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O Estranho e o Estrangeiro no Teatro

Strangeness and the Stranger in Drama

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‘AND I AM I, HOWE’ER I WAS BEGOT’: AMONGST BASTARDS, PARADOXES OF THE STRANGER IN SHAKESPEARE’S THE LIFE AND THE DEATH OF KING JOHN

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In his classical study on strangers in Shakespeare’s drama, Leslie A. Fiedler identifies four main references or ‘essential myths’: the Woman, the Jew, the Moor and the New World Savage; and in his approach to the complex *doctrine of Nature* in Shakespeare, John F. Danby states, in relation to *King Lear*’s Edmund, that ‘bastard’ is the ‘Elizabethan equivalent of ‘outsider’.[1] As a matter of fact, outsiders and outcasts populate the vast gallery of malcontents, revengers, machiavellis, changelings, and what not, in English Renaissance drama; but the rough term of abuse corresponds to a specific concern, and bastardy was a target of growing relevance in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, both by the long assumed moral outrage of illicit sex and fornication and by the economic implications of the fruits of inordinate desires, the curse imposed on a society afflicted with poverty and deprivation, vagrancy and hunger[2], and potential disorder. Be as it may, in each

[1] FIEDLER, Leslie A., *The Stranger in Shakespeare*, St. Albans, Granada, Paladin, 1974; DANBY, John F., *Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear*, London, Faber and Faber, 1948, p. 44.
[2] INGRAM, Martin, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 261 ff, *et passim.*

of Shakespeare's plays a distinctive mark goes hand in hand with the frame of genre and convention, and solid expectations are always denied by the uniqueness of experiment. This also helps explain the strange case of the Bastard Philip Faulconbridge.

Don John, the bastard brother of Don Pedro, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, responds to the interests of the codes of comic celebration and does not correspond to the figure of the impenitent dangerous villain: he is the killjoy, to be properly excluded from the final merry reunion, not the merciless conspirator armed with sinister plans of destruction. The stubborn anti-social knave lays bare his condition to one of his mates: he is 'a plain-dealing villain', closed to any fruition of joy, and an enemy of any social conventions and 'fashions', after all the basic principles of civilized existence and the elegant social practices of Messina ('I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any:', I. 3. 21-23)[3]. He doesn´t even seem very cunning: as a matter of fact, his malevolent tricks, consistent with a trifling threat, will be exposed by Dogberry, a character that is not exactly the epitome of wit and intelligence. Claudio should perhaps, accordingly, have dismissed him immediately when provided with the 'information' of his fiancée's betrayal (or wife, given the legal credibility of the espousals *de presenti)*. Don John can, anyway, explore moral frailties and prejudices, and be successful in the art of persuading Messina of Hero's infidelity: the effortlessness of his achievement strongly insinuates the drawbacks of the social world depicted in this comedy, and the 'culture of slander', haunted by male sexual honour jeopardized by female improper behaviour, paves the way to the precarious triumph of rumour[4]. Claudio and his partners

[3] All quotes from Shakespeare are to be referred to GREENBLATT, Stephen, General Editor, *The Norton Shakespeare based on the Oxford Edition*, New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

[4] The way the legal system and the assumptions of female and male guilt operate in Messina is properly displayed by Cyndia Susan Clegg: 'Truth, Lies, and the Law of Slander in *Much Ado About Nothing*', in JORDAN, Constance, and CUNNINGHAM, Karen, eds., *The Law in*

accept too easily the scandal, and the outraged young man adds to his credulity the self-commiseration that exculpates him on the verge of his penitence. The melancholy outsider may be 'composed and framed of treachery', in his brother's words (5. 1. 233-4), and he may be hunting reasons in his motiveless malignity (which would suggestively add him to Iago's and Richard of Gloucester's line), but his expected punishment, conveyed in the last lines of the play, is proclaimed with the flavour of *o* fait divers*,* or an after-thought, in the moment when the precarious threat of the inglorious fugitive has been definitely exorcised.

