# Johnson on Shakespeare: The Use and Value of Spectatorship

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**Abstract**: *Everywhere the value of liberal inquiry finds itself subject to the utilitarian question: 'What's the use of it?' Some answers to this question are to be found in Johnson's preface and commentary to his edition of The Plays of William Shakespeare, long considered a classic legitimation of the canonical work by an appeal to 'confirmed opinion.' However, a more attentive reading of Johnson's commentary shows that it grounds Shakespeare's value in his theatrical artistry more seriously than any predecessor. As a playwright, Shakespeare's attention is necessarily fixed on his spectators, and the value of his canonical work rests on the way he raised his concern for the spectator from entertainment and seduction to a much broader ethical and civic framework. The immediate context for Johnson's work is a widespread discussion about the value spectatorship conducted in mid-eighteenth century. But Johnson's awareness and analysis of the value of spectatorship can, this essay submits, be useful to our own discussion of the value possessed by a canonical work and of liberal inquiry in general.*

**Keywords**: *value, cannon, theatrical performance, spectator, plays, performance*

## I

Inside the North American academy the status of the humanities is currently undergoing major revaluation. The undergraduate major has continued on its steep decline in numbers nationwide. State institutions have also to contend with lawmakers hostile to an undergraduate course so apparently without market value in the twenty-first century workplace. Since in the twenty-first century market value dwarfs every other value, this is no insignificant problem. Moreover, the economies of expenditure that the new electronic media technology offer to administrators press relentlessly forwards, apparently without any heed for the specific pedagogical requirements of the liberal arts. A twenty-first century North American administrator or politician can hardly resist a scenario in which a single star turn delivers lectures already commissioned by an educational corporation to an enormous captive audience. Add to the mix a thin trickle of underpaid adjunct instructors who can be educated in the prevailing institutional culture more easily than any tenured faculty and the recipe is ravishing. Meanwhile, restless superstars languish in the graduate schools of the more prestigious universities, as applicants for advanced degrees plummet.

These may seem specifically North American problems, although American problems have a habit of spreading elsewhere. Students of literature everywhere, however, face problems not just of numbers, but of identity. As I recently discovered in a quest for a suitable anthology for an undergraduate course, it is often impossible to separate today's literary anthologies from yesterday's history textbooks. In the contemporary mega-anthology published by global operations like Norton and Longman, Keats or Spenser come to us dwarfed by historical and political context. When I found myself responsible for choosing a text for the Romantic-Modern survey, I soon found myself asking whether the Romantic period really was the age when Edmund Burke and Joseph De Maistre worried about a new and dangerously unattached subjectivity. Every author I approached, from Charles Lamb to Virginia Woolf, seemed to carry the responsibility for the world on his back. Moreover, as any college catalog shows, there is also the phalanx of courses – extremely popular in contemporary universities –that fold in literary subject matter with the pressing problems of the social sciences: gender and identity, literature and the marketplace, religious values in contemporary tragedy. It is all too easy to think that literature's chief value lies in helping a student get somewhere else – to the big issues of gender, class, race, and nation.

Such a context might seem unpropitious for a reconsideration of the question of 'canon and value' that takes as its text Samuel Johnson's 1765 edition of *The Plays of William Shakespeare*. Many students of English literature of my generation will be able to recite the formula offered in Johnson's Preface to this edition for the value of the canonical work: 'What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared; and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favor.'[1] Memory has grafted these words into the consciousness, but the appeal they lodge to *confirmed opinion* is surely the kind of thing twentieth-century literary theory was designed to set itself against. Johnson shows little anxiety about the diverse constituencies that constitute *confirmed opinion* and his sense of posterity as a vast zone of quietude is one that we now see as our professional responsibility to disturb.

Yet first impressions here are very misleading. In the rest of this essay, I shall attempt to show how Jonson performs a series of interconnected tasks of major importance for the contemporary student in search of discovering significant relationship between canon and value. First of all, as editor of Shakespeare, Johnson is magisterial in marshaling the various skills necessary to understand a revered work from the distant past. This is the Johnson W. K. Wimsatt saw as the father of professional criticism. Without this sense of professional obligation, the past can be easily bent to a favored shape, condescended to, or wildly over-reverenced. As Johnson spikily pointed out, it can also be simply swept aside and the words of the long-dead author substituted by more seemly utterance.

