

Juan F. Cerdá

## Malleable Shakespeare : Reformulating Schechner's Efficacy-Entertainment Braid

**Abstract:** *In his book from 1988, Performance Theory, Richard Schechner described performance as a dialectical negotiation of two axes functioning as poles of a continuum. This 'basic polarity', which Schechner termed the efficacy-entertainment braid, is epitomised in medieval cycle plays, church rituals and court ceremonies (efficacy pole) and bards, troubadours and fairs (entertainment pole). While Schechner privileged aspects closer to the efficacy pole as responsible for a play's universality, this paper oppositely suggests a balanced distribution of performative elements in the efficacy and the entertainment axes both to move away from the notion of universality and to account for at least part of Shakespeare's dramatic potential to appeal audiences through consecutive historical scenarios. Thus, by using examples from Titus Andronicus and The Comedy of Errors, this essay illustrates how Shakespeare's dramatic malleability can be seen to emerge from both poles of Schechner's braid.*

**Key words:** *Shakespeare, Schechner, Performance Theory, Titus Andronicus, The Comedy of Errors.*

One branch of academic criticism has traditionally defended Shakespeare's quality, international, and inter-historical success through variations on one general idea: his plays portray basic human emotions or address essential values that transcend language and culture – Shakespeare is universal. This long-standing conception can be identified as late as 1994 in Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* yet, in the last few decades, literary theory has adversely developed an increasing self-awareness about the critic's imposition over the artistic object, alerting against such suspicious notions (Pozuelo and Aradra 2000: 33-61). From early on, Shakespeare, the ultimate canonical figure in Western literature, became the logical target for those who intended to reconsider literature from alternative perspectives; consequently, theoretical approaches were applied and even articulated to re-evaluate his work. Criticism focused on historical, social and ideological determinants, borrowing concepts from different disciplines such as Psychology, Post-structuralist Philosophy, Marxism, Anthropology or Sociology, amongst others. Harold Bloom's description of some of these critical approaches as 'Schools of Resentment' (Bloom 1994: Chapter 1), or Jonathan Culler's complaints about inter-disciplinary amateurism (Culler 1995) exemplify

the tensions emanating from the new directions criticism was taking and their possible consequences: the Shakespearean text was dissolving, Shakespeare was being undermined.

In perspective, focusing on other aspects of the Shakespearean cosmos seems a necessary and useful step to counterbalance the lopsided academic tradition towards the author and the text; still, the causes of Shakespeare's success, in all its complexity, remain greatly unexplained. A playwright's success can hardly be described as stable, uniform or universal, and thus modern criticism has appealingly suggested that cultural value is constructed in relation to cultural and historical variables (Bennett 1990: 112). In other words, context inescapably affects a play's reception in innumerable ways, ranging from the ideological fostering of political institutions to aesthetic convention. Yet again, Shakespeare's plays have managed to be continuously staged, challenging context and audience variation. This essay assumes that reception is significantly determined by contextual factors and by the mediating role of the audiences' codes, conventions and expectations, yet it also argues that part of Shakespeare's receptive potential is promoted by the text itself. Without falling into essentialist or reductive categorizations, this essay aims to describe how, transforming and reformulating previous traditions, Shakespeare provides a highly malleable cultural object that embraces change by accumulating a wide range of potentially successful theatrical elements, by providing a text that offers itself to reproduction, adaptation and appropriation. To illustrate this, the essay will concentrate on the classical and medieval heritage through two early works, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Titus Andronicus*.

For Richard Schechner, Elizabethan drama is only one historical variety of the wider concept of performance, which entails a broad range of public and private events. Any performance is characterized by a 'basic polarity' that Schechner terms the efficacy-entertainment braid, a dialectical negotiation of two axes that he describes as 'poles of a continuum' (1988: 252, 120). Efficacy is epitomized in medieval cycle plays, church rituals and court ceremonies, while entertainment is exemplified by bards, troubadours and fairs:

When efficacy dominates, performances are universalistic, allegorical, ritualized, tied to a stable established order; this kind of theatre persists for a relatively long time. When entertainment dominates, performances are class-oriented, individualized, show business, constantly adjusting to the tastes of fickle audiences (Schechner 1988: 123).

