

[The following chapter, “The Human Title,” is excerpted from *Olson on Shakespeare: The Late Plays and the Post-Modern Present*, edited by Ralph Maud (not yet published). This is one of ten chapters on Shakespeare that Olson drafted in late 1954 while teaching at Black Mountain College. Olson typed all of them out, making few corrections along the way. But once drafted, he never came back to shape them into a proper book. “The Human Title,” like the other nine chapters, has never been published before. It can be found in Box 35, at the Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. The emended text is copyright © by the Estate of Ralph Maud. Previously unpublished works by Charles Olson are copyright © of the University of Connecticut. Used here with permission.]

Olson on Shakespeare: The Late Plays and the Post-Modern Present,

Chapter 3: The Human Title

The round world would seem to have done itself in, 200, 300 years ago. Take Newton, not Shakespeare: why was it so long, those many years, before the train got backed up to him, & hooked, and started again—when, 1907? what year was Einstein’s first theory?—to go ahead? what was it took so long for men to pick up on Newton? anything essential? In other words was there there, too, a lapse such as it would seem there has been in verse since Shakespeare well tossed away the obviousness of the world, the dullness of object and event as round, as that apple instead of, the laws of—what Newton did draw attention to—its fall?

The music, its fall. “Strike flat the thick rotundity . . .” And what do you get? First, the death of any absolute as such. Second, the recognition of relative as consequent, not at all that miserable modern sense of relative, which totally forgets or ignores that the absolute, by being unseated as ideal, cannot be removed, is only in fact moved over to where it very much is, where it is really total, in the instant, in the new instant, the novel moment, every new one, where we are confronted—and liberated, if our wills are able, if they are capable of both taking that absolute slice and having it, at the same time that, because that absolute moment will be, with the next one fast on its heels, relative to that next moment, therefore causative, if we *act* accurately (so far as it has been given us to act, and act accurately) we are doing all that life asks of us, viz. that we are absolute in that moment. And there is only one way one can be: by the actual and the real at once, that is, by the intersection of them as abscissa and ordinate, the real being that vertical which goes down to the deepest as well as the highest, and the actual—what we do—being what we have been prepared to do, and, in the new instant, are newly capable of doing!

Excuse, please. But no light will ever be thrown on why Shakespeare settles for fathers & daughters (or youths), and on the verse he involved himself in from 1608 to 1613—indeed, how it was easy for him to work with that “youth,” John Fletcher. (Fletcher was 34 when the two of them wrote *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and Henry 8th, and Shakespeare was 49)—unless it is seen how “post-modern” he had made himself.

Now inside that extreme statement one must work back. For I don't, myself, think that he, any more than Newton, was that “wise,” wise as they were. None of us can get that far away from the degrees of the reality contemporary to us. No actuality can outstrip the real that much; but it is one of the feebleness[es] of modern thought (now, thank god, decently buried!) not to recognize how very damn far a man can throw, by his act, ahead of his real. Example, Arthur Rimbaud, that this lad by age nineteen, date 1873, had driven through to at least this date, 1954, had, in fact, come ahead a century from his birth.

I should not want to press it, but it is worth noting how much Hamlet is the study of the breakdown of the “whole man.” And how much he is involved with his mother, how much he is himself a “youth.” And if you ask yourself what man, in the whole range of the plays, is anything like say a usual man of power in the middle of his life, you have: (1) Macbeth, as probably the most “normal” (!); (2) Othello? but he is so much his own dupe, and his problem so utterly lust, that he comes out narrow, no matter his substance—or girth; (3) Coriolanus, maybe—but he had a mother! and his relation with Aufidius and his wife's doubts of how fastened their marriage is because of this friendship lead right into the midst of the problems of the late plays; (4) Antony, of course, and it would be merely argumentative on my part to reckon him against, say, the wholeness of Enobarbus, or say how Pompey, Caesar and Lepidus make him look a little of the “boy” love makes him. In short, it would seem to me only Lear comes out a figure of the dimension such dramatists as the Greeks were always making their men—and their women. (I am thinking of Euripides, more than the other two, and, say, the *Trojan Women*, the *Bacchae*, as well as Hercules, Ulysses, and his other men.) And Lear is old.