Yet the absolute value of professionalism has not always served the practice of criticism well in the last quarter century. Is there value of a different order in Johnson's performance, value that can enhance our understanding of canonical works not as professionals, but as citizens and consciousnesses? Nine years before the publication of his edition, Johnson had announced his 'Proposals for Printing by Subscription the

Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare, Corrected and Illustrated by Samuel Johnson' (1756). On publication, his opus was retitled *Johnson's edition of The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765). The shift between the two titles indicates a major reorientation in Johnson's sense of his editorial responsibilities. In his 1765 edition, Johnson is, as commentator and exegete, primarily concerned with the possibilities of play and its implications for its spectators. At a time when the Elizabethan stage was regarded as a sordid and gross institution, this was an unusual and innovative decision. In making it, Johnson acknowledged the importance of spectatorship for the new urban societies of consumption and discussion that had been in construction since the publication of Addison's *The Spectator* (1712-14). In viewing Shakespeare as serious dramatist rather than clown or philosopher, Johnson entered a debate about the question of spectatorship and what were beginning to be seen as the civic imperatives of reflection, criticism, and discussion addressed by David Hume, Adam Smith, and Joshua Reynolds among many others. What Johnson summarizes as *confirmed opinion*, he also analyzes as a process of great value for any society that aspires to free discussion and sustained reflection.

To a significant degree, we are the legatees of this mid eighteenth-century debate. A battery of contemporary social theorists, from Habermas to Luhmann, from Kluge to Nagt, have emphasized that the communicative sphere holds the hopes for a contemporary democracy. Before universities reinvented themselves as accountable and diverse institutions, they were centers for free discussion chiefly conducted by exploration of the long-valued works that examined possibilities not articulated, still less enacted, in the public world: Plato's *Republic,* Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels.* The value of Johnson's edition of *The Plays of William Shakespeare* lies in the way it allows us to reimagine these necessary processes of reflection, criticism, and speculation coming alive all over again.

## II

It is generally accepted that, unlike such contemporaries as Voltaire or Diderot, Johnson conceived of his own labor in the republic of letters in terms of successive and sustained acts of secular piety performed on behalf of a valued object. Yet this does not mean that he saw himself as performing selfless acts of obeisance before a departed master spirit. Predictably, Johnson saw himself first of all as carrying out the series of eminently practical tasks. The editors who preceded him in editing Shakespeare in were a various group. They included an author often considered the first professional poet, Alexander Pope. As Johnson intimated, Pope's labors on in editing Shakespeare and translating Homer were inseparable from the promotion of his own creative talents. Pope civilized Homer as much as he translated him, and the specter of 'correctness' still hangs over his image of Shakespeare. Thomas Warburton, a cleric long-schooled in the powers of discerning the secret senses of the language of inspiration, was a second precursor. As Johnson's commentary points out repeatedly, Warburton bestowed on Shakespeare too much of the ingenuity he had exercised on the sacred text. Finally, Lewis Theobald, an editor modern scholarship has most consistently seen as its own progenitor. Theobald's

rational procedures for the practice of emendation and the 'conjectural criticism' he championed were not without controversy among his peers, however. Thomas Edwards's satirical *A Supplement to Mr. Warburton's Edition* (1748) voiced misgivings shared by many readers that Warburton and Theobald had raised editorial practice to the point where it threatened to usurp its subject. Johnson shared their apprehension.

Each of these authors had his own way of conceiving of Shakespeare's value. In his own proposals Johnson set out the grounds for editing 'the great father of the English drama' (56) all over again. He emphasized how far his own editorial labor had the advantage of work already undertaken by his predecessors. This is the Johnson of classroom legend, honoring the past in almost Catonian proportions. Typically, he followed this praise with severe reproofs of the vanity of his predecessors. At this point, he set out a major distinction between his own achievement and theirs. His main goal for himself and his reader, Johnson proposed, was to aid the task of arriving at 'the pleasure of judging for ourselves' (55). From their editorial thrones, Pope, Warburton and Edwards had each denied their readers this pleasure.

