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Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

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A Feast of Strange Opinions: Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes on the English Renaissance Stage

Edited by Marco Duranti
and Emanuel Stelzer

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CEMP - Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

The series of CEMP volumes offers studies and fully annotated scholarly editions related to the CEMP open-access digital archive. This archive includes texts pertaining to the genres of the paradox, of the paradoxical fiction, and of the problem, which were published in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and which are currently unavailable online and/or not open access (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/bib-arc/cemp). Our digital archive features diplomatic, semidiplomatic, and modernised editions of selected works, furnished with critical apparatuses and editorial notes, alongside related documentary materials, which, in turn, are relevant to poetic and dramatic texts of the English Renaissance. These texts provide fundamental testimony of the early modern episteme, functioning as a hinge joining widespread forms of the paradoxical discourse in different genres and texts and within the development of sceptical thinking.

The project is part of the Skenè Centre as well as of the Project of Excellence Digital humanities applied to foreign languages and literatures (2018-2022) Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the University of Verona (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/en/).

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5

Paradox in Performance

Bryan Crockett

Abstract

Principles developed by the mid-twentieth century anthropologist Victor Turner can be applied to some early modern plays, most notably Shakespeare's. Some of these plays achieve their effects by involving the audience in a unifying, sympathetic, communal response that effaces cultural distinctions. Such performances employ a rhetoric of communitas. Other plays tacitly invite members of the audience to choose a side, to argue about the play after the production, to defend one understanding of the play over another. Such is the rhetoric of structure.

According to Turner (1975, 34), the central or "root" paradigm of European culture in Shakespeare's day was essentially sacrificial, involving the individual's rejection of selfhood as a response to Christ's martyrdom. Turner argues that social dramas in the Western tradition tend to evoke the sacrificial paradigm, even if obliquely, using its energies to resolve crises. One of the most striking aspects of a culture's root paradigms is that any focal symbol growing out of a paradigm is "numinous" because it is paradoxical, "a coincidence of opposites, a semantic structure in tension between opposite poles of meaning" (88-9). The Eucharist, for example, embodies both death and life for the believer, who vicariously participates in Christ's death and resurrection every time the elements are received. In periods of crisis, according to Turner, the paradoxical status of root paradigms is reinforced and heightened. As a result, performative negotiations of the crisis tend toward either a conscious embracing of the paradox in all its contradictoriness or a resolution of the paradox into one of its contrary principles. That process helps explain the relentlessly militant tone of a great deal of early modern discourse.

Keywords: structure; communitas; sacrifice; root paradigm; social drama; Shakespeare; paradox

At a crucial moment in the last act of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the imprisoned king provides a brief anatomy of a paradox as he muses on the thoughts that inhabit the little world of his cell. "The better sort," he tells himself,

> As thoughts of things divine, are intermixed
> With scruples, and do set the word itself
> Against the word, as thus: "Come, little ones",
> And then again,
> "It is as hard to come as for a camel
> To thread the postern of a small needle's eye".
> (5.5.11-16)[1]

The closer one comes to a crucial truth, King Richard at last understands, the more one is constrained to use the opposing terms of the paradox in order to express that truth.

The dual construct of the paradox – a term or idea set against an opposing one in a way that evokes some hitherto occult truth that casts light on both terms or ideas – is instantiated in the very nature of acting, of role-playing. The person on a theatrical stage is simultaneously an actor and a character. Members of the audience watch and listen as the character gives voice to an idea conceived by the playwright, while the idea's mode of expression is determined by the actor. The audience experiences a complex interplay involving playwright, character, and actor. Such multiplicity of perspectives lends itself to paradoxical thought.

Particularly in early modernity, the stage became the site of not only of what we usually understand as enacted conflict and resolution of a dramatic presentation, a self-contained story, but also of what Turner called a social drama: a real-world series of stages beginning with a breach of societal norms and ending with the instigator's reintegration into society. Such dramas, whether in the real world or the imagined one created by a playwright, typically find expression in the language of paradox.

Central to Turner's understanding of cultural performances, whether played out in real-world ritualistic conflict and resolution or in the fictive world of a staged presentation, is the idea that the

[1] All quotations from Shakespeare's plays refer to Shakespeare 1997.

rhetoric arising out of a breach of social relations tends toward either "structure" or "communitas". Turner explains the difference:

> The bonds of communitas are anti-structural in that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, non-rational (though not *ir*rational), I-Thou or Essential We relationships, in Martin Buber's sense. Structure is all that holds people apart, defines their differences, and constrains their actions. (1974, 46-7)

The same rhetorical forces apply to most staged drama, including Shakespeare's; some plays achieve their effect by involving the audience in a unifying, sympathetic, communal response that effaces cultural distinctions. Such plays employ a rhetoric of communitas. Other plays tacitly invite members of the audience to choose a side, to argue about the play after the production, to defend one understanding of the play over another. Such is the rhetoric of structure.