By the same token, *King John*'s Bastard is not the accomplished villain in revolt against the trick of nature liable to provide him an argument to deceive, exploit and destroy. Richard of Gloucester, later king Richard III, and, according to John F. Danby, one of the outstanding ancestors of the bastard Edmund, finds in his physical handicap –

> 'I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
> Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
> Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world scarce half made up.'
>
> *Richard III,* 1. 1. 20-21

- an unassailable case for the reaction against the winter of his discontent and the idle atmosphere of the fair well-spoken days of peace, and soon will project his tremendous amoral energy into a world devised for him to bustle in.

Edmund shares this same cunning and exuberant vitality, and to give full vent to the urgency of his instincts he relies on the vigorous lively nature and on the cosmic principle of his elective affinities – 'Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law/ My services are bound.' (*King Lear,* Conflated Text, 1. 2. 1-2). He may be ruthless and

Shakespeare, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Macmillan, Palgrave, Early Modern Literature in History, 2010, pp. 167-188.

indifferent to the devastating effects his pragmatism may cause, but at least he has a point in his discontent – 'Why bastard? Wherefore base? /…/ Why brand they us / With base? With baseness, bastardy? …' (1. 2. 9-10), and audiences are invited to evaluate the sense of his resentment in the context introduced by boastful males (energetic old fathers with the age of grandfathers in a mythic representation that ignores mothers): in the opening moments of the play the Bastard, a respectful by-stander, has to listen to the spicy jokes of the old knights that vaunt their past virility, (' Though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged'), and *King Lear* is pervaded by the established leitmotif of bastardy, almost ubiquitous as evil itself: Gloucester rejects Edgar as a bastard when he believes in the false accusations against his son conceived 'by order of law' ('I never got him', 2. 1. 79), and invests his 'Loyal and natural boy', 2. 1. 85) in his lands and heritage, a gesture to be corroborated later on, when winds blow in a different direction and the persecuted old Earl is deprived of his title and property in favour of the cunning bastard (3. 5), Lear repudiates his wife as an adulteress and labels Regan as bastard if she does not obey her duties towards her father (2. 4. 124-5), and in his enraged and impotent outbursts in the heath against the corrupted human condition he summons bastardy and lasciviousness as the utmost illustration of the *topos* of the world turned upside down ('/… Let copulation thrive, / For Gloucester's bastard son was kinder to his father/ Than were my daughters got 'tween the lawful sheets.', 4. 6. 112-114). Edmund in his fall will bitterly evoke that frail happy glimpse in his life that at least made him the focus of concern and some kind of affection ('Yet Edmund was beloved:/ The one the other poisoned for my sake, / And after slew herself.', 5. 3. 238-40, as a matter of fact rather an illustration of frenzied lust than the expression of true unblemished love), and, when the wheel is come full circle, he has still time for a somewhat unconvincing recantation that does not go without the suggestion that his course was also dictated by a natural condition he could not evade ('I pant

for life. Some good I mean to do, /Despite of mine own nature', 5. 3. 242-4). Brothers and enemies, an archetypical motive in literature given expression in the first words of the villain's voice and in the exhilaration of his auspicious machinations

> 'Well, then,
> Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land
> Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
> As to the legitimate. Fine word, legitimate!
> Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
> And my invention thrives, Edmund the base
> Shall top the legitimate. I grow, I prosper:
> Now gods, stand up for bastards!' 1. 2. 15-22.

- will return with the suggestive note, appropriately enunciated by the lawful brother and upright revenger, that bastardy and adultery were duly punished:

> 'I am no less in blood than thou art, Edmund;
> If more, the more thou'st wronged me.
> My name is Edgar and thy father's son.
> The gods are just and our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to plague us:
> The dark and vicious place where thee he got
> Cost him his eyes.' 5. 3. 166-172.[5]

This rivalry is also inscribed early in the action of *The Life and Death of King John*, but the Bastard has not to do with any accursed figure of tradition. He responds before the King to his brother's claims, Robert Faulconbridge, who wants to be acknowledged as

[5] Honour Matthews sees in the peculiar expression of the myth of Cain and Abel (its use in reverse) a restorative import: 'Edmund dies, but not before he has craved Edgar's forgiveness and attempted to save Lear and Cordelia. It is possible therefore that Shakespeare conceived of Edgar's act as being both punitive and redemptive: 'the perfect revenge' which purifies and does not destroy'., MATTHEWS, Honour, *The Primal Curse: The Myth of Cain & Abel in the Theatre*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1967, p. 55.

