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Shakespeare and the exorcists

Between the spring of 1585 and the summer of 1586, a group of English Catholic priests led by the Jesuit William Weston, alias Father Edmunds, conducted a series of spectacular exorcisms, principally in the house of a recusant gentleman, Sir George Peckham of Denham, Buckinghamshire. The priests were outlaws – by an Act of 1585 the mere presence in England of a Jesuit or seminary priest constituted high treason – and those who sheltered them were guilty of a felony, punishable by death. Yet the exorcisms, though clandestine, drew large crowds, almost certainly in the hundreds, and must have been common knowledge to hundreds more. In 1603, long after the arrest and punishment of those involved, Samuel Harsnett, then chaplain to the Bishop of London, wrote a detailed account of the cases, based upon sworn statements taken from four of the demoniacs and one of the priests. It has been recognized since the eighteenth century that Shakespeare was reading Harsnett's book, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, as he was writing *King Lear*.[1]

My concern is with the relation between these two texts, and I want to suggest that our understanding of this relation is greatly enhanced by the theoretical ferment that has affected (some would say afflicted) literary studies during the past decade. This claim may arouse scepticism on several counts. Source study is, as we all know, the elephants' graveyard of literary history. My own work, moreover, has consistently failed to make the move that can redeem, on these occasions, such unpromising beginnings: the move from a local problem to a universal, encompassing, and abstract problematic within which the initial concerns are situated. For me the study of the literary is the study of contingent, particular, intended, and historically embedded works; if theory inevitably involves the desire to escape from contingency into a higher realm, a realm in which signs are purified of the slime of history, then this paper is written *against* theory.[2]

But I am not convinced that theory necessarily drives toward the abstract purity of autonomous signification, and, even when it does, its influence upon the study of literature may be quite distinct from its own designs. Indeed, I believe that the most important effect of contemporary theory upon the practice of literary criticism, and certainly upon *my* practice, is to subvert the tendency to think of aesthetic representation as ultimately autonomous, separable from its cultural context and hence divorced from the social, ideological, and material matrix in which all art is produced and consumed. This subversion is true not only of Marxist theory explicitly engaged in polemics against literary autonomy, but also of deconstructionist theory, even at its most hermetic and abstract. For the undecidability that deconstruction repeatedly discovers in literary signification also calls into question the boundaries between the literary and the nonliterary. The intention to produce a work of literature does not guarantee an autonomous text, since the signifiers always exceed and thus undermine intention. This constant exceeding (which is the paradoxical expression of an endless deferral of meaning) forces the collapse of all stable oppositions, or rather compels interpretation to acknowledge that one position is always infected with traces of its radical antithesis.[3] Insofar as the absolute disjunction of the literary and the nonliterary had been the root assumption of mainstream Anglo-American criticism in the mid-twentieth century, deconstruction emerged as a liberating challenge, a salutary return of the literary text to the condition of all other texts and a simultaneous assault on the positivist certitude of the nonliterary, the privileged realm of historical fact. History cannot be divorced from textuality, and all texts can be compelled to confront the crisis of undecidability revealed in the literary text. Hence history loses its epistemological innocence, while literature loses an isolation that had come to seem more a prison than a privilege.

The problem with this theoretical liberation, in my view, is that it is forced, by definition, to discount the specific, institutional interests served both by local episodes of undecidability and contradiction and by the powerful if conceptually imperfect differentiation between the literary and the nonliterary. Deconstruction is occasionally attacked as if it were a satanic doctrine, but I sometimes think that it is not satanic enough; as John Wesley wrote to his brother, "If I have any fear, it is not of falling into hell, but of falling into nothing."[4] Deconstructionist readings lead too readily and predictably to the void; in actual literary practice the perplexities into which one is led are not moments of pure, untrammeled *aporia* but localized strategies in particular historical encounters. Similarly, it is important to expose the theoretical untenability of the conventional boundaries between facts and artifacts, but the particular terms of this boundary at a specific time and place cannot simply be discarded. On the contrary, as I will try to demonstrate in some detail, these impure terms that mark the difference between the literary and

the nonliterary are the currency in crucial institutional negotiations and exchange. This institutional economy is one of the central concerns of the critical method that I have called cultural poetics.

Let us return to Samuel Harsnett. The relation between *King Lear* and *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* has, as I have remarked, been known for centuries, but the knowledge has remained almost entirely inert, locked in the conventional pieties of source study. From Harsnett, we are told, Shakespeare borrowed the names of the foul fiends by whom Edgar, in his disguise as the Bedlam beggar Poor Tom, claims to be possessed. From Harsnett, too, the playwright derived some of the language of madness, several of the attributes of hell, and a substantial number of colorful adjectives. These and other possible borrowings have been carefully catalogued, but the question of their significance has been not only unanswered but unasked.[5] Until recently, the prevailing model for the study of literary sources, a model in effect parceled out between the old historicism and the new criticism, blocked such a question. As a freestanding, self-sufficient, disinterested art-work produced by a solitary genius, *King Lear* has only an accidental relation to its sources: they provide a glimpse of the "raw material" that the artist fashioned. In so far as this "material" is taken seriously at all, it is as part of the work's "historical background," a phrase that reduces history to a decorative setting or a convenient, well-lighted pigeonhole. But once the differentiations upon which this model is based begin to crumble, then source study is compelled to change its character: history cannot simply be set against literary texts as either stable antithesis or stable background, and the protective isolation of those texts gives way to a sense of their interaction with other texts and hence to the permeability of their boundaries. "When I play with my cat," writes Montaigne, "who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?"[6] When Shakespeare borrows from Harsnett, who knows if Harsnett has not already, in a deep sense, borrowed from Shakespeare's theater what Shakespeare borrows back? Whose interests are served by the borrowing? And is there a larger cultural text produced by the exchange?

Such questions do not lead, for me at least, to the *O altitudo!* of radical indeterminacy. They lead rather to an exploration of the institutional strategies in which both *King Lear* and Harsnett's *Declaration* are embedded. These strategies, I suggest, are part of an intense and sustained struggle in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England to redefine the central values of society. Such a redefinition entailed a transformation of the prevailing standards of judgment and action, a rethinking of the conceptual categories by which the ruling élites constructed their world, and which they attempted to impose upon the majority of the population. At the heart of this struggle, which had as its outcome a murderous civil war, was the definition of the sacred, a definition that directly involved secular as well as religious

institutions, since the legitimacy of the state rested explicitly upon its claim to a measure of sacredness. What is the sacred? Who defines and polices its boundaries? How can society distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate claims to sacred authority? In early modern England, rivalry among elites competing for the major share of authority was characteristically expressed not only in parliamentary factions but in bitter struggles over religious doctrine and practice.

Harsnett's *Declaration* is a weapon in one such struggle, the attempt by the established and state-supported Church of England to eliminate competing religious authorities by wiping out pockets of rivalrous charisma. Charisma, in Edward Shils's phrase, is "awe-arousing centrality,"[7] the sense of breaking through the routine into the realm of the "extraordinary," and hence the sense of making direct contact with the ultimate, vital sources of legitimacy, authority, and sacredness. Exorcism was for centuries one of the supreme manifestations in Latin Christianity of this charisma; "in the healing of the possessed," Peter Brown writes, "the *præsentia* of the saints was held to be registered with unfailing accuracy, and their ideal power, their *potentia*, shown most fully and in the most reassuring manner."[8] Reassuring, that is, not only or even primarily to the demoniac, but to the community of believers who bore witness to the ritual and indeed, through their tears and prayers and thanksgiving, participated in it. For unlike sorcery, which occurred most frequently in the dark corners of the land, in remote rural hamlets and isolated cottages, demonic possession seems largely an urban phenomenon. The devil depended upon an audience, as did the charismatic healer: the great exorcisms of the late middle ages and early Renaissance took place at the heart of cities, in cathedrals packed with spectators. They were, as voluminous contemporary accounts declare, moving testimonials to the power of the true faith. But in Protestant England of the late sixteenth century, neither the *præsentia* nor the *potentia* of the exorcist was any longer reassuring to religious authorities, and the Anglican Church had no desire to treat the urban masses to a spectacle whose edifying value had been called into question. Even relatively small assemblies, gathered far from the cities in the obscurity of private houses, had come to represent a threat.

