Shakespeare's Vanishing
Characters

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Way back in the nineteenth century at the very height of imperial theme Carlyle, an eminent Victorian, who was more Indian than some Indians in his ardour of hero-worship, stumbled on a prophetic vision of the vanishing empire:

Indian Empire, or no Indian Empire, we cannot do without Shakespeare! Indian Empire will go, at any rate some day; but this Shakespeare does not go, he lasts for ever...

'King Shakespeare' does last for ever and everywhere, even in the lost empire. He is like the Himalayan range, not merely in heights and depths but also in grandeur, mystery, and sublimity. As we scale one peak the other peaks at once rise up in front of us wherethrough gleam some forbidding though fascinating angles of approach. But one critic or the other of the stature of T.S. Eliot is always there to encourage us along the uncharted contours even though one may not at all expect to arrive at a new shore of light:

About anyone so great as Shakespeare it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong. Whether truth will ultimately prevail is doubtful, and has never been proved: but it is certain that nothing is more effective in driving out error than a new error.

Not only one new error but many are likely to be perpetrated along the road not taken. Why on earth was Shakespeare's theatre named the Globe? Was it because all the world is a stage, with an endless pageant of the changing scenes? Time, mutability, and death are at the heart of Shakespeare's dramatic world, guiding and governing it. No wonder, hence, that we witness in the constant flux of day and night entry
and exit, rise and fall, life and death. But sometimes far above the routine entry or exit there are the moments which acquire profound significance, and an exit tends to become a passage for transcendental journeying beyond the utmost bounds of drama presenting vanishing as a metaphysical phenomenon enveloped in mystery. A most magnificent spectacle of vanishing on a cosmic scale, however, is in The Tempest, unfolding the never-ending rhythm of appearance and reality:

... these our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like the insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind; we are such stuff
As dreams are made on and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

(IV.i. 148-158)

Sleep seems to be an arch through which Shakespeare's vanishing characters travel unto some vast unknown beyond the horizon. Prospero's actors melt into thin air. With the final fall of the curtain the play ends but certainly not the players who move away on the different planes of everyday reality. What has melted away is the mimic world, some fascinating illusion. Is it not so also in real life on the stage of the world? Between the rising and the falling of the curtain, with intervening entries and exits, these characters spring to life, and after creating a great illusion fade out off the stage. In "Burnt Norton", when T.S. Eliot affirms that "If all time is eternally present all time is unredeemable", he wants us to realise that time is not fragmentary, and it has no beginning, no end. If the past is being continually annihilated, the future is beyond our reach. Excepting in terms of the present moment everything else tends to be mythical. To drift with the drifting moments in the tide of time and then all of a sudden be jostled out of the eternal present, shuffling away all the mortal coil...
Vanishing in Shakespeare, more than a dramatic device is a metaphor of the eternal cycle of life and death and rebirth. Passing away off the stage, after life's fitful fever is over and being resurrected in the memory of the audience, is an analogue of the intimations of immortality, invisible as music but positive as sound. Shakespeare seems to have grown so much fond of these characters that although one might tend to accuse him of dispatching them heartlessly at times through the thick of action, in fact he transports them into the sanctuary of our memory where they are secure, free from all the constraints of time and space. May be he does not want to let them drop dead or be killed on the stage apart from the probable dramatic or theatrical expediency.

Shakespeare certainly brooked no surplusage; nor did he ever compromise his art with any sentimental concession. He could without any hesitation reject a character, so very brimming with life like Falstaff, the moment he lost relevance to the dramatic scheme; and we do not mind either. Nor do we miss, even for a moment, a character most memorable but appearing just for a while on the stage and then seen no more like, for instance, the Apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet*, that archetypal portrait of poverty and essential humanity. But there are characters who exit without a word, the characters whom we miss more than their masters do, and experience an intense sense of longing and loss. Any quest of these characters is apt to be at best a sentimental journey, at worst the negation of dramatic reality. We have to reckon with the line of demarcation between the play world and the real world although they tend at times to intermingle, thus blurring off the frontiers between the two. Even a man of robust commonsense such as Doctor Johnson turned his back on the play world of the printed page as if it had impinged mercilessly on the real world. "I might relate" he says, "I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor." It shows how at times the experience of the play world is invaded by the real world.
have critics like Walter Raleigh to launch us out in the right direction:

On his characters we pass judgment freely; as we grow familiar with them, we seem to belong to their world...We are well content to share in this dream-life, which is so marvellously vital, so like the real world as we know it; and we are unwilling to be awakened. How should the dream judge the dreamer?