Early modern European paradoxes achieve their force in part through their restatement of central Christian mysteries, whether Catholic or Protestant. The language of Christian thought is insistently paradoxical, from the sayings of Jesus to the epistles of Paul to the creeds developed in the ecumenical councils of the early church to the meditations of medieval mystics to the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Renaissance Platonists to the language of Protestant reformers. Heir to all these sources and attuned to the power of literary paradox, William Shakespeare incorporated it, in his poems as well as his plays, to singular effect.

At the start of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, for example, the title character enters alone – a stage direction in the earliest printed editions makes that clear – and delivers a speech that seems anything but a private meditation spoken aloud. It is a speech made for an audience, a speech meant to be shared. And, of course, everyone in the theatre audience is there to share it, to hear Richard say, "Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this son of York" (1.1.1-2). This son of York is Richard's older brother, the king: Edward IV, whose emblem was three shining suns. And so, Richard seems to say, his brother the king, the son, s-o-n of the house of York, is like the sun, s-u-n, effulgent, shimmering with light. It is a compliment fit for a king. But again, the king is not there to hear

the compliment; Richard is alone on the stage. As often with drama, Shakespearean and otherwise, a soliloquy affords the opportunity to bring the audience into the speaker's imagined world – in this case, a world offering only resentment to the younger brother. It seems that Richard is laying bare his heart to the theatre audience, especially when he says:

> But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
> Nor made to court an amorous looking glass;
> I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
> Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
> Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world scarce half made up,
> And that so lamely and unfashionable
> That dogs bark at me as I halt by them —
> Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
> Have no delight to pass away the time,
> Unless to see my shadow in the sun
> And descant on mine own deformity.
> (1.1.14-25)

Then, after revealing his unwilling humiliation, he lets the audience in on his plan. He says,

> And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
> To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
> I am determined to prove a villain,
> And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
> (1.1.28-31)

"I am determined". Do those three words mean that he has decided, has made up his own mind, has willed himself, has *determined* to be a villain, or does it mean that he *has been* destined, *pre*determined to be a villain? Both interpretations are plausible now, just as they were when Shakespeare wrote the play. That humble word *am* ("I *am* determined to prove a villain") can mean one or the other. Shakespeare has given us a fine paradox: Richard seems to be somehow both fated and free. Imagining that at least for Richard such a thing can be possible is the challenge Shakespeare lays before his audience. And is it going too far to include every audience in the same situation –

trembling between the mighty opposites of fate and freedom? Or can one somehow be both fated *and* free? A fine paradox. A good actor can sustain the ambiguity, can leave the audience wavering between two apparently irreconcilable possibilities. In effect Richard says, "I am the embodiment of a paradox".

In England the use of the literary paradox reached its apex in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: the time of Shakespeare and his fellow poet John Donne, whose nineteenth sonnet, for example, begins with the line "Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one" (Donne 1998, 207). Vexing or not, an experiential if not a logical exposure to the apparently irreconcilable terms of a paradox speaks to a whole range of troubling events.

One example: in 1561, three years before Shakespeare was born, it seemed that God had raised his hand against his own house in London, causing lightning to strike and burn the steeple of St Paul's Cathedral. Clearly, it seemed, God was sending a message. But what message? The Church of England bishop James Pilkington revealed his answer in a sermon at London's Paul's Cross, the high-profile outdoor venue in the shadow of the cathedral, where thousands of Londoners – as many as 6,000, we are told – typically flocked to the churchyard on Sundays to hear Paul's Cross sermons. The reason for the lightning strike, Pilkington told the congregation, was the people's residual, popish superstition and ignorance. With that bolt of lightning, Pilkington proclaimed from Paul's Cross, God was sending a clear message: the people were to give up their popish ways, fully embracing the doctrines of the protestant Church of England.

This was too much for the staunch Catholic John Morwen. He wrote and published a pamphlet (Morwen 1563) explaining that obviously, God sent the bolt of lightning as a call for all of England to return to the old faith.

