Self-Effacement and Autonomy in Shakespeare

kirby farrell, Prof

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kirby_farrell1/8/
Chapter 2

Play-Death, Self-Effacement, and Autonomy

To show how fantasies of play-death shape social behavior in Shakespeare and his culture, I want to relate the pattern of play-death and apotheosis to a pattern of self-effacement and autonomy. In both, a radical loss of identity leads to compensatory self-aggrandizement. By effacing themselves individuals may fulfill themselves. By nullifying or appearing to nullify their own wills, they may free themselves to act with greater personal force. For simplicity’s sake I begin with examples of this fantasy that directly dramatize a sequence of death and resurrection or strongly imply it. After surveying the fantasy in the plays, I examine it in the context of contemporary family and social dynamics, and then in relation to the imaginative process of theater itself.

In many of the plays a crisis of autonomy clearly leads to self-effacement. Playing dead then becomes a means of circumventing oppression. When Juliet resists an arranged marriage, her father threatens either deathlike rejection—“hang, beg, starve, die in the streets” (3.5.192)—or deathlike submission that would negate her will. Faking death according to the friar’s plan, Juliet preempts her parents’ control and aspires to a liberating rebirth in her lover’s arms. Banished from Verona, socially destroyed, Romeo dreams that he died and then Juliet “breathed such life with kisses in my lips / That I revived and was an emperor” (5.1.8–9).

Given the formidably hierarchical and competitive social world projected in most Shakespearean drama, self-effacement is at least in part a submissive gesture. As in the England Shakespeare himself knew, authority in the plays is palpably personal. However prominent the cultural and metaphysical apparatus of power, in action power is the
king's will or the father's. In addition, there is no imaginative model of reasoned resistance to authority in the plays, any more than there was in Elizabethan England. Challenged by an angry ruler, minions in Shakespeare routinely protest their eagerness to die, thereby hoping to prove their loyalty and preempt death. Antigonus offers to sacrifice himself to save the infant Perdita from her despotic father (WT 2.3.166–67). When Pericles plays tyrant, his lieutenant Helicanus promptly offers to die: “I have ground the axe myself” (Per. 1.2.58). In a literal fulfillment of the wish Romeo dreams, Pericles suddenly rewards the self-effacing Helicanus by making him ruler of Tyre in his stead.

Pericles himself undergoes a figurative play-death. Cowed by a despotic father figure, “the great Antiochus, / Gainst whom I am too little to contend” (1.2.17–18), Pericles abandons his princely identity and flees. Shipwrecked, he reacts as if appeasing an angry father, begging the elements to “remember, earthly man / . . . must yield to you; / And I . . . do obey you.” Straightaway he finds “Nothing to think on but ensuing death” (2.1.2–7). Overwhelmed by adversity, the prince enters a deathlike paralysis. When his daughter Marina restores him to himself, purged of his self-disabling anxieties, his recovery is explicitly a rebirth: “Thou . . . beget’st him that did thee beget” (5.1.195).

Where comedy or tragi-comedy prevails in the plays, fantasies of self-effacement usually lead to wish fulfillment. Like Pericles' flight from Antiochus, Falstaff's fake death at the feet of Douglas is escapism. Yet as Pericles' eventual revival seems magically to undo the original threat by confirming him a strong, benign father himself, so Falstaff's resurrection brings him to the wish-fulfilling role of warrior-hero. Similarly, Marina escapes a murderous stepmother and apparent doom—“She is not dead . . . as she should have been” (Per. 5.1.215)—to find her rightful identity and parents.

At its most wishful, the fantasy of self-effacement promises to resolve conflicts with authority in a world where self assertion may appear inherently rebellious. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hermia can choose a husband only by defying Egeus, Theseus, and the state itself. Rebellions, Hermia and Lysander abandon their Athenian identities, “losing themselves” in the wood. Undergoing a “death-counterfeiting sleep” (3.2.364), the lovers awake to find themselves transformed. They seem to have achieved a new autonomy that the play dramatizes when Theseus gratuitously invites them into his own privileged circle.