In its specific context, Johnson's statement refers to the task of editorial emendation. But the principle of 'judging for ourselves' is one with major critical implications for the student of canonical value: any work of this order offers unusual opportunities for adults to exercise their judgments. Not so much their judgments about their worth as completed artefacts, I would argue, although the history of criticism in the twentieth century has plenty of essays titled: '*The Winter's Tale:* A Reappraisal' or 'Reassessing Henry James.' Such essays have their uses, but, as his commentary shows at every turn, Johnson was more crucially concerned with how the reader and spectator exercise that judgment on the work as it unfolds, on the strategies the author employs to make an impact on an adult spectator. For all his reputation as solemn arbiter, Johnson is most useful to us not in delivering judgments about ultimate value, but in watching how Shakespeare releases a complex of emotional, ethical, and political responses from his spectator from passage to passage, scene to scene.

In the first place, of course, Johnson's intends his words about 'the pleasure of judging for themselves' to act as a challenge to a larger European climate of thinking where Shakespeare's value was not undisputed. Voltaire's *Lettres Philosophiques* (1734) devoted many pages to praising English *moeurs*: its freedom of worship and trade, scientific genius, and admirably rational philosophy. Voltaire was much more skeptical about English taste, particularly in tragedy. In Shakespeare he saw 'Un génie plein de force et fécondité, de naturel et de la sublime, sans la moindre étincelle de bon goût et sans la moindre connaissance des règles.' ('A genius full of force and fertility, natural and sublime, without the least glimmer of good taste or the least knowledge of the rules'[2] (69). Flawed himself, violating any rational standard of propriety, Shakespeare was more worrying for Voltaire because he transmitted his flaws to others. As a canonical dramatist, he passed his mixture of mirth, misery, and onstage savagery down to such lesser talents as John Dryden and Thomas Otway. Shakespeare initiated a line of descent – and a canonical artist subsists through his line of descent if nowhere else – that Voltaire considered defective.

Comments like these must have been in Johnson's mind as he began his task as the latest in a train of laborers intent on salvaging Skakespeare. Before anything else, he needed to settle the words of his author as precisely as he could by rescuing his text, not just from the molestations of the Elizabethan printer, but from the ministrations of his predecessors, who had editorialized Shakespeare into conformity with the demands of a polite society. He spared no effort in detailing the ways in which Shakespeare fails to conform to current polite usage. However much Johnson might grimace at some of the language licensed by Shakespeare's stage, he made no attempt to repair it. Johnson did not follow the example of Thomas Bentley's edition of *Paradise Lost* (1732) or Jonathan Richardson's *Explanatory Notes on Paradise Lost* (1734) in emending his author brutally by easing his English into greater conformity with contemporary usage.

His gloss of *Hamlet* IV.5.81 'In hugger-mugger to inter him' is unequivocal on this issue. Most of his predecessors offer something less jarring on the contemporary ear: "In private to inter him.' This provokes Johnson's uncompromising rebuttal:

That the words now replaced are better, I do not undertake to prove; it is sufficient that they are Shakespeare's. If phraseology is to be changed as words grow uncouth by disuse or gross by vulgarity, the history of every language will be lost; we shall no longer have the words of any author; and, as these alterations will be often unskillfully made, we shall in time have very little of his meaning (140).

In his Preface, Johnson makes no pretense that his vigilance and accuracy can emulate 'the absolute and definite' (57) activities of the scientist. The superiority of *in hugger-mugger* to any more decorous alternative is not something he can *undertake to prove*. His preference, however, is a decision, made on coherent, discussible grounds not through oversight or inertia: 'It is sufficient that [these words] are Shakespeare's.'

In Johnson's estimation, if a great author does not exist in his *words*, he did not exist anywhere at all. If Shakespeare's authority is the first source to which Johnson appeals, it is not the last. A genuine anxiety – shared by many of his generation – that *the history of every language will be lost* if contemporary preferences ease out past usage further bolsters his choice of preservation over propriety. On this criterion, preservation is a sort of public duty that proceeds at every turn with an acknowledgment of potential public loss. Johnson here sets some ground rules for sound editorial practice. In the case of an author of canonical value, sometimes an editor's most valuable intervention is not to intervene. Johnson would not comprehend the hand-wringing of a former President of the Modern Language Association, who wondered whether Rabelais was too robust for the sensibilities of the late twentieth-century classroom. A lost Rabelais is a worse prospect than an offended audience.

