

**LUSUS NATURAE VERSUS THE POET OF ALL THINGS:
WILLIAM HAZLITT'S REVALUATION ON
18TH CENTURY CRITICISM OF SHAKESPEARE¹**

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And what of this new book the whole world makes such a rout about? — Oh! 't is out of all plumb, my lord, — quite an irregular thing! — not one of the angles of the four corners was a right angle. — I had my rule and compasses, etc. my lord, in my pocket. — Excellent critic!

LAWRENCE STERNE, *TRISTRAM SHANDY*

Before we enter more immediately into the subject in hand, we shall say a few words on the title: *Lusus Naturae* versus the *poet of all things*. Both the Latin and the English expressions refer to Classical mythology and were brought into opposition when criticism on Shakespeare took a different stand during the Romantic Movement. According to legends², *Lusus*, one of Bacchus sons or companions, is said to have helped the deity in his conquering and civilizing scheme. While Bacchus himself took an expedition to India, *Lusus* went westward, landing on today's Portugal; hence the word Lusitania. Luis de Camoens, in *The Lusiads* Canto III, praised the Portuguese fatherhood³. Besides having conquered and civilized India, Bacchus is mostly known as a symbol of the organic energies of the Universe, attributes which his associates, such as Pan and *Lusus*, shared with him. Therefore, when Shakespeare's plays were compared to a work of a "genius shooting wild, deficient in taste", in Hugh Blair's words (2005, p. 537), the expression, *Lusus Naturae*, used by Coleridge in his *Lectures on Literature*, came in handy to characterize 18th century criticism of Shakespeare. The "poet of all things" refers to the son of Poseidon, Proteus. Homer describes this deity, in

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² The mythology of *Lusus*, as one of Bacchus' companions, spread out during the Middle Ages apparently from a mistranslation from the Latin word *lusus* (game), found in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*; find entry "Luso" in *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa e Brasileira* (Lisboa: Editorial Enciclopédia, 1936-1960): "Pastor filho ou descendente de Baco, que povoou a parte mais ocidental da Ibéria. Camões refere-se-lhe em vários passos de *Os Lusíadas*", p. 41. Coleridge seemed aware of this myth, for every time he uses expression *Lusus Naturae*, in his series of *Lectures on Literature*, he adds the equivalent in English: "child of nature" or "delightful Monster".

³ "This was the Lusitania, name applied/ by *Lusus*, or *Lisa*, sons, they say,/ of ancient Bacchus, or his boon compeers,/ eke the first dwellers of her eldest years" (Camoens, 1880, p. 94).

Odyssey Canto IV, as having the power of assuming the form of all things⁴. The parallel between Shakespeare and Proteus echoes back almost to the time of Shakespeare; in the 17th century, Margaret Cavendish wrote: “one would think he [Shakespeare] had been transformed into every one of those Persons he hath described” (Cavendish, 1664 apud Coleridge, 1987, v.1, n. 22, p. 69). However, it was only in the Romantic period, and mostly in William Hazlitt’s acclaimed work *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*, that this notion was fully expanded. What I intend to show, in this paper, is how this shift of godlike images, from *Lusus* to *Proteus*, represents a new stance to criticism itself.

During the Augustan era, many philosophers and critics endeavoured to conjoin the lessons and precepts inherited from ancient and Renaissance poetic and rhetoric with the latest philosophical inquires, for example, on the role the mind plays to form ideas from the internal and the external world: the world from *within* and the world from *without*, in John Locke’s terms (1997, p. 110). It was the birth of aesthetics, as we understand it now. But when it came to the appreciation of a work of art, most critics and philosophers remained faithful to old precepts: the true work of art is beautiful and “beauty is truth, truth beauty” (Keats, 2001, p. 222)⁵. In the literary world, this precept left no room but for the *Belles Lettres*. This meant that the intense and somewhat painful emotions of tragedy needed to be subdued and not pressed too close in order to be rendered artistic. David Hume, for example, in his essay “Of Tragedy”, says that the pains from sorrow, terror and anxiety depicted in a well written tragedy can only be converted into pleasures by the beauties of proper language and ornament (1987, p. 216) — by the beauties of language, I rephrase it (a well written and *proper* language), of what doesn’t reveal itself clearly to the eyes but to the ears.

