

Shakespeare's Momentary Lapses of Reason

The Paradox and the Absurd

IVAN NYUSZTAY

Abstract: In Shakespearean drama reason at times falters and becomes ineffective in coping with the events. Its limits appear as temporary but dramatic reminders of the necessarily curbed scope of human understanding. Instances of 'reasonless' and meaningless phenomena abound in the plays and present themselves mostly in the forms of paradox and the absurd. In the selective recourse to paradoxes in Shakespeare, this article will focus on the tragedies—together with a potentially tragic instance in a chronicle play—which most blatantly expose the limits of reason. I believe that these momentary lapses demonstrate recurring structures of containment characteristic of Shakespeare. Demonstrating the ways paradox and the absurd are contained in Shakespearean drama also entails an overview of the fundamentally different handling of these concepts in the Theatre of the Absurd.

The question whether reason in Shakespeare is the “be-all and the end-all,” like the deadly blow for Macbeth,¹ is a tempting one. The characters are mostly cogitating subjects who form judgements logically, guided by their common sense. Macbeth strives to decipher the prophecies, contemplates the murder, and ruminates about his suitability for the purpose. In the great monologue, Hamlet ponders a series of succinct alternatives regarding life and death and carefully weighs them with his analytic mind. At other moments, however, reason falters, becomes vulnerable and abortive. I believe that these shortcomings of rational enquiry are most clearly perceivable when we look at the ways in which Shakespeare probes its limits. The apparently ‘reasonless’ and meaningless phenomena that thus present themselves call for a discussion of the Shakespearean paradox and the absurd.

1 “... that but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all” (1.7.4–5).

It goes without saying that this article cannot do full justice to the staggering variety of paradoxes in Shakespeare. Instead, I will focus on those instances in the tragedies which most poignantly capture the limits of reason. Moreover, in these investigations I also address the question of how paradox and the absurd are contained in Shakespearean drama, and, accordingly, how they are to be distinguished from their respective counterparts in the Theatre of the Absurd.

Although there is a plethora of absurdities in Shakespearean drama, we find only three occurrences of the word “absurd” in the plays. In *Henry VI Part I*, the Duke of Alençon is clearly bewildered by the suggestion that Charles the Dauphin place himself as viceroy under King Henry to restore peace in France, “[t]his proffer is absurd and reasonless” (5.3.137). In attempting to thematise the implications of a rather complex term, we are here compelled to resort to a no less complicated term, “reasonless.” For what is meant exactly by reason is unclear. In Alexander Schmidt’s *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary*, the word could refer to the “rational faculty and power of the mind,” as well as “fairness” or “justice,” not to mention “argumentation,” “satisfaction,” and finally, “cause” (945). Since the latter is specified, i.e. the restoration of the peace, it can be ruled out, which leaves us with the alternatives. The plan of Charles’ submission to the King, while simultaneously retaining his dignity and authority, is deemed both by Alençon and the Dauphin to be meaningless, irrational. Moreover, Charles also claims that he already owns “more than half the Gallian territories,” and is considered a “lawful king;” therefore, the promise of advancement through submission could also culminate in losing everything. In light of this reaction, “reasonless” seems to denote both senselessness and unfairness. The absurd, then, is here linked to an unthinkable self-surrender, the character’s fear of becoming no more than his own shadow: “Must he be then as shadow of himself?” (5.3.133).

Alençon’s question, marking the potential disintegration of identity, echoes throughout Shakespeare’s works, mostly in the tragedies. Perhaps the most well-known instance of this existential crisis is in *King Lear*:

KING LEAR: Who is it that can tell me who I am?

FOOL: Lear’s shadow. (1.4.221–222)

Hamlet’s dangerous introversion, the obsessive mourning of his father’s death, merits Claudius’ similarly worded remonstrance: “Fie, ’tis a fault to heaven, / A fault against

the dead, a fault to nature / To reason most absurd" (1.2.101–103). Hamlet's grief and withdrawal, as well as his "antic disposition" constitute a threat to Claudius since they curb the scope of surveillance. To him Hamlet is not himself but his own shadow, as it were, although it remains precarious under what preconditions he would consider Hamlet self-identical. Claudius' nostalgic image of a Hamlet who is entirely himself dates back to a time well before the play starts, to the era of King Hamlet's kingship, and thus remains a matter of utter conjecture to the spectator/reader. Turning the tables, the plot seems rather to focus on what Claudius' present self-image is, and what it has to do with the past self, the perpetrator of fratricide. Later, in the scene of attempted confession and self-laceration, he is temporarily divided with himself and the words of disapproval addressed to Hamlet above, shower back on him: "O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven" (3.3.34).