And we would fain do some sleep-walking in search of the vanishing characters even if it involves speculative responses of which there is no dearth: "Were Hamlet Othello and Othello Hamlet!" is a classic conjecture. Here there is a probable critical hazard of ignoring the integral relation between the plot and the character as well as the integrity of dramatic structure. No matter how very true to life, a portrait is no person, a landscape no nature; and the duality is irrevocable. All the same life is always larger than art, and there is ample scope for an occasional lover's quarrel in the play world as in the real world. When some dear characters just disappear without a word, we tend to feel not merely deserted but also jilted. The art experience evokes imaginative subjectivity and the human interest surfaces far above the dramatic action so much so that even fantasy seems to be real. If the dramatic fantasy is dramatic reality, the various planes and patterns of reality in Shakespeare's plays afford room for an exploration like this.

Quite close to the theme of vanishing characters we have the boy theme in Shakespeare running from end to end right from Venus and Adonis to The Tempest. There are boys and boys. If an Orlando or a Romeo or a Coriolanus behaves as a school boy, with their senile naivety Shylock and Lear and Gloucester are the old fools who are babes again. Shakespeare's is a densely populated world. When it comes to the vanishing characters, however, it is not so much Ariel that Lucius in Julius Caesar and the Fool in King Lear the boys who stand out prominently. Both the plays are developed in upheavals, private and public, physical and moral, external and internal. Again they present dichotomy of life and death, youth and age, reason and passion. In the nights which are dark and cold and stormy these boys follow their masters like their shadows, and strive hard to evoke...
and inculcate in them the qualities they lack: the Fool inculcating wisdom in the King, Lucius tenderness in Brutus, the qualities, the lack of which constitutes hamartia of the protagonists. Had Lear been wiser and Brutus tenderer! It is said that those whom God loves die young. Is it also true of Shakespeare who bestows so much love on these characters?

_Julius Caesar_ has an interesting pattern of point-counterpoint of vanishing. Caesar who is assassinated refuses to vanish, and haunts Rome with a heart hungry for revenge, thus looming large on the play. But the boy Lucius just vanishes like the fading tunes of his music. We first meet him in the stormy night on the eve of the Ides of March. He runs breathlessly up and down letting in and letting out the conspirators with muffled faces and hidden daggers in Brutus’s orchard. After the sleepless night next morning while the storm is gathering over the Capitol, the boy is again baffled by Portia’s deranged behaviour:

Lucius: Madam, what should I do?
Run to the Capitol and nothing else?

How could poor Portia guide when she herself had lost direction under unbearable tension? The tide then turns against Brutus. He loses the game. He loses Portia. He quarrels with Cassius. It is now all over and there is no beyond but the terrific nemesis. It is here that we have some of the tenderest moments in the play:

Burtus: Look Lucius, here’s the book I sought for so.—

... ... ... ... ...

Lucius: I’m sure your Lordship did not give it me.

Brutus: Bear with me, good boy, I am much forgetful.
Canst thou hold up thy heavy eyes awhile,
And touch thy instrument a strain or two?

... ...

Lucius: It is my duty, sir.

Brutus: I should not urge thy duty past thy might;
I know young bloods look for a time of rest.

Lucius: I have slept my Lord, already.
Brutus: It was well done, and thou shalt sleep again; I will not hold thee long. If I do live, I will be good to thee.

(Music and a song. Lucius falls asleep.)

This is a sleepy tune. O murd'rous slumber! Layest thou thy leaden mace upon my boy, That plays thee music? Gentle knave, good night. I will not do thee so much wrong to wake thee. If thou dost nod, thou break' st thy instrument.

We have all love and tenderness here although Brutus has a chaos within. But soon the Ghost of Caesar appears and Brutus shrieks. Lucius wakes up and says:

Lucius: The strings, my Lord, are false.

Brutus: He thinks he still is at his instrument. Lucius, awake!

Lucius: My Lord!

Brutus: Didst thou dream, Lucius, that thou so criedst out? Didst thou see anything?

Lucius: Nothing, my lord.

And the scene ends with the stage direction 'Exeunt'. Where does Lucius go hereafter? The last moments of Lucius's life on the stage are enveloped in sleep and music reminiscent of John Keats:

My spirit is too weak—Mortality Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep.

Music, particularly in Shakespeare's tragedy, echoes not only the rhythm of life. In its fading tunes, lapsing into silence it reveals the hush of death also. If the sound of music is the sound of life, its silence is death. Brutus without Lucius and Lear without the Fool are the men without their shadows as it were.

To turn from a Roman play to a tragedy like King Lear, is to be confronted with a greater element of mystery in the scheme of things which makes our search of the Fool in King Lear even more formidable than that of Lucius. For, the Fool is not merely a page but also a mirror, sometimes convex,
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sometimes concave but always reflecting the broken images of the King and his conscience. In the school of sorrows and sufferings of Lear's life the clown acts as a major teacher. Here we have to approach with greater caution, for there are significant critical contours. To start off with Granville Barker is to turn to a critic who never for a moment approved of any dissociation between the play and the theatre. Though he recognises how Shakespeare has put the Fool to a transcendent dramatic use, he accepts without any hesitation his abrupt and untimely exit:

Lear has patted him as one pats a dog; he shows a dog's fidelity. It is foolish of him, no doubt, to follow his master in such a storm but then he is a fool. Shakespeare having had his dramatic use of him drops him incontinently.