In the *Declaration*, Harsnett specifically attacks exorcism as practiced by Jesuits, but he had earlier leveled the same charges at the Puritan exorcist John Darrell.[9] And he does so not, as we might expect, to claim a monopoly on the practice for the Anglican Church, but to expose exorcism itself as a fraud. On behalf of established religious and secular authority, Harsnett wishes, in effect, to cap permanently the great rushing geysers of charisma released in rituals of exorcism. Spiritual *potentia* will henceforth be distributed with greater moderation and control through the whole of the Anglican hierarchy, a hierarchy at whose pinnacle is placed the sole legitimate possessor of

absolute charismatic authority, the monarch, supreme head of the Church in England.

The arguments that Harsnett marshalls against exorcism have a rationalistic cast that may mislead us, for despite appearances we are not dealing with an Enlightenment attempt to construct a rational faith. Harsnett denies the presence of the demonic in those whom Father Edmunds claimed to exorcize, but finds it in the exorcists themselves:

> And who was the deuil, the brocher, herald, and perswader of these vnutterable treasons, but *Weston* [*alias* Edmunds] the Iesuit, the chief plotter, and . . . all the holy Couey of the twelue deuilish comedians in their seueral turnes: for there was neither deuil, nor vrchin, nor Elfe, but themselues.[10]

Hence, writes Harsnett, the "Dialogue between *Edmunds*, & the deuil" was in reality a dialogue between "the deuil *Edmunds*, and *Edmunds* the deuil, for he played both parts himself".[11]

This strategy – the reinscription of evil onto the professed enemies of evil – is one of the characteristic operations of religious authority in the early modern period, and has its secular analogues in more recent history when famous revolutionaries are paraded forth to be tried as counter-revolutionaries. The paradigmatic Renaissance instance is the case of the *benandanti*, analyzed brilliantly by the historian Carlo Ginzburg.[12] The *benandanti* were members of a northern Italian folk cult who believed that their spirits went forth seasonally to battle with fennel stalks against their enemies, the witches. If the *benandanti* triumphed, their victory assured the peasants of good harvests; if they lost, the witches would be free to work their mischief. The Inquisition first became interested in the practice in the late sixteenth century; after conducting a series of lengthy inquiries, the Holy Office determined that the cult was demonic, and in subsequent interrogations attempted, with some success, to persuade the witch-fighting *benandanti* that they were themselves witches.

Harsnett does not hope to persuade exorcists that they are devils; he wishes to expose their fraudulence and relies upon the state to punish them. But he is not willing to abandon the demonic altogether, and it hovers in his work, half-accusation, half-metaphor, whenever he refers to Father Edmunds or the Pope. Satan served too important a function to be cast off lightly by the early seventeenth-century clerical establishment. The same state Church that sponsored the attacks on superstition in the *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* continued to cooperate, if less enthusiastically than before, in the ferocious prosecutions of witches. These prosecutions significantly were handled by the secular judicial apparatus – witchcraft was a criminal offense like aggravated assault or murder – and hence reinforced rather than rivaled the bureaucratic control of authority. The eruption of the demonic into the

human world was not denied altogether, but the problem was to be processed through the proper, secular channels. In cases of witchcraft, the devil was defeated in the courts through the simple expedient of hanging his human agents and not, as in cases of possession, compelled by a spectacular spiritual counterforce to speak out and depart.

Witchcraft, then, was distinct from possession, and though Harsnett himself is skeptical about accusations of witchcraft, his principal purpose is to expose a nexus of chicanery and delusion in the practice of exorcism.[13] By doing so he hopes to drive the practice out of society's central zone, to deprive it of its prestige and discredit its apparent efficacy. In late antiquity, as Peter Brown has demonstrated, exorcism was based upon the model of the Roman judicial system: the exorcist conducted a formal *quæstio* in which the demon, under torture, was forced to confess the truth.[14] Now, after more than a millennium, this power would once again be vested solely in the state.

Harsnett's efforts, backed by his powerful superiors, did seriously restrict the practice of exorcism. Canon 72 of the new Church Canons of 1604 ruled that henceforth no minister, unless he had the special permission of his bishop, was to attempt "upon any pretense whatsoever, whether of possession or obsession, by fasting and prayer, to cast out any devil or devils, under pain of the imputation of imposture or cozenage and deposition from the minstery."[15] Since special permission was rarely if ever granted, exorcism had, in effect, been officially halted. But it proved easier to drive exorcism from the center to the periphery than to strip it entirely of its power. Exorcism had been a process of reintegration as well as a manifestation of authority; as the ethnographer Shirokogorov observed of the shamans of Siberia, exorcists could "master" harmful spirits and restore "psychic equilibrium" to whole communities as well as to individuals.[16] The pronouncements of English bishops could not suddenly banish from the land inner demons who stood, as Peter Brown puts it, "for the intangible emotional undertones of ambiguous situations and for the uncertain motives of refractory individuals."[17] The possessed gave voice to the rage, anxiety, and sexual frustration that built up particularly easily in the authoritarian, patriarchal, impoverished, and plague-ridden world of early modern England. The Anglicans attempted to dismantle a corrupt and inadequate therapy without effecting a new and successful cure. In the absence of exorcism, Harsnett could only offer the possessed the very slender reed of Jacobean medicine; if the recently deciphered journal of the Buckinghamshire physician, Richard Napier, is at all representative, doctors in the period struggled to treat a substantial number of cases of possession.[18] But for Harsnett the problem does not really exist, for he argues that the great majority of cases of possession are either fraudulent or subtly called into existence by the ritual designed to treat them. Eliminate the cure and you eliminate the disease. He is forced to concede that at some distant time possession and exorcism were authentic, for, after all,

Jesus himself had driven a legion of unclean spirits out of a possessed man and into the Gadarene swine (Mark 5: 1–19); but the age of miracles has passed, and corporeal possession by demons is no longer possible. The spirit abroad is "the spirit of illusion."[19] Whether they profess to be Catholics or Calvinists does not matter; all modern exorcists practice the same time-honored trade: "the feate of iugling and deluding the people by counterfeyt miracles."[20] Exorcists sometimes contend, acknowledges Harsnett, that the casting out of devils is not a miracle but a wonder – "*mirandum & non miraculum*" – but "both tearmes spring from one roote of wonder or maruell: an effect which a thing strangely done doth procure in the minds of the beholders, as being aboue the reach of nature and reason."[21]

The significance of exorcism, then, lies not in any intrinsic quality of the ritual nor in the precise character of the marks of possession: it lies entirely in the impression made upon the spectators. It may appear that the exorcist and the possessed are utterly absorbed in their terrifying confrontation, but in the midst of the sound and fury – "crying, gnashing of teeth, wallowing, foaming, extraordinarie and supernaturall strength, and supernaturall knowledge"[22] – the real object of the performers' attention is the crowd of beholders.