The senses play an important role also in Hamlet's rather equivocal outburst on power and flattery addressed to Horatio, in which he gives vent to his embittered disillusionment: "No, let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp" (3.2.60). Harold Jenkins associates the "candied tongue" with an "obsequious dog" whose servile licking is likened to "the flatterer's sugary words." Indeed, the image cluster of dog and candy is one of Shakespeare's favourites, claims Jenkins, falling back on Caroline Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery*. Hamlet here refers to the two sycophants, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose petty but portentous mission he has just unravelled, and lashes out at their unconditional genuflection to the King. What is even more important here, however, is that the pomp is absurd, i.e. insipid, as the corresponding footnote tells us.² It has lost all savour for Hamlet since his father's untimely death and the rather tactlessly timed ceremonial inauguration of Claudius.³

A different kind of ceremony provides the context for the absurd in *Antony and Cleopatra*. After the lost final battle, as the victorious Octavius Caesar is approaching, the heroine fears being publicly humiliated in Rome, when exhibited as an "Egyptian puppet." The future is foreboding:

The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us and present
Our Alexandrian revels; Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth; and I shall see

2 Cf. Alexander Schmidt.

3 The pejorative qualifier in the adjectival phrase, "absurd pomp," dovetails with Shakespearean epithets like "painted" (*ATL* 2.1.3; *Timon* 4.2.36) or "vain": see Jenkins fn.

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Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I'th' posture of a whore. (5.2.215–219)

To Iras' retort that she would rather blind herself, Cleopatra responds affirmatively: "Why, that's the way / To fool their preparation and to conquer / Their most absurd intents" (5.2.223–225). The danger of being thus caricatured and debased is dreaded since, once again, the self is to be presented as someone else. There is a crucial discrepancy between Cleopatra's self-identity—the image she entertains of herself (the respectable queen of Egypt, her "greatness")—and the external identification through caricature. Yet, the caricature is not entirely unreasonable. Cleopatra does acknowledge the grounds for misrepresentation, the revels in Alexandria during the war, when surely they had neglected their pressing duties. The play brings to the fore this historical ambiguity concerning the ways victors represent losers. Furthermore, the "absurd intents" also mirror the Shakespearean theatre itself. The comedians who stage the hero and the heroine distort reality as Shakespeare reshapes his fundamental source, Plutarch.⁴ But this is not the only self-reference in this quote. The lines including "squeaking Cleopatra boy" are given to a boy actor playing the heroine. The "squeaking" is contrasted to the queen's "greatness" a boy presumably cannot render. As Wilders reminds in the corresponding footnote, Shakespeare at this point "shows extraordinary boldness," questioning the competence of his own actor. In other words, this is hardly less than an absurd intent itself. To conclude, the daunting double image of the self so characteristic of Shakespearean drama is easily detectable in Alençon's unthinkable self-surrender, in Hamlet's "dangerous" introversion and corresponding disillusionment, as well as in Cleopatra's fear of misrepresentation.

A number of critics have examined the phenomenon of the absurd in Shakespearean drama. According to Robert Hapgood, the best way to scrutinise Shakespeare's vision of the world is by placing his plays in the context of the Theatre of the Absurd (144–145).⁵ Similarly, Anne Paolucci makes the daring claim that, in a sense, Shakespeare is the predecessor of dramatists like Camus, Ionesco, Beckett, or Albee (231). No doubt there are numerous episodes, dialogues, and reflections in Shakespeare apart from the excerpts discussed above

4 Cf. John Wilders' introduction to the Arden edition (57).

5 Edward Bond also affiliates Shakespeare with the absurdists when castigating him for being too Beckettian (Bulman 67).

that could be labelled “absurd,” even though the term is not mentioned. One may gloss as absurd Hamlet’s “antic disposition,” Lear’s confused and incoherent meanderings on the heath, Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking, or the often hardly intelligible blabbering of the Fools, to mention but a few.