The universalistic, allegorical and ritual side of Shakespearean performance, its efficacy, can be understood by examining Shakespeare's classical and medieval heritage, and the reformulation of myth and symbol. Schechner roots symbolic behaviour in performance to ancient rites, and Greek drama is credited as the genetic source for Western culture:

The transformation of combat behaviour in performance into performance is the theatrical heart of the kaiko. This transformation is identical to the action at the heart of Greek theater, and from the Greeks down through western theater history. Namely, characterization and the presentation of real or possible events – the story, the plot, or dramatic action worked out by people, gods, or demons – is a transformation of real behaviour into symbolic behaviour' (Schechner 1988: 109).

The perception of Shakespeare's universality relates crucially to this 'characterization of events' and their 'transformation into symbolic behaviour'. Shakespeare's *great tragedies* have repeatedly been described according to the central symbolic premise of the main character/s – Othello/Jealousy, Hamlet/Doubt, Romeo and Juliet/Romantic Love etc. – although, potentially, the metaphorical/symbolic/allegorical is present in every Shakespearean drama. Shakespeare's apparent universality has emanated from the *elements of efficacy* in his work, instigated by a carefully crafted use of language, and his treatment of action. This process can be illustrated in relation to previous dramatic traditions bidirectionally:

On the one hand, symbolic potential is assimilated from classical drama in early works, like *Titus Andronicus*, which 'depicts several Ovidian myths in the action – the world's four ages, and the story of Tereus, Philomel, and Procne' (Miola 2000: 19). This investment in the symbolic can also be related to medieval moralities such as *Mankind* or *Everyman*, where allegory is the organizing principle of the action. The classical and medieval traditions are reflected in Shakespeare's use of language in its symbolic function: his continuous use of the *sententia* recalls Senecan tragedy, while the repeated use of biblical reference parallels with the medieval cycle plays and moralities which present religious doctrine by means of the reconstruction of biblical passages or the allegorical characterization of events. In Schechner's terms, Shakespeare's plays can be described as belonging to the tradition of ritual performance both by the symbolic potential of the Shakespearean action and by the conscious use of linguistic techniques that foster transcendent symbolism, myth or rite.

On the other hand, Shakespearean characterization differs greatly from classical and medieval drama. As early as 1839, José Blanco-White pointed out that Shakespeare's plays are articulated in such a way that language provides a high degree of differentiation between the characters (Blanco-White [1839] 2007). The immediate result of this deliberate linguistic technique is a strong illusion of individuality and humanization by which main characters are perceived to have a voice of their own, to be real. This illusory perception was epitomized by Madeleine Doran when she wrote 'what a marvel is Hamlet! I mean in the legerdemain by which Shakespeare fools us into thinking Hamlet is a living person' (Doran 1976: 33). Despite the Elizabethan elaborate artificiality of language, Shakespeare provides his characters with an unprecedented linguistic differentiation that, added to their symbolic potential, offers a wide range of options to a changing audience.

Since his early works, Shakespeare displays this dually articulated mechanism of symbolic significance and *humanized* characterization that results in the creation of a new form of drama that invests strongly in both poles of the efficacy-entertainment braid. Although increasing individualization and humanized characterization implicitly entail a departure from symbol and allegory, Shakespeare allows both aspects to coexist. Lavinia seems to explicitly address this interest in *Titus Andronicus*: 'Ay, come Semiramis, nay, barbarous Tamora, / for no name fits thy nature but thy own' (II.iii.118-9).<sup>1</sup> Lavinia's words fulfil this double function: the parallel between Tamora and Semiramis (previously suggested by Aaron

---

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Shakespeare's plays taken from Hughes 1994 (*Titus Andronicus*) and Dorsch 2004 (*The Comedy of Errors*).

in II.i.22) brings every connotation of the Semiramis myth, yet Lavinia's words explicitly bring attention to Tamora, the genuinely humanized fictional character.