The same dynamics, however, also served the Renaissance state as a means of violent control over its subjects. Not uncommonly condemned criminals were pardoned at the last moment, in the presence of the executioner, to the applause of spectators who were apt to be the protagonist's friends. Officially rehearsed for death, pleading eternal loyalty to the punishing crown, the condemned might suddenly find his life restored. In this scenario play-death amounts to traumatic dissociation. Shaken from its claims on life, the (criminal) self is effaced and then reconstituted as a penitent self publically grateful to the merciful ruler. Presumably this fantasy motivates Measure for Measure's Duke Vincentio when, playing friar, he counsels the condemned Claudio to "be absolute for death" (3.1.5), and Claudio replies, "I humbly thank you. / To sue to live, I find I seek to die, / And seeking death, find life. Let it come on" (41–43). In theory at least, such a play-death may reorganize personality, inducing a conversion experience.

In The Winter's Tale, by contrast, unyielding integrity is treated as insubordination, and self-effacement becomes self-sacrifice or martyrdom. Paulina uses the illusory loss of Hermione and Perdita to drive a long-suffering Leontes to penance and renewed feeling. The supposed deaths transform the king and his kingdom as well. The play's fantasy of efficacious martyrdom gives form to rebellious energies that might otherwise be perverted or remain repressed, with damaging consequences.

Hermione's return from the grave makes vivid some associations that are often latent in other examples of the self-effacement fantasy. As in the language of the oracle that calls for the recovery of Perdita, requiring "that which is lost" to be "found" (3.2.135), Hermione's resurrection draws on the complex of ideas at the core of the Christian myth, where the meek shall inherit and individuals must lose themselves to find themselves. When the statue comes alive in Paulina's chapel, the play insists that the change is in the eye of the beholder, a spiritual transformation. Like the golden statues of Romeo and Juliet, the image of Hermione is the public apotheosis of redemptive love.

Restored to life, Hermione possesses a new spiritual force sufficient to awe her once-dominating husband and king. The same spiritual power emanates from the ascendant Marina, Perdita, and All's Well's Helena, among others. Whether characters are expressly aware of the fantasy or it is subsumed in the structure of the play, its dynamics are constant. By passing through a tacit death, an eclipse of identity in the eyes of the world, characters acquire—or dream of acquiring—au-
As Hero’s restoration illustrates, self-effacement may be fruitless. Society may be corrupt and unresponsive, as in many of the tragedies. Edgar providentially turns his blind father’s suicide into a play-death that enables Gloucester to bear his suffering. Lear, by contrast, tries to manipulate his daughters by conspicuously sacrificing his power, only to have them betray him. Relinquishing his royal identity, Lear would “Unburthened crawl toward death” (1.1.41). Trying to use death to win pity and become the model of the secure, beloved father, Lear falsifies his relations with his daughters. In turn his self-effacement exposes him to his daughters’ depredations and to a death-counterfeiting sleep of harrowing profundity. “You are wrong to take me out of the grave,” he cries to Cordelia. “Thou art a soul in bliss; But I am bound / Upon a wheel of fire,” as if in the underworld (4.7.44–46).

If the comedies celebrate the self-effacement fantasy, the tragedies emphasize its perils. Romeo’s dream of being revived as an emperor proves to be a compensatory and doomed solution to his exiled impotence. Juliet’s play-death is similarly escapist and self-defeating. As she ominously goes through the motions of suicide in drinking the potion, so the lovers’ evasion of communication with the social world ominously prefigures their mutual miscommunication and suicides in the graveyard.

One danger of the fantasy is that it may serve not only self-fulfilling wishes but also aggressive ends. Like Lear invoking a pathetic crawl toward death, Cleopatra manipulates pity to demand love. Inadvertently provoking Antony’s suicide, her impulse to play dead expresses her ambivalence toward her lover. Self-destruction is more overtly aggressive in Antony’s fantasy of striking at Caesar by slaying himself. Ordering Eros to kill him, he vows: “Thou strik’st not me; ’tis Caesar thou defeat’st” (4.15.68).