It’s also true that according to old precepts art is an *Imitation of Nature*. But, as Hume, Voltaire and others put it, it’s not nature *per se* that art imitates — because the human mind has no access to the thing in itself — but nature seen through the eyes of beauty, *la Belle Nature*. Therefore, artists have to avail themselves of the formal rules of *decorum*: to say what is proper in a given circumstance. Shakespeare, wrote Voltaire in his *Philosophical Letters*, had no knowledge of *decorum*. In Hamlet Act V Scene I, for

⁴ “He will try you by taking the form of all creatures that come forth/ and move on the earth, he will be water and magical fire” (Homer, 1967, p. 76).

⁵ In this famous line from John Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the romantic poet imbues with classical feelings and thoughts a matter so congenial to them.

example, a clown defies the king, calling him a fool⁶. Shakespeare, argued Hugh Blair, abounds in metaphors fetched from the remotest and the most improper likeness of things: in *Henry V*, Act IV Scene viii, after having mentioned a dunghill he builds up a metaphor out of its steam⁷. Indeed “mixed Metaphor”, contended Blair, “is one of the grossest abuses of this figure” (2005, p. 163). His works could at best be works of genius — vast, sublime — but never beautiful and always inclining to the monstrous and irregular: a *Lusus Naturae*. As a matter of fact, says Voltaire: “the English were only capable of producing irregular beauties (...). The genius of Shakespeare”, proceeds the *philosophe*, “was sublime, of great natural force and richness, but he had no knowledge of the rules” (Voltaire, 1961, p. 84). Similarly, for Hume, Shakespeare’s want of taste and “total ignorance of all theatrical art and conduct” (Hume, 1983, p. 151) bore, without doubt, enriched and fertile works, but uncouth, misshapen, completely out of plumb. Rules and compasses were needed for due amendments and Aristotle’s *Poetics* appeared to offer the right tools.

The Greek philosopher argues that a work of art must be a living whole, and this can only happen if it imitates a single, unifying action that unravels itself at the same time and place. Dramatic poetry best imitates nature when its plot has a beginning, middle and an end: one necessarily following from the other. In the philosopher’s words:

A whole is that which has a beginning, middle and an end. A beginning is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an end is that which does itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it. A middle is that which itself comes after something else, and some other thing comes after it. Well-constructed plots should therefore not begin or end at any arbitrary point, but should employ the stated forms. (Aristotle, 1996, pp. 13-14)

Therefore, according to an interpretation that August Schlegel criticized for taking the whole as a mere accumulation of parts (1846, p. 239), the time and place of the plot corresponded to the actual time and place of the play. No overlapping of time was allowed. All action should take place, at most during the course of a day, for no one would bear standing on a theatre for longer; and the first act shouldn’t be, let us say, in

⁶ The First Clown answered Hamlet, who demanded the question about the time when he was meant to overcome Fortinbras, thus: “Cannot you tell that? every fool can tell that” (Shakespeare, 1994, p. 137).

⁷ “And those that leave their valiant bones in France,/ Dying like men, though buried in your dunghills,/ They shall be fam’d; for there the sun shall greet them,/ And draw their honours reeking to heaven” (Shakespeare apud Blair, 2005, p. 160).

Venice and the second in Cyprus, as it happens in *Othello*. For eighteenth century drama critics, this was understood as a means to make spectators *believe* in the actions represented as real events. In this sense, dramatic poetry can only be a single whole when it deludes and transports spectators to a different reality. The violation of the rules has to be carefully avoided by the poet.