In terms of receptive potential, Shakespeare's conception of drama implies certain advantages. Symbolic interpretation is both maintained and transformed: myths, symbols and concepts, old and new, remain for those audiences familiar, capable or eager to *read into* the play, to transcend the *immediate* performance. At the same time, myths are reformulated and updated in such a humanized manner that the non-symbolic (the individual, the ephemeral, etc.) is provided for audiences that favour such aspects of performance.

The equilibrium between efficacy and entertainment in Shakespeare's plays is also related to genre redefinition. According to Santiago Segura Munguía, classical tragedy and comedy were two well-differentiated genres: 'In Tragedy, actors incarnate mythological Gods or heroes, [...] in the Comedy, Gods perform an irrelevant role. The action is installed in the real world of every-day life [...] which the audience can be identified with' (Segura 2001: 282). Accordingly, classical tragedy openly displayed myth and symbol to assure the didactic half of the Aristotelian principle, whereas the lower genre of comedy was supposed to avoid morality and doctrine, and to provide mainly festive humour and entertainment. As opposed to the tragic playwright, 'the writer of comedies does not intend to supplant the moralist in his corrective function of the vices and habits of society' (Segura 2001: 282).

In the treatment of comedy, Shakespearean drama is closer to medieval drama, in the sense that 'the vices and habits of society' are clearly palpable even if they do not provide unproblematic moral models. *Mankind*'s romping tone, its cursing, singing, or its elements of slapstick comedy are all elements that promote the staging of moral examples in an entertaining manner. Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* shares with *Mankind* many of these farcical and comic elements, together with the addressing of "serious" issues. Although Shakespeare abandons the use of allegorical characters to address moral or social concerns, *The Comedy of Errors* is an especially doctrinal play. It includes 'some sixty direct biblical quotations, with others taken from the Book of Common Prayer and the Homilies' (Dorsch 2004: 1), and the conception of marriage and loyalty displayed through the interaction of the main characters seems to be rooted in Christian precepts. At the same time Donna Hamilton 'sees the play in terms of religious conflict' between Protestant and Catholic doctrine (King 2004: 13).

This conflation of simultaneous elements illustrates Shakespeare's redefinition of drama in terms of genre. Closer to the medieval moralities, Shakespeare overrules the classical restraints on comedy by continuously addressing those matters which were initially limited to tragedy. Miola observed this distinction between the *Comedy of Errors* and its immediate source, pointing out that while 'Plautus presents us with simple character types... [Adriana] introduces the topic of gender inequity' (Miola 2000: 77). Through its main characters, Adriana, Antipholus's mistress or Pinch, *Errors* incorporates certain questions that go beyond the aim of immediate entertainment. Different conflicts, like gender and master/servant relations or miscommunication, are *added* to the classical conception of comedy. The assimilation of such topics becomes a source of interest for Elizabethan and later audiences, that will potentially be faced with the task of interpreting, assimilating, contextualizing or renegotiating such frictions. The classical notion of comedy, with its restricted focus on entertainment is balanced with elements that originally belonged exclusively to the tragic paradigm in the Shakespearean reformulation of the genre. In this

respect Shakespeare is closer to the medieval conception of drama, as described by Wickham, who argued that 'successful medieval drama is essentially tragi-comedy' (Wickham 1981: 17). This compensation of comedy by giving room to "serious" issues – ranging from the moral, the philosophical or the intellectual, to the social – is responsible for the higher degree of adaptability of Shakespearean comedy compared to previous models. As Schechner pointed out, if the 'fickle' elements in comedy become obsolete due to changes in the historically dependant context of the performance, the 'serious' elements provide a chance of survival. This is not, as Schechner suggests, because efficacy elements are essentially universalistic, but rather it is a consequence of the adaptive possibilities they offer. It is a question of accumulation: if the playwright offers a text with elements of both efficacy and entertainment, its malleability will provide a higher *adaptability quotient* in terms of audience acceptance. Following Bennett and Schechner, the potential of Shakespearean comedy to survive the evolution of the codes and conventions of the audience responds to its balanced investment in elements of both efficacy and entertainment.