In Juliet’s apparent demise self-effacement implies inwardly directed aggression that may finally result in suicide. Yet when her supposed death is discovered, the fantasy reveals its complexity. Like magical curses, her father’s earlier death threatens against her (3.5.192) suddenly appear borne out. In turn, Juliet’s play-death symbolically kills him. Identifying himself with his daughter, the old man cries: “O child! My soul and not my child! / Dead art thou—allack my child is dead, / And with my child my joys are buried” (4.5.62–64). Given old Capulet’s harsh authority and selfish grief, Juliet unwittingly accomplishes a gratifying revenge by her apparent death. Finally “All are punished” by the lovers’ deaths (5.3.295). In this context the play acts out a fantasy in
in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!" (274–77). What we are beholding is an imagination that tries to survive onrushing annihilation by role-playing. Othello draws on the dynamics of the self-effacement fantasy, projecting a nullifying play-death and the eschatological suffering of a mythic, tragic Othello who may live on in the minds of men.

II

There are many ways of looking at the imaginative pattern I have been describing. To open it up more fully I want to draw together some characteristics of Renaissance English society, the family, and the theater, beginning with Tudor society's official conception of itself.

Although the ideology based on the great chain of being was promulgated to justify the unprecedented absolutism of Tudor government and therefore was never wholly in touch with the social reality it pretended to describe, it presupposes a static world that is accordingly selfless. In theory, as a chain of being ordered the universe, so a hierarchy of obedience ordered the family and society. Dependent persons were "subsumed" into the personalities of their fathers and masters. Havoc resulted from self-assertion, whether in the present of, mythically dissociated, in the violation of the Tree of Knowledge and original sin. Week after week, as prescribed by law, preachers warned that any resistance to authority was an evil madness and meant damnation. According to the official "Homily on Obedience (1559)," even Christ himself and his Apostles "received many and diverse injuries of the unfaithful and wicked men in auctoritate," yet "they patiently suffered death itself obediently." Threatened by Pilate, "Jesus answered: Thou couldst have no power at all against me except it were given thee from above." Christ's rebuke signifies not the power of individual faith and suffering in the face of persecution, but "plainly, that even the wicked rulers have their power and auctoritate from God." 56

The doctrine of the chain of being so polarized the concept of obedience that it permitted virtually no autonomy in the modern sense. In theology, since God was absolute and unmoved, judgment was merely metaphorical. The soul's actions automatically determined its fate. Sin was death, a direct rejection of God "in which the soul becomes a negative image to its previous capacity for union with God. Sin is the anti-matter to God's reality." In its social form this opposition between obedience and nullity tended to minimize or deny the
autonomy of those who served, thereby aggrandizing authority figures such as the father and the king. Since obedience means identification with the will of a superior, absolute obedience entails self-effacement. Like sin, disobedience is nullity. Tudor authorities commonly dehumanized and nullified the disobedient, labeling them beasts, blaming their behavior on magical charms (as Shakespeare's despotic fathers do with willful daughters), branding their bodies, or making them outright slaves to be treated, in the famous futile 1547 statute on vagabonds, for example, like "movable goods or cattle." In the hierarchy derived from the chain of being the only truly autonomous person is the king. Such a system makes personal autonomy a function of absolute authority: a sort of apotheosis beyond the scale of ordinary life. It presupposes a radical polarity between self-negation and self-assertion.

Similarly, in the popular mind the Christian myth of salvation placed the believer in a cosmic family structured by the polarities of dominance and submission, all and nothing. By submitting to the Father, the Christian could hope to pass through death to a triumphant rebirth that parallels the child's achievement of adulthood and identification with the father, on the one hand, and the entrance into the ranks of the elect, on the other. Through abnegation the figuraiive child could be elevated in a union with the Lord that was also both an individual eschatological triumph and a rise above the intervening ranks of society.

In these secular and religious paradigms the polarity of relationships resembles the structure of the self-effacement fantasy in Shakespeare. But the internal dynamics are similar too insofar as individuals must surrender themselves in order to identify with powerful authority. What complicates matters, in Shakespeare and in his culture, is emergent individualism. However rigid their social roles, the English seem to have been complexly individualistic, even as dramatic characters such as Iago or Falstaff may appear highly particularized while revealing typological origins or lineaments.

