

THE POET AND THE BARD

Andrew Monnickendam

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

The aim of this paper is to analyze and discuss the impact and importance of Ted Hughes' *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, published in 1992. The book has its own intrinsic interest, the Poet Laureate has decided to write a lengthy study –over five hundred pages– of another national institution: no less than the bard himself. Hughes has decided to be openly anti-academic, by opposing many current theories of culture, as represented by various forms of poststructuralism, and by not bothering to include a bibliography or an index. Hughes's proposal is to trace the formulation and application of a basic mythic pattern which is present in all Shakespeare's work. Biographically, this must strike the reader as somewhat odd, in complete contrast with the voice of *Crow*, for example, which is the voice of dismemberment and separation, most memorably in such poems as *A Childish Prank*, in which the worm is cut up and divided between man and woman¹. Personally, attempts to find the key to an author's mind remind me of a cartoon I saw as a child. Yogi Bear (or it might have been Huckleberry Finn) wants to join the army. Candidates are given different shaped blocks, circular, rectangular or oval, and have to place them in a board with correspondingly shaped holes. The exercise is completed successfully. However, a rather brutish character, who cannot distinguish the matching shapes and holes, has to force the blocks in. Needless to say, it is the latter who is chosen for the army. In other words, there is inevitably, in such

¹ Crow laughed,
He bit the Worm, God's only son,
Into two writhing halves.

He stuffed into man the tail half
With the wounded end hanging out.

He stuffen the head half headfirst into woman
And it crept in deeper and up
to peer out through her eyes
Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly
Because O it was painful. (Ted Hughes, *Crow*, London: Faber & Faber, 1972).

studies as Hughes's, the odd bit which does not fit in, or does so in a most peculiar way. Hughes, it must be stated, does not believe that Shakespeare's mythic pattern is necessarily premeditated, it is more a case of the pattern asserting itself throughout the length and breadth of Shakespeare's oeuvre. Hughes's insistence on the importance of the mythic plane, he leans heavily on Robert Graves and Northrop Frye, puts to one side several areas of research that have dominated Shakespearean studies for many years. The study of tragic heroes, heroines and their predicament is displaced by the mythic plane; the study of the subversive nature of drama and language suffers the same fate; the source of transgression is now that of mythic patterns establishing their presence. Furthermore, Hughes's approach presupposes a development that culminates in the tragicomedies, particularly in *The Tempest*. In other words, the "Complete Works" are not only complete in the sense of being the high point of English culture, but they are also completed, in the sense of being rounded off. The "Complete Works" possess their own internal logic, which is, Hughes argues, mythologically defined.

Hughes's thesis is based upon an explicit relationship between the poems and the plays. What is identifiable as being problematic in the poems is also present, though in a much more complex and often convoluted form, in the plays. As a methodological strategy, this is highly questionable, but at this point, it is extremely important to say that it is not my intention to adopt a non-committal standpoint. To say that Hughes's hypothesis is leaky but he makes many incisive observations not only is condescending but also irrelevant and ultimately belittling, as if a hypothesis is put forward, it is to be judged as a hypothesis, not as a hotchpotch of comments of varying validity. Hughes argues that Shakespeare's works have a template, the tragic equation, on one side of which we have *Venus and Adonis* and on the other *The Rape of Lucrece*. *Venus and Adonis*, in any version, is a tale of desire which culminates in the death of the male and the sorrow of the female. Initially, Shakespeare follows an erotic pattern:

...she cannot choose but love;
 And by her fair immortal hand she swears
 From his soft bosom never to remove
 Till he take truce with her contending tears...
 (79-82)

However, this particular Adonis is plain hard to get, and the more Venus desires him, the less he responds. Consequently, he is accused by Venus of being Narcissus (157-162). Adonis is killed the next day by the wound in his thigh

caused by the raging boar, leaving Venus to weep over his body and carry off in her bosom the metamorphosed flower. Hughes points out that this is the only version of the myth in which love is not culminated: Venus weeps over the body of a virgin, not a lover. Such a situation makes the identification of the boar futile: there is no way of determining whether it follows one mythic pattern, the boar is the jealous lover Mars, or whether it follows the other, it is Persephone, come from the underworld. Adonis had rejected Venus' advances on the grounds of morality.