All right. After that excursus, coming back to Hamlet, and noting that Timon was left out, Timon, that uncomfortable Lear and unborn Prospero, what am I getting at, by grabbing on to a troubled Hamlet? Simply this: that Shakespeare is the earliest evidence of the birth of the modern psyche, the thing which for 300 years bedevilled men and women, and is only now going away. It is time, for example, that somebody dragged out into the light how hateful, like they say, Shakespeare is to women, how increasingly, from *Hamlet* on, women become the butt of the lust theme. *Troilus and Cressida* is written the next year, *Measure for Measure* 1604, and though Cleopatra and Cordelia intervene, the theme sets in in earnest from 1608 on—with the late Sonnets telling and telling the expense of spirit and the waste of shame, he says, that lust involves men in. To show how extreme he

could get, one need only quote the most powerful, if overwrought, speech in *Cymbeline*, Posthumus' soliloquy (III, v):

Is there no way for men to be but women
 must be half-workers? We are all bastards,
 and that most venerable man which I
 did call my father was I know not where
 when I was stamped. Some coiner with his tools
 made me a counterfeit. Yet my mother seemed
 the Dian of that time. So doth my wife
 the nonpareil of this. O vengeance, vengeance!
 I thought her
 as chaste as unsunned snow. O, all the devils!
 This yellow Iachimo in an hour—was it not?
 or less!—at first? Perchance he spoke not, but,
 like a full-acorned boar, a German one,
 cried “O!” and mounted; found no opposition
 but what he looked for should oppose and she
 should from encounter guard. Could I find out
 the woman's part in me! For there's no motion
 that tends to vice in man but I affirm
 it is the woman's part. Be it lying, note it,
 the woman's, flattering, hers, deceiving, hers,
 lust and rank thoughts, hers, hers, revenges, hers,
 ambitions, covetings, change of prides, disdain,
 nice longing, slanders, mutability—
 all faults that may be named, nay, that hell knows,
 why, hers, in part or all, but rather all!
 For even to vice
 they are not constant, but are changing still
 one vice but of a minute old for one
 not half so old as that. I'll write against them,
 detest them, curse them. Yet tis greater skill
 in a true hate to pray they have their will:
 the very devils cannot plague them better.

Mother and wife and unsunned snow. So they must stay, or man's lust rushes out, his liver will not abate, he'll not be able to keep the “white cold virgin snow” upon his heart!

What nonsense, you cry. And good enough, wise as you are. I only say William Shakespeare, then, didn't find it so—or why the quantity of the statement of it, why the fierce going away from it, why the breaking off to the celebrations of innocence & chastity and of youth as noble and beautiful only that it is innocent & chaste, and that man thereafter, after youth, is only a good parent who warns and works against lust's hell? So far does he go that in his last play, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, chivalry itself is restored to give chasteness back to all things. And to suggest the verse better than Posthumus' speech from *Cymbeline*, how the verse was dried and flatted after *Antony & Cleopatra*, even the verse of love, let me quote Emilia's paralleling of two girls' love with two men's:

You talk of Pirithous' and Theseus' love.
 Theirs has more ground, is more maturely seasoned,
 more buckled with strong judgment, and their needs
 the one to the other may be said to water
 their intertangled roots of love. But I
 and she I sigh and spoke of, were things innocent,
 loved for we did, and like the elements
 that know not what nor why, yet do effect
 rare issues by their operance, our souls
 did so to one another . . .

The rest of the speech is altogether to the point: how the flower one put between her breasts (“then but beginning/ to swell about the blossom”) the other wanted, how the song one coined the other had to sing it in her sleep,

This rehearsal, she sends,
 (which, every innocent wots well, comes in
 like old importment's bastard) has this end,
 that the true love between maid and maid may be
 more than in sex dividual.

Than sex dividual! You can't go further toward Urania, the ninth Muse, than this. And to show how long this concept of the psyche did last, think of Melville's sad singing of the same tune in “After the Pleasure Party,” “the sexual feud clogs / the aspirant life”!

I have this trouble, to get to the verse, that I must arouse your acknowledgement of a man coming to see the thing this flat and divided before, I take it, either the romantic or the classical mind could experience in anything like its pleasure the dry sweet music or the knotted crabbed music of the late Shakespeare. And I say this not at all to be that verse's advocate, or to do more of

that imposing of his genius on us. Au contraire. All I wish to do is to tie the verse to verse now, to cancel the 300 years in between, to make evident how an art of artifice can be at least as rewarding as the damned round 0—which, I take it, Shakespeare came to understand, as we have, that it only duplicates secular reality, and has no light to throw, other than that strong and dramatic one which events, the bores, carry, has no answers, only has the representations of outward things to tickle us.