Shakespeare's reformulation of tragedy will have identical repercussions in this respect, for it expands the classical model by not restricting it to its symbolic and didactic potential. One of the main differences between Shakespearean and classical drama is attributed by Miola to the addition of 'comic characters to his source stories to reflect humorously and satirically on the main action' (Miola 2000: 76). The dramatic function of comic characters is not limited to the entertaining aspects of performance, for they are frequently central to the efficient/symbolic characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy, yet the inclusion of these characters promotes the non-didactic, the humorous, the exclusively entertaining – a revolution in the concept of tragedy. As in comedy, Shakespeare increases the genre's potential for adaptability by blurring its boundaries. The marginal appearance of the clown in *Titus Andronicus* (IV.iii and IV.iv) can be seen as an underdeveloped example of this practice.

The efficacy-entertainment braid provides a useful theoretical scenario for the description of Shakespeare's malleability, but Schechner restrictively associates the surviving potential of performance to the efficacy axis, to the allegorical, to the universalistic. This conception is incompatible with the determinant role of the audience in relation to theatrical success or durability. If, at a particular time and place, the dominant codes and conventions of the audience favour the entertaining elements of performance – just as Schechner himself has characterized the dominant model of production/reception from the Elizabethan period until the 1960s, or *aesthetic theatre* (Schechner 1988: chapter 4) – it is precisely the entertaining elements that can procure a play's positive reception through this stage. This essay supports the idea that both efficacy *and* entertainment must be provided in the text in order to promote a play's survival in the sea change of theatrical convention.

Language can be described as the text's primary tool for this new conception of myth/symbol and the staging of moral/intellectual conflicts, yet language is also the initial element responsible for potential entertainment. Shakespeare's resourceful, elaborate and manifold torrent of expressive devices – dual meaning, imagery, conceptualism, parallelism, soliloquy, repetition, rhyme, wit, stichomythia, rhythm, alliteration, puns, etc. – provide an extremely diverse source for entertainment, regardless of genre distinctions. Because of these features, amongst other things, the *acting* of the text, its performance, is a source of

entertainment in its own right. Shakespeare's texts accumulate such an amount of potentially entertaining elements that classical and medieval drama seems to be outnumbered or outdone by accumulation; especially since the Shakespearean text reworks existing sources in terms of plot and dramatic action. In *The Comedy of Errors*, confusion, misunderstanding and mistaken identities provide the initial entertaining setting of the play. Antipholus's denied entry into his home, like most of the comic situations, is already provided by Plautus' *Menaechmi*, and the misplacing of objects, slapstick passages, singing, swearing, or using bad Latin for comic effect seem inspired by medieval moralities such as *Mankind*; even so, Shakespeare rewrites on the premise of increasing comic potential by multiplying these elements. Echoing another Plautine comedy, *Amphitruo*, Shakespeare adds a second set of twin servants, resulting in the multiplication of comic misunderstandings from seventeen to fifty (King 2004: 1; see note 1). In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare uses conventions from the Senecan tragedy of revenge to provide a gory and ultra-violent play. The spectacle of blood and violence can also be considered a powerful source of potential entertainment for certain audiences, credited by the success of the revenge tragedy in the 17<sup>th</sup> C. or the 20<sup>th</sup>-century vogue of the action film.

At a global level, the potentially entertaining elements of the Shakespearean play partly respond to its context of production: the Elizabethan conception of drama as *spectacle*, where sword-fights, singing, dancing, or the shape and disposition of the Elizabethan theatre functioned with the text as a unified whole. These conditions have since evolved and theatrical space has been subject to transformation (frontal disposition, experimental spaces, etc.) or reconstruction (Renaissance theatrical spaces in London, Almagro and elsewhere), yet the negotiation, reproduction or adaptation of Elizabethan non-textual elements has a direct implication in the reception of Shakespeare's work. Elizabethan drama was originally a theatrically rich spectacle that has offered many alternatives for later productions and, at the same time, the Shakespearean text provided a set of characteristics that have continued to be appealing to different contexts.