Call it not love, for Love to heaven is fled
 Since sweating lust on earth usurp'd his name...
 (792-793)

Love comforteth like sunshine after the rain,
 But Lust's effect is tempest after sun;
 Love's gentle spring doth always fresh remain,
 Lust's winter comes ere summer half be done.
 Love surfeits not: Lust like a glutton dies.
 Love is all truth: Lust full of forged lies.
 (799-804)

Adonis sought some kind of perfection which the pleasures of the body alone cannot satisfy, as these are simply "Lust". Adonis rejects the female and strives after an ideal which sanctifies pleasure within an institution, which presumably is another way of saying marriage, an institution which is not subject to the fate which Venus foresees, "Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend/ It shall be waited on with jealousy", etc.

The second element of the equation can be found in *The Rape of Lucrece* (the poem was called *Lucrece* until the Q6 version, which, coincidentally, is the first time that Shakespeare's name appears on the title-page). The story is simple. Some Roman generals wonder what their wives are up to when they are away on campaign. They make a lightening visit to the city where only Lucrece is virtuously spinning with her maids. The sight of the virtuous Lucrece serves only to excite the lust of Tarquin, who will rape her. She in turn, exposes his crimes to the generals, before committing suicide. Hughes illustrates the extraordinary symmetry between the two poems, in their language, plot, moral, in almost everything, which makes their dedication to the Earl of Southampton even more perplexing. Lucrece is indeed a model, she is "This earthly saint, adored by this devil". (85) Adonis's predictions about the consequences of lust are fulfilled:

For with the nightly linen that she wears
 He pens her piteous clamours in her head,
 Cooling his hot face in the chastest tears
 That ever modest eyes with sorrow shed.
 O, that prone lust should stain so pure a bed!
 The spots thereof could weeping purify,
 Her tears should drop on them perpetually.
 But she hath lost a dearer thing than life,
 And he hath won what he would lose again.
 This forced league doth force a further strife,
 This momentary joy breeds months of pain,
 This hot desire converts to cold disdain;
 Pure chastity is rifled of her store,
 And Lust, the thief, far poorer than before.

(680-693)

Although the moralistic tone of this extract, with its wonderfully evocative detail of "the nightly linen" and its domestic setting of the bedchamber seem a world apart from the mythical world of Venus, it is clear that both Adonis and Lucrece (and the poem's narrative voice) base their respective defence on the same concept: chastity, whether it is inside or outside marriage. In other words, what really matters is marriage. I would argue that what Hughes identifies are precisely those concerns which Milton takes up both in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* and *Paradise Lost*: what consumes Adam and Eve is lust, whereas fully satisfying physical pleasure can only be obtained, or perhaps glimpsed, in marriage. Tarquin succeeds where Satan fails.

However much chastity is of prime importance in both poems, Hughes defines *Venus and Adonis* as the myth of Catholicism, and *The Rape of Lucrece* as the myth of Protestantism/Puritanism². The end of the former, the mother holding the body of the youth is very much that of a *pietà*, that of the *mater dolorosa*. On the other hand, in the latter, the consequence of the act leads to a tremendous feeling of guilt in the mind of the victim herself, who comes to believe that as she has dishonoured her husband and her marriage; she must die, for "she hath lost a dearer thing than life". We have encountered the language and ideas of *Leviticus* as taken up by Calvinism.