Yet the sixteenth-seventeenth-century understanding of the term should be differentiated from the vision espoused by the twentieth-century Theatre of the Absurd. Disregarding this telling discrepancy, Paolucci argues that the absurd of the Theatre of the Absurd is “very old and very central” (234). Accordingly, she discovers identical paradoxical extremes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Albee’s *Tiny Alice* which “produce a Sophoclean irony” (231). Insisting on “the tragic dimension in Albee,” these extremes include darkness and light, freedom and predestined fate, “what Spinoza calls insight into necessity” (238–239). In *Hamlet*, “action dissipates into a series of isolated confrontations” in which the hero “emerges as a double image,” i.e. in the course of the play two incompatible selves materialise as Hamlet forgets the ghost’s command and is eventually spurred to action by Claudius’ move. In the apparent irreconcilability of the two images, Paolucci glimpses “that dissolution of character which is the trademark of the absurd” (236). In this analysis, dissolution and dividedness appear to be equivalent dramatic phenomena. The latter, however, designates a fundamental transformation of character specific to tragic drama and in no way a complete dissolution.⁶ The character is split precisely, because it adheres to a goal that can only be achieved in the world through ultimate acquiescence and self-surrender. It is divided because it cannot dissolve. Contrary to absurd drama, the insistence on an ideal triggers a chain of events that lead to the final annihilation. Although the key notions in Paolucci’s text—paralysis, scepticism, and the desire for certainty—capture Hamlet’s state of mind rather accurately, the play as a whole does fit into the tradition of the Elizabethan revenge play. In the same way, instances of the absurd in Shakespeare are subsumed by a comprehensive, meaningful framework, such as history, cultural traditions, or a Christian world-view. But then, classical tragedy always depended on, even confirmed, such modes of containment. One may all too easily label Ajax’s slaughtering the sheep instead of Ulysses, Heracles’s slaying his own children, or Oedipus’ self-blinding as “absurd,” forgetting that the corresponding mythology provides a cogent framework of explanations for these incidents. In the Theatre of the Absurd,

6 According to Robert Bechtold Heilman, dividedness already appears in Aristotle’s prescriptive statement in *Poetics*, that despite being a good man (superior to us), the hero commits an error (12–13).

however, we find the Camusian variant of the absurd which resists containment: it is rigorously and consistently subversive, self-sufficient and unresolvable.⁷ Or as Ionesco famously contended, “[a]bsurd is that which is devoid of purpose . . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost: all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Esslin 23). On these grounds I contest the respective contributions of Jan Kott, Martin Esslin, and Neil Cornwell to the understanding of the notion of the absurd, since in these insightful and indispensable undertakings we find a blend of the Shakespearean and the Camusian variants.

John Schwindt's essay on the emergence of the absurd in the sixteenth century also starts from paradox, although in a rather different sense. Schwindt derives the Shakespearean absurd from Luther's dialectical theology, which replaced the “optimistic Catholic theology of similitude,” and was instead based on hardly reconcilable “paradoxical oppositions” (2). The well-known binaries include nature and grace, man and God, and most notably, reason and faith. The human condition that crystallises from these paradoxes is tragic, says Schwindt, and unjust both in Shakespeare's and Luther's world, “and can be endured only by an abandonment of reason and an awakening of faith” (4). Reason should be discarded, because it lacks the competence to understand an unfathomable world.⁸ Indeed, as we are somewhat later told, “God seems cruel, unjust and insane to human reason, Luther argues, because human reason is blind, deaf, senseless, godless, and sacrilegious” (8). For Luther, the source and sanction of the paradoxical is the cross, since when most revealed in Christ, God remains most hidden in the foolishness, the suffering and the shame of the cross (5). Luther's (and Shakespeare's) God is an absconding God who is bound neither by human justice, nor by the scripture, and whose will is unlimited, free from natural law, free from revealed law, and free from reason (6–7). In contrast with Erasmus, who insisted that Christian doctrine is incompatible with the absurdity of a hidden God who elects and reprobates arbitrarily, and who is neither reasonable, just, nor good, Luther repeatedly asserts that God's works and words are beyond and even against reason. As a consequence, Luther champions the Christian as an “absurd hero who constantly confronts

7 Cf. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. In his adoption of the myth, Camus suspends the mythological context and explanation.

8 By contrast, although sceptical both of the usefulness of reason and “the posturings of theology,” Montaigne did not advocate the abandoning of reason so much as its keeping at a distance from faith (Copenhaver and Schmitt 255).

absolutely impossible things” (8–9).⁹ The conclusion is familiar: we need to believe in God precisely because God seems unjust and inscrutable. Thus, the Lutheran doctrine appears to be the precursor of Kierkegaard’s *credo quia absurdum*, which, in turn, is a famous misquote from Tertullian.¹⁰ The Christian response to the absurd for Luther, then, is faith. It is in faith that the absurd is dissolved and annulled, or as Schwindt has it, *endured*.