Obviously, not every eighteenth century critic agreed with this. Samuel Johnson, one of the leading figures in Shakespearean studies at the time, contended, in his *Preface* to his edition of the poet's work, for the opposite idea. "The truth is", says the critic "that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players" (1968, p. 275). On the point that the audience did not imagine that the proceedings on the stage were real, Dr. Johnson argued that: "the unities of time and place are not essential to a just drama" (*idem*). But whenever he speaks about the bard, Dr. Johnson is always weighing the merits of the author with his faults, accusing some of his scenes of being immoral or badly written: "Shakespeare never has six lines together without a fault" (Boswell, 2008, p. 418), as James Boswell reported from one of Johnson's conversation.

Here we touch on a second major Augustan critical reproach to Shakespeare's plays, the idea, as Schlegel summarised in his *Lectures on Dramatic Literature*, "that [the poet] wounds our feelings by the open display of the most disgusting moral odiousness" (Schlegel, 1846, p. 367). We spoke above on the scene in which Hamlet is called a fool by a grave digger. Similar examples had been gathered from Dryden's days to Johnson's in order to denounce the moral dangerousness of Shakespeare. The most common solutions were adaptations and rewritings of scenes. Dryden & Davenant's edition of *The Tempest*, for instance, drastically diminished the role played by Caliban, because of his savageness, and introduced two new characters, Dorinda, Miranda's sister, and Hippolito, Prospero's foster son, both designed to commend innocence and love; or, in Hazlitt's words, recalling and reproaching the aforesaid edition, "to 'relieve the killing languor and over-laboured lassitude' of the solitude of the imagination, in which Shakespeare had left the inhabitants of his Enchanted Island" (Hazlitt, 1998, v. 5, p. 333). We could easily multiply similar examples. For 18th century critics and philosophers, the moral amendments of texts were justified by the historical argument that the rude and uneducated manners of the age of Elizabeth prevented Shakespeare from polishing his irregularities.

The Romantic Movement represents an important shift to Shakespearean studies as it no longer accused the poet of moral imperfections and want of knowledge of Aristotle's rules. In order to understand how this shift was possible and also to grasp the true meaning of the romantic critical tradition, I'll say a few words on two ideas tightly entwined: 1) the development of a formal and historical perceptive; 2) the idea that true criticism should aim at "transfusing the living principle" of a work instead of "dissecting its skeleton", in Hazlitt's recurring expressions.

As for the first point, the development of a formal and historical perceptive, the following extract from Coleridge's *Lectures on Literature*, written not without a sense of humour, is self-explanatory: "to apply the same technical criticism to a Virgil and a Dante, or to a Shakespeare and a Sophocles is scarcely less absurd, than to demand in a Pointer the form and proportion of a Greyhound" (Coleridge, 1987, v. 2, p. 70). Aristotle's rules of the three unities were then seen as an emanation from the Greek world. Tragedy in ancient Greece, contended Coleridge alongside with the Schlegel brothers' reading of Aristotle, evolved from the Dionysius' hymns or the hymns of the goat (as evinced in its etymology: *trágos* – goat; *oidé* – ode⁸). Thus, drama commenced as a religious feast, an argument which would be further developed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*⁹. Latter in Greek history, many religious features were preserved and could still be found in the exterior forms of the Greek theatre and in the internal disposition of the drama. The most important of these was the chorus and its twofold role, namely, as an ideal audience and characters of the play. The unities only made sense within these historical and formal elements of the Greek drama.

Likewise, the supposed lack of moral delicacy in the Elizabethans was understood as something that concurred with the boldness and vigour of the poetry of the time. "If the effeminacy of the present day", wrote Schlegel "is to serve as a general standard of what tragical composition may properly exhibit (...) we shall be forced to set very narrow limits to art" (Schlegel, 1846, p. 368). Moreover, many attempts were

⁸ Since Aristotle, many critics have discussed the origin of the word *tragedy* in connection with Dionysus. Hence, wrote Coleridge: "From the hymns that accompanied an established sacrifice to one of the Hero-Gods, Tragedy had its name and origin. It first appeared as the Hymn of the Goat (Τραγου οδῆ), the victim offered to Bacchus, as God of the Vine" (Coleridge, 1987, v. 1, p. 44). It's important to notice that Coleridge warned his audience, at the beginning of his lectures, that the history of the origin of tragedy could only be conjectured, never proved (idem, p. 43).