Who is entitled to read the book of the world? The answer is not always clear, but the process of developing that answer can be worked out in what the mid-twentieth century anthropologist Victor Turner calls social dramas. The rhetoric of some of these social enactments, according to Turner, tends toward *structure*, whereby social distinctions and conventions are heightened and reinforced, while the rhetoric of other enactments tends toward what Turner calls *communitas*, whereby conventional distinctions are softened

and inclusive (1974, 34-5). Satiric comedies, for example, usually tend toward structure, while romantic comedies usually tend toward *communitas.*

According to Turner, the central or 'root' paradigm of European culture in Shakespeare's day was essentially sacrificial, involving the individual's rejection of selfhood as a response to Christ's martyrdom. Turner argues that social dramas in the Western tradition tend to evoke the sacrificial paradigm, even if obliquely, using its energies to resolve crises (1974, 34). One of the most striking aspects of a culture's root paradigms is that any focal symbol growing out of a paradigm is "numinous" because it is paradoxical, "a coincidence of opposites, a semantic structure in tension between opposite poles of meaning" (1974, 88-9). The Eucharist, for example, embodies both death and life for the believer, who vicariously participates in Christ's death and resurrection every time the elements are received.

In periods of crisis, according to Turner, the paradoxical status of root paradigms is reinforced and heightened. As a result, performative negotiations of the crisis tend toward *either* a conscious embracing of the paradox in all its contradictoriness or a resolution of the paradox into one of its contrary principles. That process, it seems to me, helps explain the relentlessly militant tone of a great deal of early modern discourse.

It was largely Turner's work, followed by that of Erving Goffman and systematized by Richard Schechner (see Schechner 2020), that led to the 'performative turn' that soon gained prominence in the social sciences. In anthropological thought, performance is not limited to self-consciously staged presentations; it assumes that all human activities, whether presented with a public audience in mind or not, are performances, and that spoken words constitute meaningful 'speech-acts'.

Debora Shuger has argued that the general shift from premodern to modern thought involves what she calls a "thickening" of boundaries, an increasing tendency to think in rigidly exclusive categories. She says:

> The sacramental/analogical character of *pre*-modern thought tends to deny rigid boundaries; nothing is simply itself, but things are signs of other things and one thing may be inside another, as Christ

> is *in* the heart, or turn into something else, as the substance of the eucharistic bread turns into the body of Christ. With the advent of modernity the borders between both conceptual *and national* territories were redrawn as solid rather than dotted lines. (Shuger 1990, 11)

Stephen Greenblatt calls attention to the early modern fascination with what he calls "the occult relation between opposites" (1991, 72). This fascination, of course, was hardly new; its roots are ancient in the East as well as the West, where those roots go back at least to Empedocles. It is evident in Shakespeare's sonnets and narrative poems as well as his plays. In *Macbeth*, to cite just one example, we have the riddling of the three weird sisters with their "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.12), which leads Macbeth to spin a riddle of his own: "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good" (1.3.129-30). Of course, he is only half right, which means his thinking has gone *very* wrong. His tragedy is that he does not know the difference between a riddle and a paradox.

It is worthwhile to pause here to take a quick look at that difference. An eight-year-old of my acquaintance recently stumped me with this riddle; I could not come up with an answer. "What is greater than God, more evil than the devil; the poor have it, the rich need it, and if you eat it, you die?". The answer? *Nothing*. Nothing is greater than God; nothing is more evil than the devil; the poor have nothing; the rich need nothing; and if you eat nothing, you die.

My point here is that unlike its cousin the riddle, paradox retains the puzzling tension that makes it hover just beyond definitive resolution. With a riddle, though, the tension of irresolution is forever slackened once you know the answer. It would be pointless for me to pose that same riddle a second time.

Paradox is different. While it can come to seem hackneyed if overused, its energy is, potentially, at least, never truly slackened. For example, a well-worn paradox like "to find your life you must lose it" is, for one who chooses to embrace it, always urgent, there to be remembered, its compelling energies to be renewed again and again.

The tolerability of paradox is, for some, a matter of taste. To my ear, it is still refreshing to hear Stephen Gosson's riddling inquiry in his sermon *The Trumpet of Warre*: "what is that, that is the highest

the lowest, the fairest the foulest, the strongest the weakest, the richest the porest, the happiest the vnhappiest, the safest and the most in danger of any thing in the world?" (Gosson 1598, sig. F5*v*-F6*r*) The answer? The good Christian. And a reading the rest of the sermon explains in a more prosaic way just how that string of paradoxes makes sense.

In some situations paradox arguably holds up better than its near neighbor, the oxymoron. Romeo, for example, speaks in oxymora befitting the besotted young lover that he is, still infatuated with Rosaline. In the play's first scene, he comes upon signs of the recent brawl between the hot-headed young men of both houses, the Montagues and the Capulets. Romeo says,

> O me! What fray was here?
> Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all.
> Here's much to do with hate, but more with love.
> Why, then, O brawling love, O loving hate,
> O anything of nothing first create,
> O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
> Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms,
> Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,
> Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!
> This love feel I, that feel no love in this.
> (1.171-80)

Compare these overblown oxymora to what Romeo says when he first lays eyes on Juliet in the speech that begins:

> O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
> It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
> As a rich jewel . . .
> Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
> (1.5.45-8)

Clearly, Romeo has moved beyond the exorbitant comparisons he lavished on Rosaline.