It remains unclear how Luther’s remedy is to be applied to Shakespearean drama. The paradoxical oppositions Schwindt uses to shed light on the human condition in the sixteenth century are markedly Luther’s, not Shakespeare’s. In Shakespeare, nature is contrasted with art, honour, or the supernatural rather than with grace; man is opposed to women, boys, or virginity rather than to God; and reason is at variance with madness or the absurd, rather than with faith. Indeed, in vain do we seek in the plays an endorsement of faith as an antidote for the absurdities. Moreover, although the hidden God becomes paradoxical for Luther when juxtaposed to the painful presence of the cross, in Shakespeare’s works it is hard to find such an explicit contrast.

Despite their major differences from Luther, Shakespearean paradoxes also represent the limits of reason. In *Macbeth*, we enter a world of hurly-burly, where the final military confrontation is foreshadowed and mingled with the internal conflict by “the battle’s lost and won” (1.1.4). On top of it all, after the weird sisters’ hackneyed keynote of “[f]air is foul, foul is fair” (1.1.11) in a play riddled with paradoxes, it becomes rather taxing to interpret the prophecies. Macbeth’s first words, as he enters the stage confirm this primordial onset of judgemental confusion: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (1.3.38).¹¹ Only later in the course of action does it crystallise that the fulfilment of hopes is achieved through a regicide that will eventually lead to Macbeth’s dividedness and downfall. What seemed fair for Macbeth, the realisation of his ambitions, turns out to be foul in the aftermath, when he proves to be “infirm of purpose,” i.e. incapable of mastering the consequences. As a castrating gesture, Lady Macbeth snatches the bloody daggers from him after the deed. This move, together with the desire to be “unsexed,”

9 This runs contrary to what Francis Bacon claims about the use of human reason in religion: “God vouchsafeth to descend to our capacity, in the expressing of his mysteries in sort as may be sensible unto us; and doth graft his revelations and holy doctrine upon the notions of our reason, and applyeth his inspirations to open our understanding, as the form of the key to the ward of the lock” (211).

10 The original being: “It is certain, because impossible” (Harrison 339).

11 And similarly, “[t]his supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good” (1.3.130–131).

and her remorseful sleepwalk centre the question of responsibility and fuel discussions of complicity in the play. Moreover, in Macduff's frenzied heralding of the murdering of Duncan, "[c]onfusion now hath made his masterpiece!" (2.3.65), we find the repercussion of the initial hurly-burly.¹² This echo accentuates the importance of paradoxes throughout, as does the fact that the witches' prophecies are not confined to Macbeth's career prospects. The future of Banquo is also rendered precarious, since he is to become "[l]esser than Macbeth, and greater," "[n]ot so happy, yet much happier," and he "shalt get kings, though [he] be none" (1.3.65–67). These paradoxes are riddles similar to those of the Delphic oracle and are resolved as those were—in time. Macbeth is faced with the truth in the weird sisters' prevarications only before his fall, "Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" (5.8.15–16). It is a timely recognition, and a painful one to be sure, in harmony with the precepts of pure tragedy, as it comes too late: "And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd / That palter with us in a double sense" (5.8.19–20).

However, equivocating paradoxes are unravelled in time not only in plots dominated by prophecies. It is only after a certain while, when discarded by Regan and Goneril, that Lear starts to understand his folly and the confines of his authority. The meeting of the two forsaken old men in act 4 is the scene of ripened insights and illuminated self-lacerations. Reminiscent of Oedipus, Gloucester's clairvoyance comes with blindness ("I stumbled when I saw" [4.1.19]), and in his ramblings Lear begins to show "reason in madness" (4.6.173). Lear has been unreasonable with the exiling of Cordelia, and he will repeatedly acknowledge this as such through the prism of a maddening dividedness: "I am a very foolish fond old man / . . . / Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old / And foolish" (4.7.60, 84–85). The limits of reason here are marked off by madness, and vice versa, the limits of madness are demarcated by the occasional flashes of reason. For both Gloucester and Lear, the contradictions are reconciled in time as the new selfhoods materialise.

Hamlet's madness is to some extent akin to Lear's in that it is punctuated by reason, or, as Polonius has it, *method*: "Though this be madness, yet there is method / in't" (2.2.205–206). Needless to say, the pretended madness, the plan to "put an antic disposition on" (1.5.180) is to be distinguished from Lear's genuinely frantic disposition. Hamlet is more calculating, methodical, analytic. The disillusioned Lear seeks to be loved and forgiven; the disillusioned Hamlet abandons love and never forgives.

12 In his prophecy the Fool in *The Tragedy of King Lear* also warns of the great confusion awaiting "the realm of Albion" (3.2.91–92).