To counter these effects, Harsnett needed an analytical tool that would enable him to demystify exorcism, to show his readers why the ritual could be so empty and yet so powerful, why beholders could be induced to believe that they were witnessing the ultimate confrontation of good and evil, why a few miserable shifts could produce the experience of horror and wonder. He finds that tool in *theater*.

In the most powerful artistic practice of his age, Harsnett claims to reveal the analytical key to disclosing the degradation of the ancient spiritual practice: exorcisms are stage plays fashioned by cunning clerical dramatists and performed by actors skilled in improvisation. Harsnett first used this theatrical analysis in his attack on Darrell, but it was not until three years later, in his polemic against the Jesuit exorcists, that he worked out its implications in detail.[23] In the account presented in the *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, some of the participants are self-conscious professionals, like Father Edmunds and his cohorts; others (mostly impressionable young serving women and unstable, down-at-heel young gentlemen) are amateurs cunningly drawn into the demonic stage business. Those selected to play the possessed are in effect taught their roles without realizing at first that they *are* roles.

The priests begin by talking conspicuously about the way successful exorcisms abroad had taken place, and describing in lurid detail the precise symptoms of the possessed. They then await occasions upon which to improvise: a serving man, "beeing pinched with penurie, & hunger, did lie but a night, or two, abroad in the fieldes, and beeing a melancholicke person, was scared with lightning, and thunder, that happened in the night, & loe, an

euident signe, that the man was possessed";[24] a dissolute young gentleman "had a spice of the *Hysterica passio*" or, as it is popularly called, "the Moother,"[25] and that too is a sign of possession. An inflamed toe, a pain in the side, a fright taken from the sudden leaping of a cat, a fall in the kitchen, an intense depression following the loss of a beloved child – all are occasions for the priests to step forward and detect the awful presence of the demonic, whereupon the young "scholers," as Harsnett wryly terms the naive performers, "*frame* themselues iumpe and fit vnto the Priests humors, to mop, mow, iest, raile, raue, roare, commend & discommend, and as the priests would haue them, vpon fitting occasions (according to the differences of times, places, and commers in) in all things to play the deuils accordinglie."[26]

The theatricality of exorcism, to which the *Declaration* insistently calls attention, has been repeatedly noted by modern ethnographers who do not share Harsnett's reforming zeal or his sense of outrage. In an illuminating study of possession among the Ethiopians of Gondar, Michel Leiris notes that the healer carefully instructs the *zar*, or spirit, who has seized upon someone, how to behave: the types of cries appropriate to the occasion, the expected violent contortions, the "decorum," as Harsnett would put it, of the trance state.[27] The treatment is in effect an initiation into the performance of the symptoms, which are then cured precisely because they conform to the stereotype of the healing process. One must not conclude, writes Leiris, that there are no "real" – that is, sincerely experienced – cases of possession, for many of the patients (principally young women and slaves) seem genuinely ill, but at the same time there are no cases that are exempt from artifice.[28] Between authentic possession, spontaneous and involuntary, and inauthentic possession, simulated to provide a show or extract some material or moral benefit, there are so many subtle shadings that it is impossible to draw a firm boundary.[29] Possession in Gondar *is* theater, but theater that cannot confess its own theatrical nature, for this is not "theater played" (*théâtre joué*) but "theater lived" (*théâtre vécu*), lived not only by the spirit-haunted actor but by the audience. Those who witness a possession may at any moment be themselves possessed, and even if they are untouched by the *zar*, they remain participants rather than passive spectators. For the theatrical performance is not shielded from them by an impermeable membrane; possession is extraordinary but not marginal, a heightened but not separate state. In possession, writes Leiris, the collective life itself takes the form of theater.[30]

Precisely those qualities that fascinate and charm the ethnographer disgust the embattled Harsnett: where the former can write of "authentic" possession, in the unspoken assurance that none of his readers actually believes in the existence of "*zars*," the latter, granted no such assurance and culturally threatened by the alternative vision of reality, struggles to prove that possession is by definition inauthentic; where the former sees a complex ritual integrated into the social process, the latter sees "a *Stygian* comedy to make

silly people afraid";[31] where the former sees the theatrical expression of collective life, the latter sees the theatrical promotion of specific and malevolent institutional interests. And where Leiris's central point is that possession is a theater that does not confess its own theatricality, Harsnett's concern is to enforce precisely such a confession: the last 102 pages of the *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* reprint the "severall Examinations, and confessions of the parties pretended to be possessed, and dispossessed by *Weston* the Iesuit, and his adherents: set downe word for worde as they were taken vpon oath before her Maiesties Commissioners for causes Ecclesiasticall."[32] These transcripts prove, according to Harsnett, that the solemn ceremony of exorcism is a "play of sacred miracles," a "wonderful pageant," a "deuil Theater."[33]

The force of this confession, for Harsnett, is to demolish exorcism. Theater is not the disinterested expression of the popular spirit, but the indelible mark of falsity, tawdriness, and rhetorical manipulation. And these sinister qualities are rendered diabolical by that which so appeals to Leiris: exorcism's cunning concealment of its own theatricality. The spectators do not know that they are responding to a powerful if sleazy tragicomedy; hence their tears and joy, their transports of "commiseration and compassion,"[34] are rendered up, not to a troupe of acknowledged players, but to seditious Puritans or to the supremely dangerous Catholic Church. The theatrical seduction is not, for Harsnett, merely a Jesuitical strategy; it is the essence of the Church itself: Catholicism is a "Mimick superstition."[35]

Harsnett's response is to try to compel the Church to become the theater, just as Catholic clerical garments – the copes and albs and amices and stoles that were the glories of medieval textile crafts – were sold during the Reformation to the players. When an actor in a history play took the part of an English bishop, he could conceivably have worn the actual robes of the character he was representing. Far more is involved here than thrift: the transmigration of a single ecclesiastical cloak from the vestry to the wardrobe may stand as an emblem of the more complex and elusive institutional exchanges that are my subject: a sacred sign, designed to be displayed before a crowd of men and women, is emptied, made negotiable, traded from one institution to another. Such exchanges are rarely so tangible; they are not usually registered in inventories, not often sealed with a cash payment. Nonetheless they occur constantly, for it is precisely through the process of institutional negotiation and exchange that differentiated expressive systems, distinct cultural discourses, are fashioned. We may term such fashioning cultural poesis; the sale of clerical garments is an instance of the ideological labor that such poesis entails. What happens when the piece of cloth is passed from the church to the playhouse? A consecrated object is reclassified, assigned a cash value, transferred from a sacred to a profane setting, deemed suitable to be staged. The theater company is willing to pay for the object not

because it contributes to naturalistic representation but because it still bears a symbolic value, however attenuated. On the bare Elizabethan stage, costumes were particularly important – companies were willing to pay more for a good costume than for a good play – and that importance in turn reflected culture's fetishistic obsession with clothes as a mark of status and degree. And if for the theater the acquisition of clerical garments was a significant appropriation of symbolic power, why would the Church part with that power? Because selling Catholic vestments to the players was a form of symbolic aggression: a vivid, wry reminder that Catholicism, as Harsnett puts it, is "the Pope's playhouse."[36]

This blend of appropriation and aggression is similarly at work in the transfer of possession and exorcism from sacred to profane representation. Hence the *Declaration* takes pains to identify exorcism not merely with "the theatrical" – a category that scarcely exists for Harsnett – but with the actual theater; at issue is not so much a metaphorical concept as a functioning institution. For if Harsnett can drive exorcism into the theater – if he can show that the stately houses in which the rituals were performed were playhouses, that the sacred garments were what he calls a "lousie holy wardrop,"[37] that the terrifying writhings were simulations, that the uncanny signs and wonders were contemptible stage tricks, that the devils were the "cassiered woodden-beaten" Vices from medieval drama,[38] and that the exorcists were "vagabond players, that coast from Towne to Towne"[39] – then the ceremony and everything for which it stands will, as far as he is concerned, be emptied out. And, with this emptying out, Harsnett will have driven exorcism from the center to the periphery – in the case of London, quite literally to the periphery, where increasingly stringent urban regulation had already driven the public playhouses.