For certain critics, early plays such as *The Comedy of Errors* or *Titus Andronicus* might reflect Shakespeare's inexperience as playwright, whether caused by their structural shortcomings – long expository speeches in *Errors* (Wells 1995: 20) – or linguistic immaturity – as in the failed use of language in *Titus* (Hughes 1994: 37). Regardless of their relative quality, these early works provide a panorama of Shakespeare's initial investment in different dramatic elements and techniques that need to be relativized in relation to the audience. A dance, a sword-fight, a song, the cutting out of a tongue, a joke, the delayed suspense of an execution, a line of verse, the confusion of a servant, or any other potentially entertaining element is only successful in relation to the audience. The reception of Shakespeare in different cultures, at different times, demonstrates that even Shakespeare's language, one of his least challenged values, can only be positively assessed in relation to the codes and conventions which, by definition, are culturally, historically, socially or ideologically determined/conditioned. The Shakespearean text has not managed to endure and succeed because it contains certain universal values, since values only exist historically. Shakespeare's reformulation of myth and symbol, its apparent potential to transcend, to mean, to mirror universal human qualities, thoughts or behaviours, or to present social or political preoccupations are not the cause of his relatively vast success, for it is only the changing audience that defines the acceptance of such elements. Once the most fickle, or

historically determined entertaining elements of performance are considered as relevant as the universalistic, mythic, symbolic or ritual elements can Schechner's braid illustrate how Shakespearean texts have managed to survive and succeed under so many changing circumstances. The accumulation of such an amount and variety of elements has provided theatre and publishing companies with a polymorphic and flexible cultural object that welcomes and encourages reception and critical evaluation.

**University of Murcia, Spain**

## **References**

- Bennett, Susan (1990). *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, London: Routledge.
- Bevington, D. (1975). *Medieval Drama*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Blanco-White, José [1839] (2007). "The Pictorial Shakespeare", in *Shakespeare en España. Textos 1764-1916*, by Ángel-Luis Pujante y Laura Campillo eds., Granada/Murcia: Universidad de Granada/Edit.um.
- Bloom, Harold (1994). *The Western Canon*, London: Macmillan.
- Bullough, Geoffrey, ed. (1957). *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, London: Routledge.
- Culler, Jonathan (1995). "Comparative Literature, at Last!", in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, by Ch. Bernheimer ed., Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 117-121.
- Denny, Neville (1973). *Medieval Drama*, London: Edward Arnold.
- Dent, J. M. (1993). *Introduction to Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, by Cowley A. C. ed., London: Everyman.
- Doran, Madeleine (1976). *Shakespeare's Dramatic Language*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Dorsch, T. S. ed. (2004). *The Comedy of Errors*, by William Shakespeare, in *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Frye, Northrop (1963). *Fables of Identity*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Happé, Peter, ed. (1984). *Medieval English Drama*, London: Macmillan.
- Hightet, Gilbert (1985). *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hughes, Alan, ed. (1994). *Titus Andronicus*, by William Shakespeare, in *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- King, Ros (2004). *Introduction to The Comedy of Errors*, by William Shakespeare, in *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, ed. T. S. Dorsch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Knights, L. C. (1963). "King Lear as Metaphor". In *Myth and Symbol*, by Northrop Frye, L.C. Knights et al., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Miola, Robert S. (2000). *Shakespeare's Reading*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pozuelo Yvancos, José María and Rosa María Aradra Sánchez (2000). *Teoría del canon y literatura española*, Madrid: Cátedra.
- Schechner, Richard (1988). *Performance Theory*, New York: Routledge.
- Segura Munguía, Santiago (2001). *El teatro en Grecia y Roma*, Bilbao: Zidor.
- Wells, Stanley, ed. (1995). *The Comedy of Errors*, by William Shakespeare, in *The New Penguin Shakespeare*, London: Penguin.

Wickham, Glynne (1981). Early English Stages, 1300-1660, in *Medieval English Drama*, ed. Peter Happé, London: Macmillan.