He does not recognise the Fool's part as anything more than that "of merely incidental importance to the scheme of the play." But the fact remains that though lost in the darkness at noon, he can't be banished from the audience's memory, for in a world turned so cruel and faithless he leaves behind an enduring trail of love, loyalty, and wisdom.

Kenneth Muir finds the Fool's both character and function rather ambiguous if not ambivalent:

Shakespeare is continually inverting the orthodox view of wisdom and foolishness. In the storm scenes there is a wild quartet of madness—Lear, Poor Tom, the Fool, and the elements themselves in which the Fool seems almost to stand for sanity. He fades from the picture when he is no longer needed since Lear can act his own Fool.

Jan Kott, who juxtaposes the tragedy with The Endgame, almost injects a footnote to Kenneth Muir's judgement that "King Lear has gone through the Clown's philosophy." He says,

In King Lear it is the Fool who deprives the majesty of its sacredness...He rejects appearances. He has no illusion. The Fool appears on the stage when Lear's fall is only beginning. He disappears by the end of Act III... A clown is not needed any more.

We have here formidable critical lighthouses to steer us away from any wild-goose chase. Tolstoy would not in the least approve of this quest, for the Fool to him is "a tedious nuisance and only an excuse for making bad jokes". The stage history of the eighteenth century records the debate...
the Fool from the theatre altogether until later on Macready restored him, casting a girl in his role. In the play the Fool substitutes Cordelia, in the theatre a girl plays the boy! Could it be that in Shakespeare's Globe an actor played the double role? That the two most intimate characters in the play, Cordelia and the Fool, are not even for a moment together on the stage bears out the speculation. Even the dying King, who enters with Cordelia dead in his arms, cries out in a confused state:

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no no life! Why should a dog, a rat, a horse have life, and thou no breath at all?

(V.iii.305-7)

The King's 'poor fool' is hanged. George Orwell perhaps had this as a clue to conclude that the Fool's body must be then dangling on the gallows, somewhere. The Fool is dead, if not on the gallows, elsewhere, or granting that the expediency of the theatre as well as the scheme of the play necessitated his dispatch, the Fool does remain, after the final exit, most conspicuous by his absence.

The Fool is not such a minor character. He plays a major role and grows not merely in stature but also in wisdom through the passage of the play. As Kent recognises, he is not altogether a fool:

Fool: We'll set thee to school to an ant, to teach thee there's no labouring i' th' winter.... Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following

(II.iv.70-73)

Is this clowing? If all the world is a stage, it is the stage of fools, and the Fool is everyman. The Fool plays also the philosopher and the chorus, and thus moves quite close to the audience. The last that we see of him is in Act III. Scene vi:

Lear: Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains. So, so. We'll go to supper i' the morning.
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Kent then asks him: "Come, help to bear thy master;" followed by the stage direction: 'Exeunt Kent, Gloucester, and Fool bearing Lear.' Beyond this there is no trace of the Fool. While the King is being more tightly tied to the life's 'wheel of fire' the Fool fades away. We can never imagine him deserting his master, for he was greatly attached to him, and to Cordelia. Lear knew it too well. When told, "Since my lady's going to France, the Fool hath much pined away" he had at once retorted: "No more of that; I have noted it well." It is perhaps this pining not only for Cordelia but also for the life of love, wisdom, and order in the world of hate, folly, and chaos that ultimately leads him to an endless vanishing. If life is surrounded by an infinite oblivion called death, vanishing is the way. Both King Lear and Julius Caesar are the plays enveloped in all sorts of storms. But there is also stillness beyond the storms into which fade out these characters. However, Edgar is there to comfort:

Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;  
Ripeness is all.

(V. i. 9-11)

Vanishing as a dramatic device or memory as a sanctuary, and both creating a metaphor, is not in Shakespeare alone. India's Shakespeare Kalidasa, in Shakuntalam, the play that transported Goethe into such ecstasy that he is reported to have danced with joy with the book in his hand, has a classic vanishing character, the neglected Hamspadika in the hero's harem. She does not even once appear on the stage, but sings only for an extremely short melancholy song, while lamenting the way her lord like a bee flies away from flower to flower. But floating on the sound waves of music she wafts into our memory and fills us with an unending quest. Thus vanishing makes even a most minor character memorable.

A critical quest like this is apt to end in an uncritical encounter, and launch us out on the blue waves of fancy. It nonetheless might evoke a spiritual response, and then the fantastic voyage would turn into the transcendental journey prayed for in the Kathopnisad:

O Lord, lead us from untruth to Truth,  
From darkness to Light,