In devoting considerable philological and hermeneutic labor to the work of a nearly anonymous entertainer, Johnson undertook to examine what the profession of playwright involved for artist and spectator. Because he considered himself to be dealing with a work of canonical importance, he had the sense of generations of subsequent spectators more closely in his line of thought as well. With his text settled, he could then set about the task of commentary, glossing difficult passages, highlighting specific features of

characterization and stagecraft that were only visible to him after long immersion in 'the books his author read' (54) and the plays his contemporaries wrote.

This respect for Shakespeare's choice of words and presentation of events did not make Johnson a silent partner to genius, following its operations in hushed awe. In fact, as commentator we often find Johnson signaling – and even demurring from – unexpected turns in the action. His famous response to Cordelia's death 'in a just cause' in *King Lear*, of course, is not the report of a scientific editor, if by 'science' we mean a subject pursued *sine ira et studio*. He does not deny Cordelia's death to be 'contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles' (126). These words are often quoted. But if we move from these well-known words about how far Shakespeare violated the norms of faith and justice to how Johnson justified this practice, then we come much closer to understanding the value Johnson saw in the canonical work.

After enumerating the particular sympathies and allegiances Shakespeare's plotting violates, Johnson submits that Shakespeare's dispatch of Cordelia 'is justified by the Spectator, who blames Tate for giving Cordelia success and happiness in his alteration' (126). Nahum Tate's Restoration adaptation of *King Lear* notoriously aimed to ease the pain of tragedy for its audience by preserving Cordelia's life. Johnson makes his case for a more lasting and valuable pleasure for the spectator if he ponders the spectacle of Cordelia dead. Such a spectator is unlikely to see this as the best of all possible worlds like Voltaire's Pangloss. Such a spectator is invited to begin to examine the problem of human misfortune, an inquiry David Hume famously conducted in *The Natural History of Religion* (1757). Johnson has a very different view of these matters from Hume but for Johnson and Hume, 'the Spectator' of human misfortune is an educable animal, not just Tate's consumer satisfied with the easiest of demands made on his sympathies. If Johnson's fixed point of reference for Shakespeare's plays is 'the Spectator,' then it goes without saying that he will need to be unprecedentedly attentive to the activity of spectatorship.

If Johnson's commentary points on one front to the problem of human misfortune and Hume, on a complementary front it looks forward to Adam Smith and the transforming value and dangerous potential of aesthetic spectatorship strenuously examined in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith's anxiety about 'the propriety of every passion'[3] stirred by an aesthetic object was something of which mid-eighteenth century writers on aesthetics were acutely conscious. Far from being remote from our condition as productive and market animals, 'aesthetic objects' were valuable and dangerous because they treated of matters 'peculiarly related to ourselves.' As Smith recognized, this called for inquiry about 'the pitch of passion the spectator can go along with' as the art work unfolds in narrative, poetry, or drama. Students of natural sciences were in search of the greater regularities exhibited by remote phenomena. But this did not mean the human sciences were illegitimate; in fact, they had to be conducted more delicately, to use a favored phrase of the time.

Writers about art had henceforth not to involve themselves with 'the rules,' but with the spectator. Addison, whose *Spectator* had effectively established the eighteenth

century as the century of spectatorship, had realized this half a century before. But Addison's spectatorship meant decorous consumption, domesticated philosophy. By the middle of the century, Smith, Hume, Johnson all acknowledged that if art had value it was not by conformity to French rules. The value of art rests in its expansion and stimulation of human sympathies by the presentation of imaginary situations and persons. If art extended the world beyond the precincts of the given, serious inquiry about art needed called for those who conducted it to suspend their powers of judgment and to become spectators of the spectator. What kind of transformations did art work on its spectators? Throughout his commentary Johnson implicitly asked himself this question: if Shakespeare's plays were not the acme of French correctness or contemporary politeness, then what value did his plays possess in their engagement with the sympathies of their spectators?