It is in this symbolically charged zone of pollution, disease, and licentious entertainment that Harsnett seeks to situate the practice of exorcism.[40] What had once occurred in solemn glory at the very center of the city would now be staged alongside the culture's other vulgar spectacles and illusions. Indeed the sense of the theater's tawdriness, marginality, and emptiness – the sense that everything the players touch is thereby rendered hollow – underlies Harsnett's analysis not only of exorcism but of the entire Catholic Church. Demonic possession is a particularly attractive cornerstone for such an analysis, not only because of its histrionic intensity but because the theater itself is by its very nature bound up with possession. Harsnett did not have to believe that the cult of Dionysus out of which the Greek drama evolved was a cult of possession; even the ordinary and familiar theater of his own time depended upon the apparent transformation of the actor into the voice, the actions, and the face of another.

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With his characteristic opportunism and artistic self-consciousness, Shakespeare in his first known play, *The Comedy of Errors* (1590), was already toying with the connection between theater, illusion, and spurious possession. Antipholus of Syracuse, accosted by his twin's mistress, imagines that he is encountering the devil: "Satan avoid I charge thee tempt me not" (IV.iii.46). The Ephesian Antipholus's wife, Adriana, dismayed by the apparently mad behavior of her husband, imagines that the devil has possessed him, and she dutifully calls in an exorcist: "Good Doctor Pinch, you are a conjurer; / Establish him in his true sense again" (IV.iv.45–6). Pinch begins the solemn ritual:

> I charge thee, Satan, hous'd within this man,
> To yield possession to my holy prayers,
> And to thy state of darkness hie thee straight;
> I conjure thee by all the saints in heaven.
> (IV.iv.52–5)

only to be interrupted with a box on the ears from the outraged husband: "Peace, doting wizard, peace; I am not mad." For the exorcist, such denials only confirm the presence of an evil spirit: "the fiend is strong within him" (IV.iv.105). At the scene's end, Antipholus is dragged away to be "bound and laid in some dark room."

The false presumption of demonic possession in *The Comedy of Errors* is not the result of deception; it is an instance of what one of Shakespeare's sources calls a "suppose" – an attempt to make sense of a series of bizarre actions gleefully generated by the comedy's screwball coincidences. Exorcism is the kind of straw people clutch at when the world seems to have gone mad. In *Twelfth Night*, written some ten years later, Shakespeare's view of exorcism, though still comic, has darkened. Possession now is not a mistaken "suppose" but a fraud, a malicious practical joke played upon Malvolio. "Pray God he be not bewitched" (III.iv.102), Maria piously intones at the sight of the cross-gartered, leering gull, and when he is out of earshot Fabian laughs, "If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction" (III.iv.128–9).[41] The theatrical self-consciousness is intensified when Feste the clown is brought in to conduct a mock-exorcism; "I would I were the first that ever dissembled in such a gown" (IV.ii.5–6), he remarks sententiously as he disguises himself as Sir Topas the curate. If the gibe had a specific reference for the play's original audience, it would be to the Puritan Darrell who had only recently been convicted of dissembling in the exorcism of William Sommers of Nottingham. Now, the scene would suggest, the tables are being turned on the self-righteous fanatic. "Good Sir Topas," pleads Malvolio, "do not think I am mad. They have laid me here in hideous darkness." "Fie, thou dishonest Satan!" Feste replies. "I call thee by

the most modest terms, for I am one of those gentle ones that will use the devil himself with courtesy" (IV. ii. 29–34).

By 1600 then Shakespeare had clearly marked out possession and exorcism as frauds, so much so that in *All's Well That Ends Well*, a few years later, he could casually use the term "exorcist" as a synonym for illusion-monger: "Is there no exorcist / Beguiles the truer office of mine eyes?" cries the King of France when Helena, whom he thought dead, appears before him: "Is't real that I see?" (V. iii. 298–300). When in 1603 Harsnett was whipping exorcism toward the theater, Shakespeare was already at the entrance to the Globe to welcome it.

Given Harsnett's frequent expressions of the "anti-theatrical prejudice," this welcome may seem strange, but in fact nothing in the *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* necessarily implies hostility to the theater as a professional institution. It was Darrell, and not Harsnett, who represented an implacable threat to the theater, for where the Anglican polemicist saw the theatrical in the demonic the Puritan polemicist saw the demonic in the theatrical: "The Devil," wrote Stephen Gosson, "is the efficient cause of plays."[42] Harsnett's work attacks a form of theater that pretends that it is not entertainment but sober reality; hence his polemic virtually depends upon the existence of an officially designated commercial theater, marked off openly from all other forms and ceremonies of public life precisely by virtue of its freely acknowledged fictionality. Where there is no pretense to truth, there can be no *imposture*: it is this argument that permits so ontologically anxious a figure as Sir Philip Sidney to defend poetry – "Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth."[43]

In this spirit Puck playfully defends *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> If we shadows have offended,
> Think but this, and all is mended,
> That you have but slumber'd here
> While these visions did appear.
> And this weak and idle theme,
> No more yielding but a dream.
> (V. i. 409–14)

With a similarly frank admission of illusion Shakespeare can open the theater to Harsnett's polemic. Indeed, as if Harsnett's momentum carried *him* into the theater along with the fraud he hotly pursues, Shakespeare in *King Lear* stages not only exorcism, but Harsnett *on* exorcism:

> Five fiends have been in poor Tom at once; as Oberdicut, of lust; Hoberdidance, prince of dumbness; Mahu, of stealing; Modo, of murder; Flibbertigibbet, of mopping and mowing; who since possesses chambermaids and waiting-women.[44]
>
> (IV. i. 57–62)

Those in the audience who had read Harsnett's book or heard of the notorious Buckinghamshire exorcisms would recognize in Edgar's lines an odd, joking allusion to the chambermaids, Sara and Friswood Williams, and the waiting woman, Ann Smith, principal actors in Father Edmund's "Devil Theater." The humor of the anachronism here is akin to the Fool's earlier quip, "This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time" (III. ii. 95–6); both are bursts of a cheeky self-consciousness that dares deliberately to violate the historical setting in order to remind the audience of the play's conspicuous doubleness, its simultaneous distance and contemporaneity.

A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures supplies Shakespeare not only with an uncanny anachronism but with the model for Edgar's histrionic disguise. For it is not the *authenticity* of the demonology that the playwright finds in Harsnett – the usual reason for authorial recourse to a specialized source (as, for example, to a military or legal handbook) – but rather the inauthenticity of a theatrical role. Shakespeare appropriates for Edgar, then, a documented fraud, complete with an impressive collection of what the *Declaration* calls "uncouth non-significant names"[45] that have been made up to sound exotic and that carry with them a faint but ineradicable odor of spuriousness.