On one level, for example, Hermione's resurrection implies the paradigm of Christ's sacrifice. The scene of her rebirth echoes the words of Christ the Redeemer, "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." For Paulina has bidden Leontes to "awake your faith," and commands: "Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him / Dear life redeems you" (WT 5.3.95, 102-03). If Paulina is addressing Leontes, or Leontes as well as Hermione—which is plausible since Leontes has been numb with remorse for sixteen years—then the redemptive "Dear life" is Hermione. Once despised and slandered, the now revered queen evokes the archetypal Christian paradox that—in Augustine's words—"God humbled Himself in order to be exalted." Although her actions are "Holy" (5.3.104), Hermione is far from an allegorical figure. At the outset she is strikingly individualized and matches wits with Polixenes precisely on the subject of autonomy, asserting that "a lady's 'Verily' is / As potent as a lord's" (1.2.50-51). She detects the disquiet that would lead Polixenes to say / Your queen and I are devils" as if he fears that women may be treacherously insubordinate and subvert men's self-control (81-86). When Hermione pretends to be dead, her alter ego Paulina takes over that mocking, rebellious voice and might be said to speak for her. For the resurrected Hermione is so idealized that her autonomy can be consummated in a mute identification with authority as she embraces the king (5.3.111), while her potentially threatening aspect—her uncompromising individuality—is displaced onto the outspoken Paulina.

Self-effacement fantasies frequently culminate in a style of autonomy that holds in suspension conflicting desires to merge with a powerful authority figure and also to become fully an individual. When Rosalind and Portia emerge from disguise to assume new identities in As You Like It and The Merchant of Venice, for example, their behavior dramatizes this need to balance wishes for union and independence. At once Rosalind pledges herself wholly to her father ("for I am yours") and to Orlando ("for I am yours"), by her wit implying that she is also wholly herself (AII 5.4.116-17).

Clearly this doubleness reflects the authoritarian and yet incipiently individualistic nature of Elizabethan culture. A deeper explanation might look to the specific role of judgment in the self-effacement pattern and in the culture. The church and the nation rewarded subjects who accepted authority figures, internalizing them as conscience to combat the sinful—usually instinctual—parts of their own nature. Shakespeare's characters often play dead in reaction to an overwhelming judgment of guilt. Much Ado's Hero expires "the instant she was accused," and looks to be "excused / Of every hearer" (4.1.214-16): The friar expects that on her return to life she will be wholly loved. Vindication means overcoming rejection and uniting with a formidable judge. While Falstaff's collapse in battle is a survival tactic, it also
identify with a victimized whore and protest against the beadle's hypocritical "lust" to whip her (4.6.162–65). Lear recognizes that the heart is susceptible to secret degradation that makes a vicious mockery of the social order.

Even in a static world, then, a highly stratified society could be a source of stress as well as security. In fact, however, there was considerable social mobility in Shakespeare's England. His own family had experienced fairly drastic shifts in status. His father had risen to a position of civic eminence in Stratford, then declined into debt. Grandson of a tenant farmer, Shakespeare reversed the family's fortunes and, in a tragicomic fulfillment, made himself a member of the gentry.

Change created a crisis of the aristocracy and also an ongoing crisis of dispossession and vagrancy that the poor laws tried to control. From one perspective the extensive migrations to the New World were a deliberate flight from the confines of the old society in search of greater autonomy. As sumptuary legislation reveals, mobility was a persistent threat to the rituals on which class divisions depended. If clothes make the man, which is one assumption behind the sumptuary laws, then a beholder may be tempted to see an element of theatricality, as wishful and manipulable as theater itself, in the assertive costuming of rank. To pursue the metaphor, courtesy books were simultaneously supplying scripts that anyone with money could use to stage his or her pretensions to status. For many people an elite identity "was a mode of being that could be acquired[,] ... a commodity ... that could be bought, by means of courtesy books." Courtesy books came to serve those they were originally intended to exclude. Like the failure of sumptuary legislation, the success of Castiglione witnesses how potent the desire for change must have been.

In some unexpected ways the fantasy of self-effacement dramatizes the irrationality associated with change. For one thing, "the fairy stories of the time are full of stories about changelings whose real identity had been concealed by an exchange carried out by the wetnurse" (Stone 1977, p. 100). Not only do changeling fantasies express uncertainty about one's identity: they also can be used to rationalize an unsatisfactory position in life ("if I was exchanged in the cradle, I could in truth be the noble person I sense myself to be"). Perdita's destiny plays out just this wish. "This," says the Shepherd, who finds the abandoned baby, "is some changeling" (3.3.118).
A more fundamental sign of belief in the irrationality of change is the wheel of fortune. As in fairy stories, the wheel of fortune actually controls the threats of chance and change to an extent by structuring them, specifically by polarizing the extremes of fortune and the rising or falling dynamics that connect them. What falls will eventually rise. It seems to me likely that the self-effacement fantasy presupposes a superstitious belief that by making oneself nothing, one places oneself in fortune’s upward path. There seems to be an echo of this belief in The Merchant of Venice when Bassanio, whose “state was nothing,” makes his fortune by choosing not gold or silver but base lead. Since Bassanio risks all on lead (unlike his self-inflated rivals) and goes from “nothing” to a position of mastery, his success bears a strong resemblance to the self-effacement pattern.\(^5\)