In his bitter diatribe launched against Ophelia, Hamlet explains why honesty should “admit no discourse” to beauty,

... for the power of beauty will sooner
transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the
force of honesty can translate beauty into his
likeness. This was sometime a paradox, but now the
time gives it proof. (3.1.11–15)

Jenkins glosses the word paradox as “a thing contrary to received opinion or rational explanation,” while Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor take it to refer simply to an “absurd statement.” What is more interesting for the present undertaking, however, is the established correlation between “paradox” and “proof” through *time*. In a nostalgic retrospection, Hamlet idealises the past when his Father was the King, his mother a faithful wife, and Ophelia an honest lover. The idea that beauty can no longer have “commerce” with honesty shows Hamlet’s general disenchantment with women, including his mother of course, in the world of celebrated usurpation and polished duplicity. For him, in the present, even beauty is deceptive: “I have heard of your paintings well enough. God / hath given you one face and you make yourselves / another” (3.1.144–146). Beyond the obvious allusion to false identities adopted by characters throughout the play, these “paintings” also remind us of the “borrow’d robes” of Macbeth (1.3.109), and Lear’s “lendings,” and the call “come unbutton here” (3.4.101). It is Hamlet’s assumed prerogative to penetrate the disguises and to hold “the mirror up to nature” (3.2.22). Thus, the opposition of beauty and honesty fits into the more comprehensive dichotomy of nature versus disguise, and therefore, once again, harmonises with patterns of dividedness and the double self, characteristic of the Shakespearean paradox and the absurd.

Arguing that the underlying contrasts and paradoxes above are fundamentally different from those of Luther is not trying to belittle the relevance of the latter’s doctrines to Shakespearean drama. Elsewhere I have argued that Luther’s and Calvin’s doctrines of corrupt human nature and inherent deprivation, as well as the *deus absconditus* and predestination provide some of the indispensable coordinates for Shakespearean tragedy. Still, the latter seems to dispense with faith along with the promise of an afterlife, the possibility of redemption or election which would preclude a fateful and cathartic ending (Nyusztay 47–62). Instead, as I tried to point out, the paradox and the absurd in Shakespeare are resolved in time.

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By contrast, in the Theatre of the Absurd there is no such containment, since “time has stopped” (Beckett 36). Samuel Beckett’s words are *illuminating* at this point:

The destiny of Racine’s *Phèdre* is sealed from the beginning: she will proceed into the dark. As she goes she herself will be illuminated. At the beginning of the play she has partial illumination and at the end she has complete illumination, but there has been no question but that she moves toward the dark. That is the play. Within this notion clarity is possible, but for us who are neither Greek nor Jansenist there is not such clarity. The question would also be removed if we believed in the contrary—total salvation. But where we have both dark and light we have also the inexplicable. The key word to my plays is ‘perhaps.’ (*Critical Heritage* 220)

These thoughts can also be applied to Shakespearean tragedy, despite the fact that the idea of tragic illumination is derived from Greek drama and Jansenism. Shakespeare’s tragic heroes are also illuminated while proceeding into the dark. Macbeth and Hamlet are enlightened about their weakness and finitude (the latter also about Claudius’ sinfulness); Lear comes to understand what he has lost by exiling Cordelia. In the above quote, the word “illumination” occurs three times, while the term “clarity” occurs twice, which underlines the importance of these phenomena as organic features of classical and neoclassical drama. The Shakespearean paradox and the absurd, as I have tried to point out, inform these structures of containment.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Ivan Nyusztay is an Associate Professor at Budapest Business School, University of Applied Sciences. He also teaches part-time at Gáspár Károli University. In the academic year of 2014/15, he taught British and American Culture and

Literature at UITM in Rzeszow, Poland. He holds a PhD from KU Leuven, Belgium (2000) and a habilitation from ELTE University of Budapest (2012). He is author of two books on drama theory, *Myth, Telos, Identity: The Tragic Schema in Greek and Shakespearean Drama* (Rodopi, 2002) and *Az önáazonosság alakváltozásai az abszurd drámában* [*Configurations of Identity in Absurd Drama: Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard*] (L'Harmattan, 2010) and a number of articles including "Infinite Responsibility and the Third in Emmanuel Levinas and Harold Pinter" in *Literature and Theology* (2014) and "The Merry Sufferer: Authentic Being in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*" in *Philosophy and Literature* (2018). Starting out as a Shakespeare scholar and a specialist in drama theory, over the last ten years, he has extended his research to twentieth-century drama, with a focus on the theatre of the absurd.