In Sidney's *Arcadia*, which provided the outline of the Gloucester subplot, the good son, having escaped his father's misguided attempt to kill him, becomes a soldier in another land and quickly distinguishes himself. Shakespeare insists not only on Edgar's perilous fall from his father's favor but upon his marginalization: Edgar becomes the possessed Poor Tom, the outcast with no possibility of working his way back in toward the center. "My neighbours," writes John Bunyan in the 1660s, "were amazed at this my great conversion from prodigious profaneness to something like a moral life; and truly so well they might for this my conversion was as great as for a Tom of Bethlem to become a sober man."[46] Of course, Edgar is only a pretend Tom o' Bedlam and hence can return to the community when it is safe to do so; but the force of Harsnett's argument is to make mimed possession even more marginal and desperate than the real thing.

Indeed, Edgar's desperation is bound up with the stress of "counterfeiting," a stress he has already noted in the presence of the mad and ruined Lear and now, in the lines I have just quoted, feels still more intensely in the presence of his blinded and ruined father. He is struggling with the urge to stop playing or, as he puts it, with the feeling that he "cannot daub it further" (IV. i. 51). Why he does not simply reveal himself to Gloucester at this point is entirely unclear. "And yet I must" is all he says of his continued disguise, as he recites the catalog of devils and leads his despairing father off to Dover Cliff.[47]

The subsequent episode – Gloucester's suicide attempt – deepens the play's brooding upon spurious exorcism. "It is a good *decorum* in a Comedie,"

writes Harsnett, "To giue us emptie names for things, and to tell us of strange Monsters within, where there be none";[48] so too the "Miracle-minter," Father Edmunds, and his fellow exorcists manipulate their impressionable gulls: "The priests doe report often in their patients hearing the dreadful formes, similitudes, and shapes, that the deuils vse to depart in out of those possessed bodies . . . : and this they tell with so graue a countenance, pathetical termes, and accomodate action, as it leaues a very deepe impression in the memory, and fancie of their actors."[49] Thus by the power of theatrical suggestion, the anxious subjects on whom the priests work their charms come to believe that they too have witnessed the devil depart in grotesque form from their own bodies, whereupon the priests turn their eyes heavenward and give thanks to the Blessed Virgin. In much the same manner Edgar persuades Gloucester that he stands on a high cliff, and then, after his credulous father has flung himself forward, Edgar switches roles and pretends that he is a bystander who has seen a demon depart from the old man:

> As I stood here below methought his eyes
> Were two full moons; he had a thousand noses,
> Horns whelk'd and wav'd like the enridged sea:
> It was some fiend; therefore, thou happy father,
> Think that the clearest Gods, who make them honours
> Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.
> (IV. vi. 69–74)

Edgar tries to create in Gloucester an experience of awe and wonder so intense that it can shatter his suicidal despair and restore his faith in the benevolence of the gods: "Thy life's a miracle," he tells his father.[50] For Shakespeare, as for Harsnett, this miracle-minting is the product of specifically histrionic manipulations; the scene at Dover is simultaneously a disenchanted analysis of religious and of theatrical illusions. Walking about on a perfectly flat stage, Edgar does to Gloucester what the theater usually does to the audience: he persuades his father to discount the evidence of his senses – "Methinks the ground is even" – and to accept a palpable fiction: "Horrible steep." But the audience at a play, of course, never absolutely accepts such fictions: we enjoy being brazenly lied to, we welcome for the sake of pleasure what we know to be untrue, but we withhold from the theater the simple assent that we grant to everyday reality. And we enact this withholding when, depending on the staging, either we refuse to believe that Gloucester is on a cliff above Dover beach or we realize that what we thought was a cliff (in the convention of theatrical representation) is in reality flat ground.

Hence, in the midst of Shakespeare's demonstration of the convergence of exorcism and theater, we return to the difference that enables *King Lear* to borrow comfortably from Harsnett: the theater elicits from us complicity

rather than belief. Demonic possession is responsibly marked out for the audience as a theatrical fraud, designed to gull the unsuspecting: monsters such as the fiend with the thousand noses are illusions most easily imposed on the old, the blind, and the despairing; evil comes not from the mysterious otherworld of demons but from this world, the world of court and family intrigue. In *King Lear* there are no ghosts, as there are in *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar*, or *Hamlet*; no witches, as in *Macbeth*; no mysterious music of departing demons, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

King Lear is haunted by a sense of rituals and beliefs that are no longer efficacious, that have been *emptied out*. The characters appeal again and again to the pagan gods, but the gods remain utterly silent.[51] Nothing answers to human questions but human voices; nothing breeds about the heart but human desires; nothing inspires awe or terror but human suffering and human depravity. For all the invocation of the gods in *King Lear*, it is quite clear that there are no devils.

Edgar is no more possessed than the sanest of us, and we can see for ourselves that there was no demon standing by Gloucester's side. Likewise Lear's madness does not have a supernatural origin; it is linked, as in Harsnett, to *hysterica passio*, exposure to the elements, and extreme anguish, and its cure comes at the hands not of an exorcist but of a doctor. His prescription involves neither religious rituals (as in Catholicism) nor fasting and prayer (as in Puritanism), but tranquillized sleep:

> Our foster-nurse of nature is repose,
> The which he lacks; that to provoke in him,
> Are many simples operative, whose power
> Will close the eye of anguish.
> (IV. iv. 12–15)[52]

King Lear's relation to Harsnett's book, then, is essentially one of reiteration, a reiteration that signals a deeper and unexpressed institutional exchange. The official church dismantles and cedes to the players the powerful mechanisms of an unwanted and dangerous charisma; in return, the players confirm the charge that those mechanisms are theatrical and hence illusory. The material structure of Elizabethan and Jacobean public theaters heightened this confirmation, since, unlike medieval drama with its fuller integration into society, Shakespeare's drama took place in carefully demarcated playgrounds. *King Lear* offers then a double corroboration of Harsnett's arguments: within the play, Edgar's possession is clearly designated as a fiction, while the play itself is bounded by the institutional signs of fictionality: the wooden walls of the play space, payment for admission, known actors playing the parts, applause, the dances that followed the performance.

The theatrical confirmation of the official position is neither superficial nor unstable. And yet, I want now to suggest, Harsnett's arguments are alienated

from themselves when they make their appearance on the Shakespearean stage. This alienation may be set in the context of a more general observation: the closer Shakespeare seems to a source, the more faithfully he reproduces it on stage, the more devastating and decisive his transformation of it. Let us take, for a small, initial instance, Shakespeare's borrowing from Harsnett of the unusual adjective "corky" – i.e. sapless, dry, withered. The word appears in the *Declaration* in the course of a sardonic explanation of why, despite the canonists' declaration that only old women are to be exorcized, Father Edmunds and his crew have a particular fondness for tying in a chair and exorcizing young women. Along with more graphic sexual innuendoes, Harsnett observes that the theatrical role of a demoniac requires "certain actions, motions, distortions, writhings, tumblings, and turbulent passions . . . not to be performed but by suppleness of sinewes. . . . It would (I feare mee) pose all the cunning Exorcists, that are this day to be found, to teach an old corkie woman to writhe, tumble, curvet, and fetch her morice gamboles."[53]

Now Shakespeare's eye was caught by the word "corkie," and he reproduces it in a reference to old Gloucester. But what had been a flourish of Harsnett's typically bullying comic style becomes part of the horror of an almost unendurable scene, a scene of torture that begins when Cornwall orders his servant to take the captive Gloucester and "Bind fast his corky arms" (III. vii. 29) The note of bullying humor is still present in the word, but it is present in the character of the torturer.