Lucrece verbally assaults Tarquin (as if from the pulpit) with a list of his sins: he is guilty not just of "murder ... theft ... perjury ... subornation ... treason ... forgery ... shift ... incest ..." but also of "... all sins past and all that are to

² The distinction is not always made that clear.

come" (923). The destiny, primarily of the tragic hero, but finally, one presumes, that of all men, is to have to face the terrible proposition either of constructing an image of woman as "the Puritan Lucrece figure, idealized, moralized and chaste" (Hughes 161) with the inevitable result that such a person exists only in the imagination and never in the flesh, as Adonis's death demonstrates, or as a result of this fruitless search man becomes a Tarquin, burning with rage, fury and frustration. There really is little hope for man as the construct(s) which he has to live with provide no "home sweet home" or even basic shelter. The only remaining possibility is to reject woman altogether; something which is impracticable for most men and will lead to the extinction of the human race. Therefore even though the two sides of the equation contain different constituents, Adonis is not Tarquin, Hughes argues that the tragic hero often switches between these irreconcilable figures. In other words it is as crucial to understand how the equation works as it is to realise that there is no other alternative to it.

The consequences of Hughes's analysis are far-reaching. Perhaps what most immediately springs to mind is that his hypothesis explains the misogyny that is most striking in the Sonnets, woman is dark, devilish, from the underworld, but pervades the tragedies: Goneril and Regan accompany Lady Macbeth, but Desdemona and Cordelia die, somewhat silently. Yet, we must go farther than Hughes does here. If he emphasises the centrality of Shakespeare, possibly the only untouchable canonical writer, it must ineluctably follow that cultural history, as exemplified by both literature and criticism, has reworked the Shakespearean model, the tragic equation, relentlessly. Thus, to take up the link with Milton, perhaps the association of madwomen in the attic and the Brontë's, which originates in readings of Milton, his daughters and *Paradise Lost*, stops short, as Milton reworks those very same problems that lie at the centre of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Consequently, if we accept Jonathan Bates's thesis that the Romantics are haunted both by the presence of Shakespeare and Milton, then surely we have to go beyond the idea that this influence is primarily aesthetic.

In this section of my paper, I will not enter into a detailed analysis of how we can apply the tragic equation to Shakespearean drama. One reason is practical: it would take too long. Another relates to my earlier remark, that is to say that in pinning down areas where the hypothesis is more or less convincing, we run the risk of saying there are insights, but little else. I will set the process in motion, and allow the reader to see and judge how far the application of the tragic equation is useful. The equation comes into effect after *All's Well that Ends Well*, "...the last play that is free from sexual disgust and it immediately

precedes plays that are overwhelmed with a horror of sexual disease" (Hughes 121) Most conspicuous of these is *Measure of Measure* where this "horror" infects all sectors of society, whether we direct our attention to the court or the stews of Mistress Overdone. This play clearly shows how the tragic equation functions. Angelo's strictures on morality lead him to punish those who do not share his vision of the "Puritan, Lucrece figure, idealized, moralized and chaste" (Hughes 161) with the death penalty, but when he sees his Lucrece he goes berserk with desire. It is just one of life's little ironies that the woman he possesses is not Isabella after all. Othello is another case of a rapid change from Adonis to Tarquin. His goddess, Desdemona is at first chaste, but the only whiteness she retains is the monumental alabaster of death, as Iago rapidly, and easily, converts him into Tarquin. Hamlet's preoccupations stem from his having an Adonis complex, making the question of whether or not he has had carnal knowledge of Ophelia secondary. If he has, she no longer forms part of his idealized vision, if he hasn't, they are a result of his seeing all women as corrupt and irredeemable as he would like us to believe his mother is.

If the poems, tragedies and bitter comedies demonstrate the validity of the tragic equation, then that leaves us with the problem of dealing with the tragicomedies. There is a critical consensus that there is something different about them, something which distinguishes them from the previous plays. Within Hughes's analysis, this difference stems from the foregrounding of the mythic plane at the expense of the human, or tragic plane. Hughes points out there are several indications in the tragedies themselves that this is going to happen. The first of them, questionable in my opinion, is the image of "pity, the new-born babe" in the first act of *Macbeth*, the second, at the end of *Coriolanus*, where a woman, Volumnia, survives, and finally, most significantly of all, is the healing nature of Cleopatra's love, contrasted with the arid lifestyle of imperial Rome.