Although it threatens to undermine the static, official social doctrine, belief in a wheel of fortune as a model of change may be either conservative or nihilistic. One of the many abandoned children who begged their way around England is reported to have said that “if ever he should attain to be a King, he would have a breast of mutton with a pudding in it, and lodge every night up to his eares in dry straw.”\(^6\) As in the self-effacement pattern in Shakespeare, the boy dreams not of some small, realistic change of status, but of identification with the supremely autonomous, paternal role of king. While he can envision a reversal of roles, he envisions no rebellion. By contrast, Hamlet could be said to share the beggar child’s sense of the contingency of roles but with a despairing twist when he jokes that a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. More evenly ambivalent is the way Lear plays out a version of the child’s wish in the fall and rise of Edgar as the beggar Poor Tom and later king.

In Shakespeare self-effacement promises to minimize or even preempt direct social conflict. By contrast, here is Nashe’s account of the strife to be seen in London around 1592: “From the rich to the poor . . . there is ambition, or swelling above their states . . . . The Auncients, they oppose themselves against the younger, and supprese them and keepe them doune all that they may. The young men, they call them dotards, and swell and rage, and, with many others sweare . . . they will not be kept under by such cullions, but goe good and neere to out-shoulder them.”\(^7\) Even at court this tension made itself felt. As Professor Estler has demonstrated, the queen’s generation tended to consolidate its position after early years of struggle by adopting conservative policies and blocking the advancement of younger courtiers.\(^8\) Elizabeth and the “Auncients” around her tried to “keep dounge” the restive younger men. In turn, courtiers such as Essex and Raleigh sacrificed themselves and their more realistic interests by conspicuously risking death and striving for recognition and compensatory glory. Forced into submissive roles, feeling themselves belittled and nullified by authority, they reacted by courting destruction as if only by braving nothingness could they demonstrate their loyalty and command validating admiration. In different ways, but with haunting self-destructiveness, Essex and Raleigh went to the scaffold and died in personal dramas of fatal self-assertion. It is tempting to see in this behavior an aristocratic variation on the Shakespearian pattern of abnegation with aspiration to a phoenix-like rebirth.\(^9\)

III

While the social background makes a useful explanatory context, I want to consider the fantasy of self-effacement more intimately by relating it to contemporary family structure and the formation of individual identity. For one thing, “it is impossible,” Professor Stone warns, “to stress too heavily the impermanence of the Early Modern Family. . . . None could reasonably expect to remain together for very long, a fact which fundamentally affected all human relationships” (Stone 1977, p. 81). In this context play-deaths and resurrections are a means of controlling people’s fear of their own deaths and also the deaths of their loved ones. Such play is a way of standing up to the terrifying contingency of life. That said, let me focus on family structure itself.

Following Aristotle’s Politics 1.12, Elizabethan theorists likened the father to a king. As in the official social ideology, this model of the family assigned all power and autonomy to the ruler, and implicitly preempted the will of the governed. In theory at least the ideal child substituted the patriarchal will for his or her own.\(^10\) In his obedience a boy became a model of his father’s desires. Just as in school the prescribed memorization of rhetorical models virtually made the student an actor through whom venerable authorities might seem to speak,\(^11\) so in the family the boy might be said to enact the father. While emulating her mother, a girl had to regard her as a husband’s shadow, and herself as the shadow of a shadow. Only by deference could a boy
or girl hope to pass from nonentity to adult autonomy. As in the Shakespearean fantasy of playing dead, children aspired to a transfiguring identity by acting as if they had no lives of their own. Such a transition would proceed not by self-actualizing growth, but rather by role reversal when a son at last inherits his father’s role, or by an act of benevolent paternal creation when, as in the opening of King Lear, the father at last formally grants his daughters’ independence.