This one-word instance of repetition as transvaluation may suggest in the tiniest compass what happens to Harsnett's work in the course of *Lear*. The *Declaration*'s arguments are loyally reiterated but in a curiously divided form. The voice of skepticism is assimilated to Cornwall, to Goneril, and above all to Edmund, whose "naturalism" is exposed as the argument of the younger and illegitimate son bent on displacing his legitimate older brother and eventually on destroying his father. The fraudulent possession and exorcism are given to the legitimate Edgar, who is forced to such shifts by the nightmarish persecution directed against him. Edgar adopts the role of Poor Tom not out of a corrupt will to deceive, but out of a commendable desire to survive. Modu, Mabu, and the rest are fakes, exactly as Harsnett said they were, but they are the venial sins of a will to endure. And even "venial sins" is too strong: they are the clever inventions that enable a decent and unjustly persecuted man to live. Similarly, there is no grotesque monster standing on the cliff with Gloucester – there isn't even any cliff – but Edgar, himself hunted down like an animal, is trying desperately to save his father from suicidal despair.

All of this has an odd and unsettling resemblance to the situation of the Jesuits in England, if viewed from an unofficial perspective. The resemblance does not necessarily resolve itself into an allegory in which Catholicism is

revealed to be the persecuted, legitimate elder brother forced to defend himself by means of theatrical illusions against the cold persecution of his skeptical bastard brother Protestantism. But the possibility of such a radical undermining of the orthodox position exists, and not merely in the cool light of our own historical distance. In 1610 a company of traveling players in Yorkshire included *King Lear* and *Pericles* in a repertoire that included a "St Christopher Play" whose performance came to the attention of the Star Chamber. The plays were performed in the manor house of a recusant couple, Sir John and Lady Julyan Yorke, and the players themselves and their organizer, Sir Richard Cholmeley, were denounced for recusancy by their Puritan neighbor, Sir Posthumus Hoby.[54] It is difficult to resist the conclusion that someone in Stuart Yorkshire believed that, despite its apparent staging of a fraudulent possession, *King Lear* was not hostile, was strangely sympathetic even, to the situation of persecuted Catholics. At the very least, we may suggest, the current of sympathy is enough to undermine the intended effect of Harsnett's *Declaration*: an intensified adherence to the central system of official values. In Shakespeare, the realization that demonic possession is a theatrical imposture leads not to a clarification – the clear-eyed satisfaction of the man who refuses to be gulled – but to a deeper uncertainty, a loss of moorings, in the face of evil.

"Let them anatomize Regan," Lear raves, "see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (III. vi. 74–6). We know that there is no cause *beyond* nature; the voices of evil in the play – "Thou, Nature, art my goddess"; "What need one?"; "Bind fast his corky arms" – come from the unpossessed. Does it make it any better to know this? Is it a relief to understand that the evil was not visited upon the characters by demonic agents but released from the structure of the family and the state by Lear himself?

Edgar's pretended demonic possession, by ironic contrast, is of the homiletic variety; the devil compels him to acts of self-punishment, the desperate masochism of the very poor, but not to acts of viciousness. On the contrary, like the demoniacs in Harsnett's contemptuous account who praise the Mass and the Catholic Church, Poor Tom gives a highly moral performance:

> Take heed o' th'foul fiend. Obey thy parents; keep thy word justly; swear not; commit not with man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud array. Tom's a-cold. (III. iv. 78–81)

Is it a relief to know that Edgar is only miming this little sermon?

All attempts by the characters to explain or relieve their sufferings through the invocation of transcendent forces are baffled. Gloucester's belief in the influence of "These late eclipses in the sun and moon" (I. ii. 100) is decisively

dismissed, even if the spokesman for the dismissal is the villainous Edmund. Lear's almost constant appeals to the gods

> O Heavens,
> If you do love old men, if your sweet sway
> Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old,
> Make it your cause; send down and take my part!
> (II. iv. 187–90)

are constantly left unanswered. The storm in the play seems to several characters to be of more than natural intensity, and Lear above all tries desperately to make it *mean* something (a symbol of his daughters' ingratitude, a punishment for evil, a sign from the gods of the impending universal judgment); but the thunder refuses to speak. When Albany calls Goneril a "devil" and a "fiend" (IV. ii. 59, 66), we know that he is not identifying her as a supernatural being – it is impossible, in this play, to witness the eruption of the denizens of hell into the human world – just as we know that Albany's prayer for "visible spirits" to be sent down by the heavens "to tame these vilde offences" (IV. ii. 46–7) will be unanswered.

In *King Lear*, as Harsnett says of the Catholic Church, "neither God, Angel, nor devil can be gotten to speake."[55] For Harsnett this silence betokens a liberation from lies; we have learned, as the last sentence of his tract puts it, "to loath these despicable Impostures and returne vnto the truth."[56] But for Shakespeare the silence leads to the desolation of the play's close:

> Lend me a looking-glass;
> If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
> Why, then she lives.
> (V. iii. 260–2)

The lines give voice to a hope by which the audience has been repeatedly tantalized: a hope that Cordelia will not die, that the play will build toward a revelation powerful enough to justify Lear's atrocious suffering, that we are in the midst of what the Italians called a *tragedia di fin lieto*, that is, a play where the villains absorb the tragic punishment while the good are wondrously restored.[57] Shakespeare in effect invokes the conventions of this genre, only to insist with appalling finality that Cordelia is "dead as earth."

In the wake of Lear's first attempt to see some sign of life in Cordelia, Kent asks, "Is this the promis'd end?" Edgar echoes the question, "Or image of that horror?" And Albany says, "Fall and cease." By itself Kent's question has an oddly literary quality, as if he were remarking on the end of the play, either wondering what kind of ending this is or implicitly objecting to the disastrous turn of events. Edgar's response suggests that the "end" is the end of the world, the Last Judgment, here experienced not as a "promise" – the

punishment of the wicked, the reward of the good – but as a "horror." But, like Kent, Edgar is not certain about what he is seeing: his question suggests that he may be witnessing not the end itself but a possible "image" of it, while Albany's enigmatic "Fall and cease" empties even that image of significance. The theatrical means that might have produced a "counterfeit miracle" out of this moment are abjured; there will be no imposture, no histrionic revelation of the supernatural.

Lear repeats this miserable emptying out of the redemptive hope in his next lines:

> This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,
> It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
> That ever I have felt.
> (V. iii. 264–6)

Deeply moved by the sight of the mad king, a nameless gentleman had earlier remarked, "Thou hast one daughter, / who redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to" (IV. vi. 202–4). Now, in Lear's words, this vision of universal redemption through Cordelia is glimpsed again, intensified by the king's own conscious investment in it. What would it mean to "redeem" Lear's sorrows? To buy them back from the chaos and brute meaninglessness they now seem to signify, to reward the king with a gift so great that it outweighs the sum of misery in his entire long life, to reinterpret his pain as the necessary preparation – the price to be paid – for a consummate bliss. In the theater such reinterpretation would be represented by a spectacular turn in the plot – a surprise unmasking, a sudden reversal of fortunes, a resurrection – and this dramatic redemption, however secularized, would almost invariably recall the consummation devoutly wished by centuries of Christian believers. This consummation had in fact been represented again and again in medieval resurrection plays which offered the spectators ocular proof that Christ had risen.[58] Despite the pre-Christian setting of Shakespeare's play, Lear's craving for just such proof – "This feather stirs; she lives!" – would seem to evoke precisely this theatrical and religious tradition, only in order to reveal itself, in C. L. Barber's acute phrase, as "post-Christian."[59] *If it be so*: Lear's sorrows are not redeemed; nothing can turn them into joy, but the forlorn hope of an impossible redemption persists, drained of its institutional and doctrinal significance, empty and vain, cut off even from a theatrical realization but, like the dream of exorcism, ineradicable.