⁹ Although Nietzsche often opposes Schlegel's account on drama and pretends to reform the critic's notion of the ancient chorus as 'ideal spectator', some of his leading views on tragedy, for example such a one that disentangles the modern notion of spectator with the Greek one (Nietzsche, 1993, pp. 41-42), echoes his unwelcomed predecessors: the romantic writers and critics.

made to dig up works from Shakespearean contemporaries which were then unnoticed or, in Hazlitt's terms, "were swallowed up in the headlong torrent of puritanical zeal" from later and "more refined" periods, "as they are called" (Hazlitt, 1998, v. 5, p. 160). In Hazlitt's *Lectures on the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth* the list of such authors is extensive and the critic endeavours to display and dwell on the hidden sources of their beauties. The true value of Shakespeare's plays could only be understood in contrast with his fellow writers, whose productions should by no means be undervalued. If Shakespeare "overlooks and commands the admiration of posterity, he does it from the *table-land* of the age in which he lived (...). His age was necessary to him" (Hazlitt, 1998, v. 5, pp. 163-164). Thus analysing Shakespeare's works within his historical moment, Hazlitt's reading of Shakespeare avoided both extremes: one in which the bard is depicted as a sort of monster of poetical genius; and the other which placed him "sacred and aloof from the vulgar herd of men" (Hazlitt, 1998, v. 5, p. 163). Hazlitt's acute knowledge of minor Elizabethans poets and sole interest in what they wrote, not what they were, set his criticism miles away from the *Bardolatry* that prevailed in the succeeding generations.

If, to a certain degree, the lustre of Shakespeare's genius was borrowed from the bright luminaries that circled in his constellation, what authorised Hazlitt's frequent use of the godlike protean image whenever he talks on the bard? To some extent, the air which Shakespeare breathed was favourable to the disposition of going out of one's self. According to Hazlitt, at least two major circumstances of the time rendered it possible, namely, the endless diversity and collision of opinion brought out by the Reformation and "the discovery of the New World and the reading of voyages and travels" (Hazlitt, 1998, v. 5, p. 169). However, no one but the poet could have the power, as Hazlitt learned from Shakespeare, to "body forth the forms of things unknown (...) and give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name" (Shakespeare, 1994, p. 104). There are countless examples in Shakespeare's plays, when the story spins into a reflexion on dramatic creation itself, where the poet is depicted as the magician without whose power everything would "be melted into thin air" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 254). The *palpable texture* even of the most fantastic creations of the poet's mind and the poetic licence of assuming different characters were understood by Hazlitt as the way Shakespeare found of expressing the inspired thoughts not of himself but of others. Hence one of Hazlitt's most famous passages, recalled by Jorge Luis Borges: "[Shakespeare] was just like any other man, but that he was like all other man (...). He

was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become” (Hazlitt, 1998, v. 2, p. 208)¹⁰.

Hazlitt’s approach to Shakespeare can be most fairly understood in his 1817 publication, *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*. There were countless analysis of Shakespeare’s plays before this work, but they were either not comprehensive, leaving out poems and the less popular plays, or not aimed at the *common reader*, in Virginia Woolf’s sense of the expression¹¹. As Ralph Wardle, one of Hazlitt’s critics wrote, “before this book (...), no one had ever attempted a comprehensive study of all of Shakespeare, play by play, that readers could read with pleasure as a guide to their understanding and appreciation” (Wardle, 1971, p. 201). Somewhat loosely organized, the work does not present a measured account of the plays’ strengths and weaknesses, as did Dr. Johnson; neither it treats them with an analytical reasoning or a commanding view “strained at a grand systematic conclusion” (Hazlitt, 1998, v. 1, p. 271), as did Schlegel and Coleridge, in Hazlitt’s reading of both critics. Without apologies, he addresses his readers as fellow lovers of Shakespeare and shares with them the beauties of familiar examples from the poet’s thirty five plays. *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*, *The Two Noble Kinsman* and *Titus Adronicus* are the only three to which Hazlitt doesn’t dedicate a full length analysis. But even these are spoken of in a separate chapter entitled: “Doubtful Plays of Shakespeare”; at his time the authorship of such plays wasn’t yet established.