At the end of *Venus and Adonis*, Venus picks up "A purple flow'r, check'ed with white" (1168) and places it on her bosom³; the myth will now transform itself into that of miraculous growth, rebirth or resurrection. On the tragic plane, the interaction of both sides of the equation prohibits not only rebirth, but its prerequisite: the presence of women. In other words, what we are now seeing is that Cordelia, or more precisely her disciples, the healers, the women of the heart, will now play a significant role that previously their immanent death precluded. Hughes evaluates the presence of flowers and flower imagery before tackling *The Tempest* at great length. This situation is just as foreseeable as it is logical. Not only has Hughes articulated a theory of the complete works, which

includes an assessment of Prospero's magic, but also *The Tempest*, in its masque, has recreated, through magic, a new world. Hughes insists on the importance of the vision in spite of the irony of Miranda's placement of "the brave new world" and the fact the masque is interrupted by those very elements that Prospero wants to exclude. Hughes characterises Prospero's insistence on chastity as the putting into practice of the Lucrece ideal, possible only on the island, where Miranda has seen or met no other woman. The scenario is perfect, the music is perfect, Prospero is in complete control until Caliban, boar-like [sic], and his followers interrupt the ceremony. This, coupled to Prospero's abjuration of his magic, seems to make a mockery of his vision, that is to say accentuating its baselessness. In other words, the Puritan vision cannot even work in an abstract form or impose its symbolic order on the mythical island. Hughes claims that while it is true that Prospero recognises "this thing of darkness", at the same time it is certain that darkness is externalised and thus separated in the form of Caliban. Hughes suggests something that to me is crystal clear, which is that Caliban is black, perhaps both metaphorically and physically, and is thus a descendant not just of Sycorax but also of Othello, and more significantly, of that pure black thoroughbred Aaron. It is exactly at this point, that Hughes's hypothesis could be taken that one step farther. That is to say, Prospero's vision of purity reveals its inbred inconsistency in this attempt at externalisation. In other words, however much the physical presence of Caliban is left behind on the island, its semiotic power as a sign of violence, blackness, night, all that which Lucrece describes as an abomination, remains inside the Puritan psyche. Hughes also argues that the mythic plane, as it is a paradigm of male resurrection brought about through the medium of the healing quality of women, demonstrates reconciliation and completeness:

In fact it seems obvious that he deliberately turns the flame off from the source, from Adonis's agonized death-rebirth into Tarquin, and subjects the burnt, suffering hero to the healing light from the other source, the death-rebirth illumination of the Female who is also the soul.

(Hughes 487)

Perhaps we are going round in circles, but however much this interpretation can be successfully applied to *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, it has little to do with *The Tempest*, which, it could be maintained, casts doubt upon the "elimination of the Female", a sex, it has to be admitted, practically absent from *The Tempest*.

At this point, after this appraisal of Hughes's work, I would like now to describe what I consider its achievements before moving on to its shortcomings. Whether or not there is any correspondence between Prospero and Ted Hughes,

³ It also appear on Imogen's breast, Hughes asserts.