In practice the authoritarian family must have experienced some deep conflicts. For unlike the lowest members of a social hierarchy, children are destined to be kings or queens themselves one day. Sooner or later, all children replace their parents in the world. Paternal preemption authority can only postpone or deny the inevitable reversal of roles in which the child, like Prince Hal trying on his father’s crown, comes to witness time’s negation of the parent. By destiny, all children are usurpers, and all growth is potentially rebellious. Psychologically, self-effacement may preempt Oedipal antagonism, since the children deflect their aggression against themselves in hopes of winning love and living harmoniously through their parents.

When King Henry discovers his son trying on his crown, for instance, he construes the act as parricide: “This part of his conjoins with my disease / And helps to end me” (2H4 4.5.63—64). Fathers like himself “are murdered for our pains” (77); his son wishes for his death (92). Like Lear, Henry fears that his child’s “life did manifest thou lov’dst me not” (104). To answer this accusation the prince professes “obedience” (146) and duty (147), not love. Tacitly Hal plays dead, denying all personal interest in the crown, his destiny. Tellingly he links his father’s death to his own: “thinking you dead, / And dead almost, my liege; to think you were, / I spake” (155—57). Even if Hal is only excusing himself with piety, his words acknowledge his own identity to be in part a function of his father’s. Repeatedly he denies all desire to assume his ordained role as king. If he has any wish for the crown, he pleads, “Let God . . . make me as the poorest vassal is / That doth with awe and terror kneel to it” (174—76). If he aspires to autonomy, that is, let him be reduced to the condition of a child again, abject and socially inferior.

If Henry had been able to command absolute deference from his son, he might have been able to relinquish power willingly, for then he would have been replacing himself with a model of himself. This is presumably the ideal fulfillment of the patriarchal system. Fathers such as Egeus, Old Capulet, Brabantio, and Lear behave as if they can dominate their daughters so completely that they may then choose a husband and make a marriage for them, becoming so profoundly a part of the resulting union that both the loss of the child and the potential rivalry with the younger male cease to be threatening. Cordelia’s measured protest dramatizes her precarious balance—very similar to Prince Hal’s—between patriarchal preemption of her identity and terrible mutiny: “Sure I shall never marry like my sisters, / To love my father all” (1.1.103—4).

So, too, Juliet’s play-deaths suspends her between intolerable alternatives: submission to her father or revolt, each of which jeopardizes her identity. Dragging herself, Juliet symbolically takes her own life, forestalling the compulsion to actual suicide that she revealed earlier (4.1.52—54). That compulsion plays itself out in her hallucinatory terror of going mad in the family tomb and literally effacing herself by dashing out her brain with “some great kinsman’s bone” (4.3.53), the grotesque objectification of patriarchal authority. For Juliet, that is, play-death acts out self-hatred. Deviously asserting her independence through the sleeping potion, she fears she will wake up engulfed by the family (the tomb) and smash her own brain, guiltily punishing her urge to think for herself. Her guilt internalizes the rage her father (“hang, beg, starve, die in the streets”) and her mother (“I would the fool were married to her grave!”) have directed at her (3.5.192, 140). At the same time her guilt redirects against herself the anger she could be expected to feel toward her parents.

Playing dead, that is, may act out latent aggression between parent and child. Not all play-deaths in Shakespeare involve a literal parent and child, of course. Yet as Freud would say, all adults are apt to construe their situation in the light of crucial childhood experience, and especially when, as in the fantasy of self-effacement, the dynamics of the situation recall the relationship between parent and child.

Historical evidence points to sharp ambivalence toward the young in the world Shakespeare knew. One sign of this conflict is the opposition between an Augustinian view of the infant as inherently contaminated by original sin, and a more optimistic view, based on the imagery of the infant Jesus as well as on traditional ideas of the worldliness, infantile fool, which identified infancy with innocence and human perfectibility. Didactic writers saw the “natural child” as bestial, excremental, and appetitive. To overcome original sin they called for severe
discipline. As a fantasy about radical innocence, the contrasting view held that children embody an ideal past lost to adults. By the seventeenth century this attitude became associated with Anglican nostalgia for a pastoral England gone by, to which the child provided a symbolic link. In actual families, presumably, contradictory feelings come together in complex combinations. Puritan child-rearing, for example, strove both to break children’s sinful wills and make them selfless, and also to provide exemplary education and nurture since children were the hope of a better future.