The close of *King Lear* in effect acknowledges that it can never satisfy this dream, but the acknowledgment must not obscure the fact that the play itself has generated the craving for such satisfaction. That is, Shakespeare does not simply inherit and make use of an anthropological given; rather, at the moment when the official religious and secular institutions were, for their

own reasons, abjuring the rituals they themselves had once fostered, Shakespeare's theater moves to appropriate this function. On stage the ritual is effectively contained in the ways we have examined, but Shakespeare intensifies as theatrical experience the need for exorcism, and his demystification of the practice is not identical in its interests to Harsnett's.

Harsnett's polemic is directed toward a bracing anger against the lying agents of the Catholic Church and a loyal adherence to the true, established Church of England. He writes as a representative of that true Church, and this institutional identity is reinforced by the secular institutional imprimatur on the confessions that are appended to the text. The joint religious and secular apparatus works to strip away imposture and discover the hidden reality which is, Harsnett says, the theater. Shakespeare's play dutifully reiterates this discovery: when Lear thinks he has found in Poor Tom "the thing itself," "unaccommodated man," he has in fact found a man playing a theatrical role. But if false religion is theater, and if the difference between true and false religion is the presence of theater, what happens when this difference is enacted in the theater?

What happens, as we have already begun to see, is that the official position is *emptied out*, even as it is loyally confirmed. This "emptying out" bears a certain resemblance to Brecht's "alienation effect," and still more to Althusser and Macherey's "internal distantiation." But the most fruitful terms for describing the felt difference between Shakespeare's art and the religious ideology to which it gives voice are to be found, I think, within the theological system to which Harsnett adhered. What is the status of the Law, asks Hooker, after the coming of Christ? Clearly the Saviour effected the "evacuation of the Law of Moses." But did that abolition mean "that the very name of Altar, of Priest, of Sacrifice itself, should be banished out of the world"? No, replies Hooker, even after evacuation, "the words which were do continue; the only difference is, that whereas before they had a literal, they now have a metaphorical use, and are as so many notes of remembrance unto us, that what they did signify in the letter is accomplished in the truth."[60] Both exorcism and Harsnett's own attack on exorcism undergo a comparable process of evacuation and transformed reiteration in *King Lear*. Whereas before they had a literal, they now have a literary use, and are as so many notes of remembrance unto us, that what they did signify in the letter is accomplished – with a drastic swerve from the sacred to the secular – in the theater.

Edgar's possession is a theatrical performance, exactly in Harsnett's terms, but there is no saving institution, purged of theater, against which it may be set, nor is there a demonic institution which the performance may be shown to serve. On the contrary, Edgar's miming is a response to a free-floating, contagious evil more terrible than anything Harsnett would allow. For Harsnett the wicked are corrupt individuals in the service of a corrupt

Church; in *King Lear* there are neither individuals nor institutions adequate to contain the released and enacted wickedness; the force of evil in the play is larger than any local habitation or name. In this sense, Shakespeare's tragedy reconstitutes as theater the demonic principle demystified by Harsnett. Edgar's fraudulent, histrionic performance is a response to this principle: evacuated rituals, drained of their original meaning, are preferable to no rituals at all.

Shakespeare does not counsel, in effect, that one accept as true the fraudulent institution for the sake of the dream of a cure – the argument of the Grand Inquisitor. He writes for the greater glory and profit of the theater, a fraudulent institution that never pretends to be anything but fraudulent, an institution that calls forth what is not, that signifies absence, that transforms the literal into the metaphorical, that evacuates everything it represents. By doing so the theater makes for itself the hollow round space within which it survives. The force of *King Lear* is to make us love the theater, to seek out its satisfactions, to serve its interests, to confer upon it a place of its own, to grant it life by permitting it to reproduce itself over generations. Shakespeare's theater has outlived the institutions to which it paid homage, has lived to pay homage to other, competing institutions which in turn it seems to represent and empty out. This complex, limited institutional independence, this marginal and impure autonomy, arises not out of an inherent, formal self-reflexiveness but out of the ideological matrix in which Shakespeare's theater is created and recreated.

There are, of course, further institutional strategies that lie beyond a love for the theater. In a move that Ben Jonson rather than Shakespeare seems to have anticipated, the theater itself comes to be emptied out in the interests of reading. In the argument made famous by Charles Lamb and Coleridge, and reiterated by Bradley, theatricality must be discarded to achieve absorption, and Shakespeare's imagination yields forth its sublime power not to a spectator but to one who, like Keats, sits down to reread *King Lear*. Where institutions like the King's Men had been thought to generate their texts, now texts like *King Lear* appear to generate their institutions. The commercial contingency of the theater gives way to the philosophical necessity of literature.

Why has our culture embraced *King Lear*'s massive display of mimed suffering and fraudulent exorcism? Because the judicial torture and expulsion of evil have for centuries been bound up with the display of power at the center of society. Because we no longer believe in the magical ceremonies through which devils were once made to speak and were driven out of the bodies of the possessed. Because the play recuperates and intensifies our need for these ceremonies, even though we do not believe in them, and performs them, carefully marked out for us as frauds, for our continued consumption. Because, with our full complicity, Shakespeare's company and scores of

companies that followed have catered profitably to our desire for spectacular impostures.

And also, perhaps, because the Harsnetts of the world would free us from the oppression of false belief only in order to reclaim us more firmly for the official state Church, and the "solution" – confirmed by the rechristening, as it were, of the devil as the Pope – is hateful. Hence we embrace an alternative that seems to confirm the official line and thereby to take its place in the central system of values, yet that works at the same time to unsettle all official lines.[61] Shakespeare's theater empties out the center that it represents, and in its cruelty – Edmund, Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, Gloucester, Cordelia, Lear: all dead as earth – paradoxically creates in us the intimation of a fullness that we can only savor in the conviction of its irremediable loss:

> we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

Appendix

Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*:

"They which honour the Law as an image of the wisdom of God himself, are notwithstanding to know that the same had an end in Christ. But what? Was the Law so abolished with Christ, that after his ascension the office of Priests became immediately wicked, and the very name hateful, as importing the exercise of an ungodly function? No, as long as the glory of the Temple continued, and till the time of that final desolation was accomplished, the very Christian Jews did continue with their sacrifices and other parts of legal service. That very Law therefore which our Saviour was to abolish, did not *so soon* become unlawful to be observed as some imagine; nor was it afterwards unlawful *so far*, that the very name of Altar, of Priest, of Sacrifice itself, should be banished out of the world. For though God do now hate sacrifice, whether it be heathenish or Jewish, so that we cannot have the same things which they had but with impiety; yet unless there be some greater let than the only evacuation of the Law of Moses, the names themselves may (I hope) be retained without sin, in respect of that proportion which things established by our Saviour have unto them which by him are abrogated. And so throughout all the writings of the ancient Fathers we see that the words which were do continue; the only difference is, that whereas before they had a literal, they now have a metaphorical use, and are as so many notes of remembrance unto us, that what they did signify in the letter is accomplished in the truth. And as no man can deprive the Church of this liberty, to use names whereunto the Law was accustomed, so neither are we generally forbidden the use of things which the Law hath; though it neither command us any particular rite, as it did the Jews a number, and the weightiest which it did command them are unto us in the Gospel prohibited." (IV. xi. 10)