after all, he was born in 1930, is academic. What I find particularly interesting is this return to the religious and political conflicts of the early seventeenth century, which goes some way towards confirmation of the thesis that the events of that period form the basis of British culture and consciousness, both as regards the concept of the individual and of nationality. Hughes makes many perceptive points about the religious conflicts within and outside Shakespeare's drama, but I simply do not feel that he takes his conclusions far enough. For example, in the earlier chapters he emphasises the importance of Neo-Platonism, of the Hermetic mystery, but drops the subject. I would like to take up the Catholic/Protestant confrontation which forms the basis of the two complementary myths. Hughes contextualises the situation by pointing out Shakespeare's apparent allegiance for a strong central state, a circumstance which, to a certain extent, turns the Roman plays into a continuation of the history plays, by placing the Virgin Queen at the centre of action as the only force that is strong enough to hold the warring factions apart. The succession of James to the throne would therefore account for the reiteration of this "strong government" in the closing lines of *Macbeth*. Hughes goes on to highlight a most obvious, though often neglected point: that Rome, in the time and climate of the Reformation is primarily the Rome of corrupt Catholicism. However intriguing this makes the Roman plays, it also makes Shakespeare's own beliefs even more inaccessible than before. What are we to make, for example, of Coriolanus' defeat at the hands of his mother? What are the implications of the assassination of dictatorial Julius Caesar? How would an audience react to the civil war caused by his death? If we accept the seminal/germinal nature of *The Rape of Lucrece*, what does her rape imply? Lurking behind all these questions, one certainty can be encountered, the fear of civil war brought about by religious strife.

I would like now to combine these considerations with a series of observations made by Eagleton, Michael Bristol and myself: they all concern *Hamlet*. Now the strangest thing about the play is its undying popularity. What makes five hour drama so enthralling for a modern audience? Eagleton believes that the answer can be found in the nature of Hamlet's alienation, which is somehow modern(ist).

...the resultant 'decentring' of his identity satirically questions the violent closure of bourgeois individualism as much as that of Claudius' court... the individualist conception of the self will itself enter into crisis. This is why many commentators have discerned something peculiarly 'modernist' in Hamlet... he stands at the tentative beginnings of a history which may now... be drawing to a close.

(Eagleton 75)

Hamlet is thus the first modern hero, or perhaps more momentously, the first anti-hero, unable to fit in anywhere. From a different tack, Michael Bristol defines Claudius and his court as medieval. They disclose a Carnavalesque zest for excess, for the body, for eating, drinking and fornicating, especially during a period of mourning. Claudius, as Lord of Misrule, cannot understand Hamlet's reticence and so scolds him for behaving like a spoilt child. It is perfectly feasible to draw together Hughes, Eagleton and Bristol if we return to the question of religion. Laertes, it should be remembered, is educated in Paris, Hamlet in Wittenburg. Wittenburg lies at the centre of the Reformation, and not for nothing is it still called Lutherstadt. Paris, might not be Rome, but for many Europeans it was the city of decadence and licence, the Babylon of northern Europe. The conflict between Hamlet and his uncle can be seen as generational, the medieval Claudius unable to maintain power in the Reformation age, it can be interpreted as a fable of the struggle that would become the Thirty Years War, yet it can escape no one's attention that the day finally belongs to the aptly named Fortinbras, who, will appear, if we use our imagination, just a few years later in the figure of Gustavus Adolphus. Thus, in line with Hughes' analysis, the individualism Eagleton identifies is Protestantism, which explains succinctly why Hamlet cannot accept Ophelia as a woman: she does not match up to his vision of the perfect woman that the Protestant Adonis-cum-Tarquin constructs. If we regard Hamlet as a hero, then he is not of the type that we can find in epic poems of national glorification, but closer to that more contemporary phenomenon, the novel.

If there is one major theme that Hughes has left virtually untouched, it is that of sexual difference. The fact that Hughes uses the poems as the basis of his hypothesis combined with the fact that he himself is a poet might be nothing more than a coincidence, but clearly one of the major achievements of modern criticism is a reaction against the heavily Romantic emphasis on Shakespeare as primarily a poet. Prospero, from this angle, says goodbye to poetry in the most highly poetical of styles. Keats' reading of *King Lear* is just that, a reading, after all, the poem is called *On Sitting Down to Read "King Lear" Once Again*; it is the poet talking to the poet. Whether Hughes is more inclined towards Shakespeare the poet than Shakespeare the dramatist is open to question, but the fact remains that Hughes insists that what is described in the poems, and particularly in the *Sonnets* is then transferred to the plays; this is an attempt at defining a hierarchical relationship. Furthermore, Hughes's analysis of the *Sonnets* contains one fatal flaw. Hughes comments that "a modern reader... will naturally ask how far this extravagant declaration of love is a literary convention" (Hughes 58). He replies that it is not just a convention, adding that