It may seem too obvious to emphasize that Johnson's sense of Shakespeare's value, and the value of his own editorial labors, would have proved defective without a strong sense of Shakespeare's medium. Here was a public entertainer working in a genre which, as Jonas Barish has demonstrated, had repeatedly accrued a large legacy of opprobrium.[4] Anti-theatrical prejudice, Barish shows, is not something confined to cranks, but amounts to a major chapter in European cultural history. So when we say that Johnson possessed a stronger sense of genre than his competitors, we mean more than he was a reliable taxonomist, or even that he was able to identify the various generic strata in Shakespeare's plays. It still not enough to say that Johnson recognized, much more completely than purists like Sir Philip Sidney or T. S. Eliot, the theatrical impact Shakespeare achieved by combining genres available for public performance rather than by pursuing any one exclusively. More than Eliot or Sidney, Johnson grasped the distinct value of theatrical performance, not as stirring spectacle but as a tool for reflection, criticism, and speculation by an adult spectator.

Drama is a particular kind of genre, exploiting the presences of a public audience and live actors in ways that have historically made it an instrument of public accountability. This is as true of the tragedies and comedies of classical Athens as it is of America in the age of Vietnam in *Macbird* (?), or in the postwar international state of Ralph Hochuth's *The Representative* (1963) or Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). When these plays show an audience the Greek city state disintegrating under war, Lyndon Johnson plotting murder, Pope Pius colluding with genocide, or a crisis of succession in a traditional society, they aspire to a public work that the poet or novelist cannot easily contest. For the dramatist frequently takes familiar episodes from a shared past, while at the same time inserting them into the audience's shared present to be acted out open-endedly by living performers.

Even when this is not the case, drama makes use of types and stereotypes that its author can easily recognize. It does not take long for the audience of *Le Misanthrope* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to think they have seen these figures before, even if they have not seen one of them in so sour a temper or another transformed into an ass. Consequently, the great question posed so often by a work of art – *what if* known conditions were otherwise? – is apparently less available to playwright and theater

audience. Yet dramatic practice does not bear this out. When a playwright imagines known circumstances in the career of a public figure like Pope Pius or Agamemnon, or recycles stock figures like Alceste or Bottom, that personage's reality can potentially – if the playwright so chooses – be imagined all over again by artist and audience. In the process, he becomes subject to a live audience's reflections and reconsiderations, accountable in a new dimension. This is surely a value distinct to theatrical performance, where the consequences of asking *what if* can be ventilated in public and where the physical presence of the actor challenges an audience's response.

Johnson is fully aware of the value of theatrical performance in the prosecution of a particular kind of public inquiry or private self-scrutiny, even when it is conducted in what by any other yardstick is a closed society. Consider a typical entry from his edition. One of the most famous episodes in the history plays is Prince Hal's speech *I Henry IV* 1.2.184-204. This is a soliloquy, a speech act itself distinct to Shakespeare's stage and here used to confide to the audience that Hal's prodigality is—according to Hal, at any rate—a temporary phenomenon, not a settled viciousness. In the non-canonical anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, the prince's convivial tavern virtues were on display in a way that asked very little reflection from the spectators. In this play, all that is asked of the spectators is that they join in the fun of watching powerful people made to look ridiculous.

The Henry of *Famous Victories* has no more self than a master of ceremonies. *I Henry IV* immediately confronts us with a much icier and calculating self-presentation as Hal confides that:

> By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
> And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
> My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
> Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
> Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
> I'll so offend to make offence a skill,
> Redeeming time when men think least I will.[5]

This is Johnson's commentary on the passage:

This speech is very artfully introduced to keep the prince from appearing vile in the opinion of the audience; it prepares them for his future reformation; and, what is more valuable, exhibits a natural picture of a great mind offering excuses and palliating those follies which it can neither justify nor forsake (116).

Johnson reconciles his sense of a specific skill in stagecraft ('This speech is very artfully introduced') with its status within the play as a whole, and the *future reformation* that will come at the climax of the diptych, but is still very remote at this point. At this point, Hal *making excuses and palliating follies* is very much the foil for the charismatic Hotspur who, in the next scene, boasts of his power to make the 'easy leap/To pluck great honor from the pale-faced moon' in battle. The *opinion of the audience* – and

Johnson here recognizes the affinities between the stage and the political meeting, as well as the contrasts – runs against Hal at this point.