the lawful inheritor of his father's estates; and the dispute is over when the airy and truculent young man, that would prevail as the first born according to the presumption of law invoked by King John himself, goes without that prerogative and is rather rewarded with a title of nobility and his recognition as the issue of the illustrious bastardy of Richard Coeur de Lion. He will then be ready to try his fortune in the wars in France. At this juncture his words summon up Edmund's speech in defense of the rights of energetic life-giving nature, although his pragmatism embodies more the common sense of down-to-earth catechism of mortals managing to survive in hard times than the ferocious commitment of Edgar's antagonist –

> 'Something about, a little from the right,
> In at the window, or else o'er the hatch.
> Who dare not stir by day must walk by night,
> And have is have, however men do catch.
> Near or far off, well won is still well shot,
> And I am I, howe'er I was begot.' 1. 1.170-75.

Nor is any malignity to be remarked in his allegiance to Commodity, or self-interest, the 'bias of the world', in the aftermath of the successive inflexions and wayward paths of his betters. His eloquent soliloquy exposes the shocking inflexion of 'fickle France', swerving 'From a resolved and honorable war, / To a most base and vile-concluding peace.', an example paving the way to the legitimacy of his own great expectations ('Since Kings break faith upon Commodity, / Gain, be my lord, for I will worship thee'), and along the action of the play the Bastard will be King John's most loyal and precious subject. His reputation deserves Chatillon's specific mention when the herald of France announces the swift approach of the English army ('With them a bastard of the King's deceased', i. e., Richard Coeur de Lion, II. 1. 65), his daring spirit comes to the fore when, before the walls of Angers he teases and challenges the Duke of Austria, after all the alleged murderer of his father, and urges the King's party to return to the battlefield, and later on his warring qualities are substantiated in the self-

possessed attitude that produces Austria's head, an impressive war trophy, or the matter-of-factness of the gallantry that rescues Queen Eleanor and relieves the King of anxiety (3. 2. 7-10). Time for the Bastard, indeed. Faulconbridge's undeviating faithfulness to King John qualifies him as the good counsellor advising his lord of the general upset and the factitious disposition of the nobles and, later on, mediating him with decision and energy in his efforts to appease the discontented knights, in the same scene, is illustrated in the moment when he joins his voice against the representative of England's archenemy, Cardinal Pandolph, or when he performs the delicate task of shaking the bags of hoarding abbots and setting imprisoned angels at liberty (3. 3. 6-11); and finally, after repudiating the 'inglorious league' with the French orchestrated by the Cardinal, he is entitled to organize resistance against the invaders from France ('Have thou the ordering of this present time', the weak and sick ruler tells him in V. 1. 77). Besides, the rhetorical configuration of his speech has no second among the other characters, and T. R. Barnes comes to the purpose when he stresses mastery of structure and rhythm, and deliberate speech balance in that brief moment of bitter disappointment given the presumed responsibility of the king in the young Arthur's murder (he opens the last speech of Act 4 scene 4 with a personal note, then elaborates on the state of the nation, assuming a choric voice, then returns, in the last verses, to an intimate note[6]). It is still to him, the *parvenu* or 'mounting spirit' in waiting for his moment of luck, and the successful newcomer to the happy few that, however, did not change sides and played a crucial role in English victory, that the final exhortative speech is allocated:

> 'Oh, let us pay the time but needful woe,
> Since it hath been beforehand with our griefs.
> This England never did, nor never shall,
> Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror

[6] BARNES, T. R., *English Verse: Voice and Movement from Wyatt to Yeats*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1967, pp. 40-41.

> But when it first did help to wound itself.
> Now these her princes are come home again,
> Come the three corners of the world in arms
> And we shall shock them. Nought shall make us rue,
> If England to itself do rest but true.'