From the sleeping princes in Richard III to the infant Perdita, Shakespeare attributes to children an idealized innocence that sets them apart from the world of adults. In The Winter’s Tale, for instance, Polixenes sentimentalizes children as lambs who exchange “innocence for innocence,” not knowing the “doctrine of ill-doing” (I.2.67-75). The child becomes an adult through a fall from grace (77). As in many examples of the self-effacement pattern, aspiration to autonomy produces a crisis. Just as Hermione challenges Polixenes to clarify his feelings about the fall from childish innocence (82-83), Leontes interrupts her. A moment later Leontes erupts in rage at the suspicion of “fallen” sin between his wife and friend.

In the symbolic logic of the scene Polixenes’ anxious fantasy about the fall from childhood produces an overwhelming, dissociated guilt and anger expressed in the madness of his double, the “twin lamb” Leontes (67). The idealized image of lambs denies the anxieties of actual children as well as the anxieties children may cause adults. Polixenes’ wish-fulfilling fantasy implies an unspoken opposite that surfaces in Leontes’ murderous fury against the infant Perdita. And the solution to parental ambivalence which Perdita represents is of course her long abandonment and loss of identity in Bohemia.

To appreciate the intensity of this ambivalence we need to remember that in the world outside of the Globe Theater the young were a source of great pain and dread as well as hope and pleasure. As the motherless families in the plays may suggest, childbirth routinely brought death. In Pericles, Marina’s birth aboard ship is figuratively a storm that kills her mother and so threatens the survivors that they cast the dead woman overboard to ward off the threat (3.1.48-49). The repudiated mother is replaced by—in effect, turns into—the malicious stepmother Dionyzia, who plots Marina’s murder.

Once born, the young were themselves appallingly likely to die before maturity. As Peter Laslett cautions, it takes “an effort of the mind to remember all the time that children were always present in such numbers in the traditional world, nearly half the whole community living in a condition of semi-obiteration, many of them never destined to become persons at all.” In the best of times economic pressures made children a drain on scarce resources. In fact, as Laslett goes on to observe, “the authoritarianism of traditional social life and educational practice becomes a little easier to understand when the youthfulness of so much of the community is borne in mind. A very high proportion of dependent bodies, mouths to feed and clothes and fuel to find, energy to summon up for the heavy work of rearing children, weights down the active members of society” (Laslett, p. 111). As a result parental attitudes seem to have ranged from indifference or hostility to an attachment so intense that a child’s death might derange the mother.

Historically the most primitive defense against the anxiety children cause has been to wish away the child. If the Essex Quarter Sessions Records are any indication, “infanticide was woefully common, and there were probably many other violent deaths by smothering or bruising which were concealed from the coroner.” In Shakespeare death wishes against children appear fairly often and with dramatic moral urgency. In Pericles during a famine mothers who “to nuzzle up their babes,/Thought nought too curious, are ready now /To eat those little darlings whom they loved” (1.4.42-44). A jealous stepmother would have Marina murdered. In The Two Noble Kinsmen the Amazonian Hippolyta protests, “We have been soldiers, and we cannot weep” at accounts of “babes broach’d on the lance, or women /That have sod their infants in (and after eat them) /The brine they wept at killing ‘em” (1.3.18-22). Lady Macbeth can muse “How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks [her]” and yet envision dashing out its brains (1.7.54–59). Lear fantasizes about a savage “that makes his generation messes /To gorge his appetite” (1.1.117-118). Leontes wishes to destroy Perdita, while Richard III and Macbeth scheme to murder all the young who might inherit their power.

With its analogy to Herod’s massacre of the innocents, Macbeth’s slaughter recalls the central role of the sacrificed child in Christianity. Whatever its actual incidence in English society, infanticide was a crucial religious theme. While the Son of God ransomed all of the Father’s children by his own cruel death, the threat of righteous paternal
wrath gave meaning to God's mercy and must have influenced the believers' sense of identity. As Thomas Becon expostulated in a commentary on Luke 6:36-42 (1646), "we can not deny but God hath given us good measure. For if he would have given us after our deserts, he might have plagued us with wrath, plague, pestilence, and all evil, and put us to death, assone as we were born." For Becon, a sinful human being is akin to an infant, potentially the object of its father's just violence but miraculously spared.