When Romeo meets Juliet, the two are so enamored of each other, so clearly meant for one another, that their first exchange of words constitutes a sonnet that intertwines love and religion. Romeo raises his palm and begins the exchange:

> If I profane with my unworthiest hand
> This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
> My lips, two blushing pilgrims ready stand
> To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.
> (1.5.94-7)

We have there a quatrain: a four-line verse of a sonnet in the English format, steeped in the religious imagery of pilgrims traveling to a shrine. Juliet replies with a quatrain of her own:

> Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
> Which mannerly devotion shows in this:
> For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
> And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.
> (1.5.98-101)

Juliet, playfully aware of Romeo's comparison of her to a shrine, shows that she too can play such a game. In her quatrain to him, she says, in effect, "You're a pilgrim going to a shrine? Well, how do the palmers on the pilgrimage show their devotion? Palm to palm". Her use of the word *mannerly* suggests good manners with a nice pun on the *mano*. Now, as a further sign that the young lovers are meant for one another, they share a quatrain. Thinking he can outwit her, Romeo says, "Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?" (1.5.102). She replies, "Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in *prayer*" (103). Not kissing; praying, beseeching. Now Romeo thinks he has found the words to win the verbal skirmish. He says, "O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do; / They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair" (104-5). In other words he says to her, you're not going to let me *despair*, lose all hope of getting that kiss, are, you? With her reply, "Saints do not move, but grant for prayers' sake" (106), Juliet offers him a chance, saying, in effect, I'm a saint? Well, the enshrined saint does not *move*, does not initiate the action, but the saint might grant the wish for which the palmer prays. Romeo sees his chance. The sonnet needs just one more line, and he supplies it: "Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged" (107). And he kisses her. Sadly, this mutually constructed sonnet marks the high point of their love.

It is worth noting that Romeo, advocate of using lips instead of hands, dies by taking poison through the lips. Juliet, who prefers the touching of hands to the touching of lips, dies at her own hand, with a dagger. The implicit foreshadowing is a reminder that we have been told in the play's prologue that the young lovers are star-crossed, fated by the heavens to come to a tragic end.

As for Romeo's oxymora before laying eyes on Juliet, with all his hypertrophic talk of "bright smoke, cold fire, sick health" and so on, the difference between the rhetorical force of his wordplay regarding Rosaline and his paradoxical exchange with Juliet is clear. As Shakespeare very well knew, the oxymoron had become so overused by English poets of his day, especially in sonnets, that he felt constrained to write a love sonnet of his own, the 130th, demonstrating the overuse of the oxymoron and the extravagant simile:

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
> I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
> But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
> And in some perfumes is there more delight
> Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
> I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
> That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
> I grant I never saw a goddess go;
> My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare.

In Shakespeare's hands, what begins as a deflation of overblown oxymora and similes in love poems ends as a heartfelt compliment to the speaker's lover.

I do not want to end before touching on a paradox that has been so woven into humanity's rituals, Eastern and Western, that we do not often recognize its paradoxical status. It has to do with sacrifice. The paradox evokes the ancient idea that in order for good to come, a sacrifice, often a bloody one, must be made. Whether it

flows through the veins of a hapless Aztec or a blameless Nazarene, someone's blood must be spilled if the gods are to be appeased.

The one-man Chorus who begins *Romeo and Juliet* speaks in the language of sacrifice, suggesting that the young lovers' deaths are necessary to set things right in Verona. Naught but the children's end, says the Chorus, could bring peace to the city. The paradox is that for the good to prevail, the good must die.

Soon after Shakespeare's time, when fascination with paradox was everywhere on display, a very different kind of thinking emerged. In retrospect it seems striking that Thomas Hobbes, that prophet of the Enlightenment, was just a generation younger than Shakespeare. Yet in sensibility he was worlds away. Unlike Shakespeare and a whole constellation of the other bright lights of early modernity, Hobbes was no friend of the paradox, and certainly no spokesman for *eros* as understood by Plato and as embodied in Shakespearean drama. It was Hobbes who said in his enormously influential *Leviathan*, "That which taketh away the reputation of wisdom . . . is the enjoining of a belief of contradictories" (2017, 12.25).

Unlike the world of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the new order heralded by Hobbes would usher in a systematic, non-paradoxical taxonomy. Whether the gains accorded by modern thought were worth the cost of leaving the world of paradox behind continues to tease the mind.

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