the Shakespeare's declarations are "total, unconditional, self-sacrificial..." (Hughes 60). However much "private pain" (Hughes 60) there is, Hughes then goes on to analyze the Dark Lady sonnets. In a way, this predicts his strategy of interpreting the role of the Goddess in the plays, yet we cannot fail to see that there is considerable inconsistency here. There is an Adonis figure in the poems, there is a dark Venus here, but the affections that are painful are not solely heterosexual but homosexual. This is the subject that Hughes does not develop, yet, he has given himself plenty of scope to do so. Right at the beginning of his study he states categorically:

In the Adonis myth, this fatal double emerged as Mars, Aphrodite's jealous lover, who took on the form of a wild boar and killed Adonis. So it comes about that the two versions of Adonis's death exist side by side. In the first, he is killed by Persephone in the form of a boar. In the second, he is killed by the one who will replace him - in the form of a boar. In other words, the boar is simultaneously the Queen of the Underworld in her enraged animal form, and Adonis's usurping double, a murderous martial warrior in enraged animal form.

(Hughes 8)

A radical change is brought about if the question of the double identity is analyzed. It sheds light on the problem of interpreting the sonnets as well as the plays, where sexual ambiguity plays a prominent part, for example, in the various amorous relationships, whether factual or imagined, in *Othello*. Neither should it be forgotten that women's roles were not played by women until Restoration times. Two years ago, Vita Fortunati gave us a very informative and stimulation lecture on the subject. Finally, Hughes himself stresses that Shakespeare's source for *Venus and Adonis* was presumably Ovid. *The Metamorphoses* is undeniably the epitome of ambivalence.

In reaching a conclusion in a paper of this sort, it is difficult to avoid a schoolmasterish attitude by saying "satisfactory, but could have done better", but that lies in the nature of any assessment.

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NORTHROP FRYE'S CRITICAL APPROACH TO SHAKESPEARE'S LAST PLAYS

Sofía Muñoz Valdivieso
Universidad de Málaga

... We are such stuff
As dreams are made on

Northrop Frye's analysis of Shakespeare's last plays, the so-called romances, must be seen in the context of his theory of comedy as it is presented in "The Argument of Comedy" (1949), *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), and, most importantly, in *A Natural Perspective. The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (1965)¹. Frye's critical thought is inherently schematic, and his approach to literary works is fundamentally a search for patterns and overall structures. Thus, although he knows that "each play of Shakespeare is a world in itself, so complete and satisfying a world that it is easy, delightful, and profitable to get lost in it" (Frye 1965a: viii), Frye chooses to view the comedies, as he himself indicates in the preface to *A Natural Perspective*, "from a middle distance, considering [them] as a single group unified by recurring images and structural devices" (Frye 1965a: viii). He approaches the individual plays as unified structures which relate to other similar structures and constitute what he calls the *mythos* of comedy. His purpose, then, is to lead the reader

from the characteristics of the individual play, the vividness of the characterization, the texture of imagery and the like, to consider what kind of a form comedy is, and what its place is in literature.

(Frye 1965a: viii)

The rationale behind Frye's critical approach to Shakespeare's comedies and romances is as usual articulated in the spatial metaphor of distance. In a crucial passage of *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) he had justified his method in a famous extended simile, in which he compared the task of criticism to the contemplation of a painting: the minute rhetorical analysis of the New Critics would be like

¹ References to Shakespearean romance, especially *The Tempest*, can be found in other work by Frye. See in particular, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare, The Secular Scripture* and "Romance as Masque".