Notes

1. Samuel Harsnett, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (London, 1603). Harsnett's influence is noted in Lewis Theobald's edition of Shakespeare, first published in 1733. On the clandestine exorcisms I am particularly indebted to D. P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits: Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia, 1981). *King Lear* is quoted from the New Arden text, ed. Kenneth Muir (London, 1972). All other quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the Arden editions.
2. For extended arguments for and against theory, see Walter Michaels and Steven Knapp, "Against theory" (*Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1982), 723–42), and the ensuing controversy in *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (1983), 725–800.
3. I am indebted to an important critique of Marxist and deconstructive literary theory by D. A. Miller, "Discipline in different voices: bureaucracy, police, family and *Bleak House*" (*Representations*, 1 (1983), 59–89).
4. *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York, 1964), 82.
5. A major exception, with conclusions different from my own, has just been published: John L. Murphy, *Darkness and Devils: Exorcism and "King Lear"* (Athens, Ohio, 1984). Murphy's fascinating study, which he kindly allowed me to read in galleys after hearing the present paper delivered as a lecture, argues that exorcism is an aspect of clandestine political and religious resistance to Queen Elizabeth's rule. See also, for interesting reflections, William Elton, *"King Lear" and the Gods* (San Marino, 1966). For useful accounts of Harsnett's relation to *Lear*, see Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London, 1975), 7, 299–302; Kenneth Muir, "Samuel Harsnett and *King Lear*" (*Review of English Studies*, 2 (1951), 11–21); Kenneth Muir (ed.), *King Lear* (London, 1972), 239–42.
6. Michel de Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," in *Complete Essays*, tr. Donald Frame (Stanford, 1948), 331.
7. Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago, 1975), 3. My account of institutional strategies is indebted to Shils.
8. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), 107.
9. Samuel Harsnett, *A Discovery of the Fraudulent Practices of John Darrel* (London, 1599).
10. Harsnett, *Declaration*, 154–5.
11. Ibid., 86.
12. Carlo Ginzburg, *I benandanti: Recerche sulla stregoneria e sui culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento* (Turin, 1966).
13. For Harsnett's comments on witchcraft, see *Declaration*, 135–6. The relation between demonic possession and witchcraft is extremely complex. John Darrell evidently had frequent recourse, in the midst of his exorcisms, to accusations of witchcraft whose evidence was precisely the demonic possessions; Harsnett remarks wryly that "Of all the partes of the tragicall Comedie acted between him and *Somers*, there was no one Scene in it, wherein *M. Darrell* did with more courage & boldnes acte his part, then in this of the discouerie of witches" (*Discovery*, 142). There is a helpful discussion of possession and witchcraft, along with an important account of Harsnett and Darrell, in Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971).
14. Brown, op. cit., 109–11.
15. Thomas, op. cit., 485.

16. S. M. Shirokogorov, *The Psycho-Mental Complex of the Tungus* (Peking and London, 1935), 265.
17. Brown, op. cit., 110.
18. Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam* (Cambridge, 1981).
19. Harsnett, *Declaration*, A3^{r}.
20. Harsnett, *Discovery*, A2^{r}.
21. Ibid., A4^{r-v}.
22. Ibid., 29.
23. D. P. Walker suggests that the attack on the Jesuits is a screen for an attack on the more politically sensitive nonconformists; in early seventeenth-century England, when in doubt it was safer to attack a Catholic.
24. Harsnett, *Declaration*, 24.
25. Ibid., 25. See Edmund Jorden, *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (London, 1603).
26. Harsnett, *Declaration*, 38.
27. Michel Leiris, *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar* (Paris, 1958).
28. Ibid., 27–8.
29. Ibid., 94–5.
30. Ibid., 96.
31. Harsnett, *Declaration*, 69.
32. Ibid., 172.
33. Ibid., 2, 106.
34. Ibid., 74.
35. Ibid., 20. This argument has the curious effect of identifying all exorcisms, including those conducted by nonconformist preachers, with the Pope. On attacks on the Catholic Church as a theater, see Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, 1981), 66–131 *passim*.
36. Harsnett, *Discovery*, A3^{r}.
37. Ibid., 78.
38. Ibid., 114–15.
39. Ibid., 149.
40. Harsnett was not, of course, alone. See, for example, John Gee: "The Jesuits being or having Actors of such dexterity, I see no reason but that they should set up a company for themselves, which surely will put down The Fortune, Red-Bull, Cock-pit, and Globe" (*New Shreds of the Old Snare* (London, 1624)). I owe this reference, along with powerful reflections on the significance of the public theater's physical marginality, to Steven Mullaney.
41. This sentiment could serve as the epigraph to both of Harsnett's books on exorcism; it is the root perception from which most of Harsnett's rhetoric grows.
42. Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (London, *c.* 1582), cited in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford, 1923), 215.
43. Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesie* (1583), in *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, ed. Allan H. Gilbert (Detroit, 1962), 439.
44. These lines were included in the Quarto but omitted from the Folio. For the tangled textual history, see Michael J. Warren, "Quarto and Folio *King Lear*, and the interpretation of Albany and Edgar," in David Bevington and Jay L. Halio (eds), *Shakespeare: Pattern of Excelling Nature* (Newark, Del., 1978), 95–107; Steven Urkowitz, *Shakespeare's Revision of "King Lear"* (Princeton, 1980); and Gary Taylor, "The war in *King Lear*" (*Shakespeare Survey*, 33 (1980), 27–34).

Presumably, by the time the Folio appeared, the point of the allusion to Harsnett would have been lost, and the lines were dropped.

45. Harsnett, *Declaration*, 46.
46. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford, 1966), 15.
47. Edgar's later explanation – that he feared for his father's ability to sustain the shock of an encounter – is, like so many explanations in *King Lear*, too little, too late. On this characteristic belatedness as an element of the play's greatness, see Stephen Booth, *"King Lear," "Macbeth," Indefinition, and Tragedy* (New Haven, 1983).
48. Harsnett, *Declaration*, 142.
49. Ibid., 142–3.
50. On the production of "counterfeit miracles" in order to arouse awe and wonder, see especially Harsnett, *Discovery*, "Epistle to the reader."
51. Words, signs, gestures that claim to be in touch with super-reality, with absolute goodness and absolute evil, are exposed as vacant – illusions manipulated by the clever and imposed upon the gullible.
52. This is, in effect, Edmund Jorden's prescription for cases such as Lear's.
53. Harsnett, *Declaration*, 23.
54. On the Yorkshire performance, see Murphy, op. cit., 93–118.
55. Harsnett, *Declaration*, 169.
56. Ibid., 171.
57. In willing this disenchantment against the evidence of our senses, we pay tribute to the theater. Harsnett has been twisted around to make this tribute possible.
58. O. B. Hardison, Jr, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama* (Baltimore, 1965), esp. 220–52.
59. C. L. Barber, "The family in Shakespeare's development: tragedy and sacredness," in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore, 1980), 196.
60. Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, IV. xi. 10. This truth, which is the triumph of the metaphorical over the literal, confers upon the Church the liberty to use certain names and rites, even though they have been abolished. For the entire passage from Hooker, see Appendix. I am indebted for the reference to Richard Hooker to John Coolidge.
61. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers (New York, 1972), 135.