What does invest the Bastard in this eminence, risking at awarding him textual intention and moral and intellectual persuasiveness?[7] *King John* keeps harping on issues of legitimacy: long before the claims of the rival, the young Arthur, the ostensible challenge to his throne, or the insurgency of the knights corroborating general dissatisfaction, authority is at a stake, and the king and his mother know too well how flimsy is the legitimacy sustaining the established power, actually surviving in 'strong possession' rather than in 'right' (I. 1. 39-40). Bastards and bastardy are not out of place in this competition for titles and pedigrees. As a matter of fact, the same obsession with that topic pervades this play as well: the novel knight will be confirmed in his illustrious bastardy by his mother in the last sequence of Act 1 scene 1, and the fierce dispute between Constance and Queen Eleanor, in Act 2 scene 1, accusing in dueling words each other of adultery and fornication, and therefore dismissing the pretensions of King John and young Arthur, respectively, concerns the same compulsive issue. In this context, Philip Faulconbridge seems, in a way, to be in good company. The popular figure of the Vice, rejoicing in disorder and exhibiting the traits of a characteristic figure of 'mischievous popular culture', significantly immune to danger and death as the Devil of dramatic medieval tradition, as Walter Cohen suggests[8] , keeps an enticing intimacy with the audience, and becomes then the herald of the nation (no matter that the English nation did not exist at the time of King John, or that the ruling *elite* of Norman

[7] The absolute reversion of the traditional cunning Vice and plotter that Alison Findlay, when discussing Edmund, sees in the figure (*Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama*, Manchester, 1994, *apud* WELLS, Stanley, ed., *William Shakespeare, The History of King Lear,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, The Oxford's Classics, 2000, p. 25).

[8] COHEN, Walter, in GREENBLATT, Stephen, The Norton Shakespeare based on the Oxford Edition, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1997, p. 1019.

extraction actually still spoke French). One cannot ignore the web of correspondences established between the action of the play and the time of Elizabeth: in the eyes of Rome, the Tudor queen was a bastard, and as she was also a heretic, Pope Pius V excommunicated her in 1570 by the Bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, and her subjects were released from obedience and urged to put a pious end to her life, and in *King John* the opposition of the protagonist to the Pope and his allies, in Act 3 scene 1, would deserve the same penalty –

> 'Then, by the lawful power that I have,
> Thou shalt stand cursed and excommunicate,
> And blessed shall he be that doth revolt
> From his allegiance to an heretic;
> And meritorious shall that hand be called,
> Canonizèd and worshipped as a saint,
> That takes away by any secret course
> Thy hateful life.' 3. 1. 98-105

- says Cardinal Pandulph to the distant forerunner of the martyrs of the Reformation, most probably the victim in the last Act of the play of the treacherous conspiracy of the Catholic Church and fatal poison ministered by the monk (poisoning was a permanent threat to the Protestant daughter of Henry VIII). Elizabeth was a controversial figure, like King John, and both got rid of rivals by proxy and without assuming full responsibility for the act (Mary, Queen of Scots; young Arthur), both had to cope with foreign impending or real invasion, what could be read as a heaven-sent storm destroys the enemy at sea…[9]. Shakespeare's world is definitively not the one of that John Lackland that lost ignominiously the French dominions his father, Henry II, had left in heritage to the realm, and it does not keep in any distinguished memory department the record of the ignominious defeated part

[9] COHEN, Walter, *idem, ibidem,* pp.1015-1016.

in Runnymede, forced to accept the Magna Carta[10], nor, for that matter, the evocation of that rich lore of the romantic achievements of Robin Hood, so cherished in the Elizabethan age and so profusely recreated in popular literature and drama, as Kevin A. Quarmby has not long ago eloquently demonstrated[11]. Does not the triumph of the Bastard suggest the apology of the fittest, involving the insidious suggestion that legitimate succession is not always the most reasonable and operative solution?

The play lacks the providential frame one can recognize in the Shakespeare's Chronicle Plays – there each dramatic piece as an independent artefact goes hand in hand with the sense of belonging to the wider structure of the Tetralogy -, and the Bastard's words, in the conditional tone rounded up by the last verse, remain inconclusive, in spite of the conventional succession (after all it is Prince Henry who will seat on the throne). Walter Cohen may again have a good point when he remarks that in *King John* the gods stand up for bastards[12]. In other words, this time the stranger in Shakespeare is a bastard among bastards.

[10] This document, anyhow never considered in its pristine historical constitutional import in the Age of Elizabeth, is not even mentioned in *King John.*

[11] QUARMBY, Kevin A., *The Disguised Ruler in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries,* Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama, 2012, pp. Farnham, Surrey, Ashgate Publishing, 2012, *passim*.

[12]COHEN, Walter, *idem, ibidem,* p. 1018.