The very title of Hazlitt’ book is in itself of no small importance. The word “character” in English is pregnant with moral and aesthetic values, meaning at once the distinctive nature of something or someone and a person in a novel, play or film. When Hazlitt decides to write on the *characters* of Shakespeare’s Plays, he has in mind these different senses; as such, he sets forth to analyse what is peculiar and unique to each of Shakespeare’s most noteworthy and popular characters. These are compared with one another and often with characters from different plays. But besides this extensive exercise of comparative literature, something which Hazlitt learned from preceding critics, and the minute care to bring the right illustrations from the plays themselves, the

¹⁰ For Borges quotation of this passage, see the essay “De Alguem a Nadie”, from *Otras Inquisiciones*.

¹¹ On *How Should One Read a Book?*, Virginia Woolf’s last essay from the *Common Reader* series, the writer gives us a clue of what she means by the expression, which refuses itself to be converted into a critical dogma, and unexpectedly throws us back to the romantic protean image of the poet: “Do not dictate to your author; try to became him (...). If you open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness, from the twist and turn of the first sentences, will bring you into the presence of a human being unlike any other” (Woolf, 1986, p. 259).

critic appears to incorporate Shakespeare's own protean power to his critical stance. Before we conclude, we shall say a few words on this idea.

We've seen that the Romantic critical tradition differs from the preceding school for having adopted a formal and historical perceptive and that thus it has dropped out given moulds and rules in interpreting a work of art. For Hazlitt, a sound knowledge of literary history is "half the [task], but only half" (Hazlitt, 1998, v. 9, p. 67). When criticising Dr. Johnson's reading of Shakespeare, Hazlitt wrote: "We do not say that a man to be a critic must necessary be a poet: but to be a good critic, he ought not to be a bad poet" (1998, v. 1, p. 89). Unlike Coleridge, Wordsworth and other literary figures of his day, Hazlitt never wrote poetry. However, the energetic motion of his essays, the frequent appeal to playful assonances and internal rhymes and the sinewy texture¹² that he gives to his ideas and words very often bring critical prose to the verge of poetry. There's a passage in Hazlitt famed essay *My first Acquaintance with the Poets*, an autobiographical account of the author's first meeting with the *Lake School* poets (a life-changing experience, described in terms that evoke a religious conversion), that typifies his poetical verve and where the author appears to offer a clue to his critical creed:

As we passed along between Wem and Shrewsbury, and I eyed their blue tops seen through the wintry branches, or the red rustling leaves of the sturdy oak-trees by the roadside, a sound was in my ears as of a Siren's song; I was stunned, startled with it, as from deep sleep; but I had no notion then that I should ever be able to express my admiration to others in motley imagery or quaint allusion, till the light of [Coleridge's] genius shone into my soul, like the sun's rays glittering in the puddles of the road (Hazlitt, 1998, v. 9, p. 95).

Whenever writing on books, pictures and plays Hazlitt always aims at "building up image after image" (Woolf, 1986, p. 183)¹³, until we have *motley imageries* that could be eyed from a distance, with all the charms of landscape painting; and he creates allusions, *quaint allusions*, which would instantly echo the work in question and leave a sound in the reader's ears. Like Shakespeare bodying forth his myriad characters, the

¹² In Hazlitt's *A Farewell to Essay Writing*, published not long before his death, the writer says: "If I have had few pleasures or advantages, my ideas, from their *sinewy texture*, have been to me in the nature of realities" (HAZLITT, 2000, pp. 544-545). For a more detailed discussion on Hazlitt's notion of the palpable texture of ideas, see Chapter V, "From Imitation to Expression", from David Bromwich's seminal work *Hazlitt: the mind of a critic*.

¹³ For a full understanding of Virginia Woolf's reading of Hazlitt, see her essay "William Hazlitt" from *The Second Common Readers*.

critic gives life to the object he describes by lending the colours and tones to a mind outside its own.

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