That is, the verse in these plays, does more than the plot and persons do. And because the plots and persons are withdrawn from the bluster of even Lear's events, more nakedness shows through, more of the veins and the flowing of life in them is let through to the eye and ear, and to the heart. And this is true in spite of the stiffening, the ordering of passion, in spite of a sense of woman, at least, and I should say also of man (as only best as youth), which we would now throw down as only modern.

I take it this way: that we are post-patriarchal. I say no more. But in saying that, I acknowledge what I don't think yet is sufficiently acknowledged, that in between Shakespeare and ourselves, and started by him, there was a great despair. And that it is over. But that a verse which goes ahead (as physics has) had better pick up on *laws* of a falling music, which the trochee alone will not do all of.

I pick up on this:

Their knot of love
tied, weaved, entangled, with so true, so long,
and with a finger of so deep a cunning,
may be outworn, never undone.

The Two Noble Kinsmen (I, iii, 41-44)

The image, as so often, a stereo (love-knot). The vocabulary, in this instance (and there are two general vocabularies over all the later work), simple. The metric: if still iamb and rising, stopped by spondees or by monosyllables, which have the effect of catalectic trochees. It is the interference of these stopped-down feet which most distinguishes the basic metric of the later verse from the middle and earlier. *It changes, as any stopping does, the pitch*, and joined to a humped syntax in other passages than the above, works for a difficult but most pleasurable song, at least, to begin with, a song most fit to the stance toward life and persons the poet has himself arrived at.

The consonants in the above are not playing as much a stop on the vowels as the breathing, yet the d's of the past participles "tied" and "weaved," and the g, l, and d in "entangled," and the r & n of "outworn," and the n of "undone" do tangle the flow which these particular lines, so full of o's and u's, would tend, in an earlier time, to run on by.

I spoke, earlier, of a tendency of this verse to complicate itself by internal rhyme. The lines from Emilia on her love for Flavina are an example:

The one or the other may be said to water
 their intertangled roots of love; but I
 and she *I sigh* and spoke of, were things innocent,
 Loved for we did, and like the elements
 that know not what nor *why*, yet do effect
 rare issue, by their operance, our souls
 did so to one another.

I have marked the long “i” play. But note the “of” recurrences: “love” in the first line, “of” in the next, and the same close playing on “o”s, both long and short, throughout—as close played to this ov sound as, say, “operance” works over from a hidden “innocence” in “innocent,” which one’s ear grants as an assonance, so close is all the music playing by the care of the thought.

It is this care of the thought which is another way to characterize the difference of these plays from their predecessors. It is more than care; it is the manifest *preference* for thought to action, so much so that the dramaturgy of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is nothing but pairings of thoughts & speeches between two characters, with events thrown in so fast and almost accidentally that any “plot” the play has in anything like the old sense of the dramatic is as formal as baroque music.

This comparison is not as descriptive or offhand as it sounds. Shakespeare in these late plays is depending on his own doctrine of innocence versus lust as firmly as Bach rested his music upon what his time called “the doctrine of the affections,” the belief (Homer depended upon like sets of feeling) that there were patterns of possibility which would register by themselves, and formally, such emotions as love, hope, faith, etc. (This opens, of course, a very large issue, of rage and tala, say, in Indian thought and music, as well as the whole question of the Muses in Greek verse, for example, that there were metrics and vocabularies necessary to one sort of song which, in another, would be false—a whole series of Levitician distinctions which we have lost the mind for, or are only, once again, about to discover the uses of. In any case, I wish only to stress that there are these possibilities which have been lost since at least the 17th century in the West.)

Shakespeare had something of the same for his own needs, either he had stumbled on them or he was revising classical concepts evident in the work of Jonson or Campion, knowledges of Classical practice, toward an art of doctrine, which definitely differs from the dramatic or representational. In his middle plays all emotions are talked of as entangled in actions instead of, as in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, where the states of emotions are as set, and talked about formally, as the events are formal. The pleasure rises as they pass on to a new set of dialogues on friendship or innocence or lust. The whole play is a tourney, as its plot is.