Johnson's commentary demonstrates his readiness to see the stage as a valuable site for the weighing of political and ethical possibilities necessary in any free society. He realizes that to see the Prince on a stage is not the same as to see him at a political rally, and that much of the value of the drama comes when a playwright realizes how he can exploit the unusual intimacy between actor and spectator. Although neither Johnson nor Shakespeare see the stage as erasing distinctions of rank, both acknowledge its power to suspend such distinctions and thus to encourage spectators to examine motive and action. Shakespeare's Hal might be *a great mind* but he is also, for Johnson, *a great mind offering excuses*. Johnson follows his up by remarking on Hal's inability either to *justify* or *forsake* his failings, although he balances these negatives by signposting the *future reformation* for us. Such comments are evidence that he sees the stage as a space of public accountability, capable of sustaining open and deeply interested investigation into the failings and self-deception of power. However, Johnson is not hostile to power by rote, and he goes out of his way to underscore the function of the speech in keeping *the prince from appearing vile* before his audience. At the same time, Johnson's ethical judgment is as unyieldingly exercised on Hal as it will later be on Falstaff.

Johnson wrote his commentary seventeen years after the final Jacobite rebellion and just one year after John Wilkes's expulsion from parliament following his seditious number of his periodical *The North Briton*. So we can hardly say that his commentary is the product of an age luxuriating in its own political stability. As the product of unstable historic conditions itself, the commentary implicitly makes a strong case for the value of theater's power to release an adult public's play of judgment over a political situation or a political actor. Put in less rationalist terms, the stage in this instance gives the presence of a powerful person sliding between promise and threat, self-justification and boasting and asks us how we respond to Hal on the tightrope. A spectator who gives this play his full attention has to suspend any undue deference or any undue hostility towards Hal's rank to grasp the situation Shakespeare presents. In staging the royal presence, in exposing its inconsistencies, in asking us to reconcile how Hal can redeem time by wasting time, Shakespeare exposes his popular prodigal to the full rigor of the Reformation conscience.

The play as a whole, not just Hal's speech, hardly proceeds with the impartiality and distance that Matthew Arnold or Irving Babbitt saw behind the supremely stabilizing value of the classic. Instead, as it moves from tavern to court, from loyal subjects to rebel factions, its continued canonical value for us arguably comes from the way it exploits the uncertainties of living in a mobile world, where history is still in the process of being made. By acknowledging and even foregrounding these existential urgencies in his commentary Johnson is our contemporary, an authoritative guide to the value of drama in exposing us to possibility and process even as he appeals to 'confirmed opinion.'

If Johnson alerts us the value of Shakespeare's theater in exposing its spectators to presence – enabling us to see men and women in the act of making political choices or erecting screens to protect their identity – then there are values of a more self-conscious

and self-critical kind that ask for consideration aired in his commentary. Let us move to another canonical work, *Hamlet*. Hamlet famously – and possibly superfluously – instructs his players now that 'The purpose of playing is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure' (*Hamlet* 3.2.20-24).[6] As he utters these words, Hamlet turns the players into an audience, a reversal that invites reader or audience to exercise a similar flexibility, to step out of their conventional role and to view the spectacle from a new perspective.

One of the great values of this canonical work comes from the way Shakespeare exploits as many perspectives on a base line situation – the murder of a ruler – as he can. As Hamlet contemplates exacting his deferred revenge, Claudius reflects on his own sin and contrasts earthly and eternal justice. On earth, he notes:

> In the corrupted currents of this world
> Offence's guilded hand may shove by justice;
> And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
> Buys out the law.

The shoddy molestations of justice on earth are suddenly suspended, as Claudius attacks the question from another route:

> But 'tis not so above
> There is no shuffling, there the action lies
> In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled
> Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
> To give in evidence. (*Hamlet* 3.3.57-64.)

No-one would claim that recent Shakespearean criticism has underestimated the significance of power for the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. If we want to reopen the question again of the political value of this canonical work, then there is an unquestionable audacity in the inspection of power laid bare in these two speeches. The play follows a direction we have already seen in Prince Hal's soliloquy. Once again, power exposes itself on a public stage. Soliloquy here, as there, is a tool that enables a spectator to undertake a public scrutiny of the ruler at a time when anything like public scrutiny of a monarch would be inconceivable. In *Hamlet* as in *I Henry IV*, it is also an invitation to the spectator to look inside the king, to penetrate the façade of authority, to consider not the king's two bodies, but the king's two consciences.

