this exercise is interesting to reflect upon. In Atwood's novel, the chains of the prison are broken through a brief transition from the everyday world of the prison to a 'holiday world' through a process described by C.L. Barber as 'festive release' (Paster 1975, 52) an experience that is equally joyful and fleeting. It is interesting to note that it is in transgressive action of this nature that the appeal of prison Shakespeare may actually lie. This chimes with Northrop Fry's analysis of Shakespeare's comedy, which he argues works by contrasting the 'normal' world with an alternate 'green' world in which 'tyrannical elders' are defeated by the release of 'the life force over that which blocks it' (Paster 1975, 52). Atwood's (2016, 79) version of this 'green world' – an immersive Prison Shakespeare production - prompts us to question what, in our normal world, is blocking the positive social development of certain members of our society.

This question is further provoked by a scene in *Hag-Seed* that perhaps hints at the tribute paid to prisoners by Atwood through her novel's title. In this scene, her prisoners discuss Shakespeare's characterisation of Caliban, also known as 'Hag-Seed' (1.2.369), Prospero's log-hauling slave in *The Tempest*:

Why's he have to suffer so much for being what he is? It's like he's, you know, black or Native or something. Five strikes against him from Day One. He never asked to be born. (Atwood 2016, 265)

This statement is a poignant reminder of the many studies that reveal the overrepresentation of 'Hag-Seeds' in the penal system at home and abroad - members of society who are made to suffer for 'what they are' in terms of their ethnicity, experience of being in foster care, or learning disability (see for example Jonson-Reid 2000; Hayes et al 2007; Campbell et al 2015).

As noted, it is significant that the temporary 'release' from incarceration enjoyed by Atwood's 'Hag-Seeds' is achieved not through the application of any socially-ameliorating, therapeutic or rehabilitative agenda, but rather in the absence of such agendas. As such, Atwood eschews establishing any instrumental relationship between theatre and reality and she is relatedly highly cautious about making any claims for the 'truth' of Shakespeare's text. Rather, at the end of her novel, after identifying the various literal and metaphorical prisons in *The Tempest*, she reminds us of the most overarching and overbearing 'prison' of all when working with a Shakespeare play: the Shakespeare text itself (Atwood 2016, 273). In this, there is a note of caution against mistaking fiction for fact, fantasy for reality. As much as we might want to indulge the essentialist theatrical aphorism oft invoked when working with Shakespeare (and invoked in Atwood's novel by Felix Phillips) to 'trust the play' (Atwood 2016, 144), Atwood also reminds us that Shakespeare has the power to exert an immobilizing institutional force. The prison Shakespeare practitioner may thus benefit from remembering, as Atwood outlines, to be alert at all times to another question just as urgent but less frequently asked when working with Shakespeare's plays: 'But is the play trustworthy?' (Atwood 2016, 144).

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