Any sense that the audience can coolly and objectively perform this task is snatched away, however, if we consider the shifts in perspective and diction mobilized in the two extracts mobilize. Each extract offers a different and contradictory presence. The first establishes the privilege and the violence of power as the *guilded hand* is seen to *shove by justice.* Here Shakespeare's verse asks for spectators able to imagine a scene from Skelton's *The Bowge of Courte* (1499) or *Speke Parott* (1521), works with a penetrating

vision of caste privilege across the three estates. The second nakedly reverses the situation: earthly power is abruptly disempowered and stands before public censure and divine judgment compelled to indict itself. Once again, the stage, a medium of popular entertainment, is rolled back to be exposed to the full rigors of the Reformation conscience.

The value of such an extension of the spectator's power to imagine alternative conditions to present 'currents of this world' comes close to what I want to argue as the central value in the study of the humanities. The value of many of the great canonical works from the way they induce a strategically beneficial bewilderment in their spectators by placing together situations and motives our political or civic dispensations have always survived by keeping apart. The Dover cliff episode in *King Lear* is not the sole example of Shakespeare lowering audience and actor over an abyss.

## III

As we saw in the commentary he provided on Cordelia's death in *King Lear*, Johnson's supreme court of appeal in discussing the drama was 'the Spectator.' The spectator we have seen Shakespeare imagining for *Hamlet* has to hold opposite kinds of justice simultaneously in view and to try to bridge them in his own precarious synthesis. The imaginary spectator he exploited in *I Henry IV* had to be ready to see Henry IV stripped of his populist charisma and dynastic authority. Are we then to imagine an 'impartial spectator' who can view the superimposition of divine justice over human corruption with equidistant sympathy? Or does this kind of conjunction make us imagine its only possible audience as some superhuman presence like an absolute God? Rather than plumping for either of these, I would submit that a work that brings such different perspectives so closely together has the value of forcing its spectators to speculate, to view present reality and personality as perpetual works in progress, always subject to reassessment. From one perspective, Shakespeare's plays make power accountable by exposing the guilt or guile of Claudius and Hal to public view. The presence of such characters as visual spectacle is impressive, intimidating. Their words are much less imposing, and Shakespeare inserts their words into circumstances in which the balance of power becomes suspended, inverted or negated: by degrees, we start to interrogate these ostentatiously powerful figures. Over the course of a play or an *oeuvre*, this kind of spectatorship can become a habit.

Much of contemporary life, as Wyndham Lewis recognized long ago in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), is devoted to making us into compliant spectators. It would be fair enough to say that the postmodern university is a fairly late entrant in fulfilling this objective and it is probably completely unrealistic to suggest that it could do much in reversing it. Yet the example of Johnson's investigation of Shakespeare is still there for our inspection. Here is an editor who legitimizes canonical achievement through an appeal to 'confirmed opinion,' yet proceeds throughout by practicing the enlightened virtue of exposing power to the rational questioning and criticism of a spectator. Twentieth-century scholarship has often praised Johnson for his exemplary

professionalism in refusing to interfere with Shakespeare's usage or in his attempt to spell out the historical practices of Shakespeare's stage. In this essay, however, I have attempted to argue for a more public-spirited Johnson, a Johnson who saw the stage as the training-ground for a more skeptical and enlightened spectator ready to look more quizzically at the claims of power. The value I see in Johnson and Shakespeare, it goes without saying, is one that I see potentially available in many canonical works, in Aristophanes, Dostoevsky, or Keats, if space existed to examine them. In any conceivable future, our society is organized in ways that suggest we are going to be spectators for most of the time. The value of the canonical work lies in its potential for encouraging its spectators and readers to acquire and to cultivate the virtue of enlightened spectatorship.

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**Notes**

1 All references to Samuel Johnson's Preface and edition of Shakespeare are to Wimsatt, W. K. *Dr. Johnson on Shakespeare*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969. Print. Subsequent references will be cited by page number.

2 Voltaire. *Lettres Philosophiques*. Ed. F. A. Taylor. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. Print.

3 Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984: 27. Print.

4 Barish, Jonas. *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice.* Berkeley: U of California, 1981. Print.

5 Shakespeare, William. *Henry IV*. ed. David M. Bevington. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print. Act, scene, and line number supplied within the text.

6 Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. ed. G. R. Hibbard. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print. Act, scene, and line number supplied within the text.