More common than physical denial of the child is psychological denial. The child is wished away by imaginative distortion or negation of its identity.29 "Who sees a child sees nothing," says a proverb Elizabethans knew. Original sin served to justify an adult's projection of his own unacceptable feeling onto the child, yet even Polixenes' idealization of "twinned lambs" substitutes adult wishes for the reality of childhood. Fathers such as Egues and Brabantio discount their daughters' wills by imagining that demonic or magical influences cause their rebellion. Fantasies of cannibalizing one's young, as in the examples from Pericles and King Lear above, reveal a wish to reincorporate a child whose independent existence threatens to exhaust or kill the parent by taking all the parent's love and sustenance.30

The ambivalent complement to denial is a reversal reaction in which adults project a parental role onto the child to serve their own needs. In Shakespeare wise daughters often guide and comfort parents. Pericles conceives of his daughter Marina as "Thou that beget'st him that did thee beget" (1.1.195), a wish-fulfilling version of the fantasy by which Lear made his daughters his mothers (1.4.173). As Bradley noticed, however, sons such as little Macduff and Mamillius tend to be "pathetic figures," too wise for this world, noble but doomed.31

It seems plausible, though I know of no way to prove it, that the self-effacement fantasy originates in this matrix of ambivalent projections. To be the object of other people's projections is to have one's identity altered or nullified, creating a disjunction between one's public and private selves. Fantasies of self-effacement take forms that dramatize this sense of simultaneously being oneself and not oneself, present and not present, as when Portia and Rosalind assume disguises or Falstaff or Juliet plays dead. The sense of doubtfulness is unmistakable in Comedy of Errors when the ostensibly dead Antipholus of Syracuse has the identity and life of his twin imposed on him in Ephesus. His experience in Ephesus is akin to the experience of living in a web of intensely projective relationships.

More specifically, self-effacement makes sense as a reaction to the parental attitudes described above: a reaction by which a child seeks to fulfill parental fantasies of denial or negation in order to avoid actual conflict and rejection. He tries to suspend his identity to protect it. Analogously, projective reversal permits the child a form of power and autonomy, however distorted, as does the resurrection that usually follows a play-death in Shakespeare. The dynamics of the relationships fantasized in art and in the culture, that is, seem to match.

Given the ambivalence between parents and children in Shakespeare and the world he knew, the pattern of loss and reunion in the plays must have been powerfully moving to his audiences. By projective distortions or outright aggression parent figures in the plays may deny their offspring during the most anxious years the way Egues would be "as a god" to his daughter, free to change or destroy her identity as if it were wax (MND 1.1.47-51). Once past the critical transition to adulthood, the child may be resurrected in an idealized and untroubling form. As the old shepherd in The Winter's Tale, complains, "I would there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest" (3.3.59-61), for in that oblivion all youthful rebellion could be dissolved. If the young efface themselves, adults may then confidently grant them freedom as Prospero does Ariel and Ferdinand. This, after all, is the plot of A Midsummer Night's Dream and other Shakespearean comedies: young lovers flee a judgmental authority, become figuratively invisible and purged of disobedience, then rejoin society as honored members. As sleep transforms youth in a wood outside of Athens, so Perdita goes from helpless babe to queen as if, says Time, "you had slept between" (4.1.17).

In its cultural context the effacement that so often symbolically separates childhood from adulthood in Shakespeare appears to express not only adult denial of childhood, but also the child's denial (and the denial of the child in every once-vulnerable adult) of his own disturbing condition. As each maturing generation sought compensation for its own years of inferiority and impotence in projective demands on its young, presumably it unwittingly tended to perpetuate the cycle of insecurity.32 Coming of age, some individuals must have repressed or redirected feelings of hurt, dread, and anger from their early lives. This process may be reflected in the "blackout" of self-effacement. In the theater the fantasy may have allowed spectators to rediscover vicariously, in a safely disguised form, disturbing transformative experiences, with the possibility of integrating them more fully. The play would be
bringing to new life or resurrecting material that has the potential to enhance self-awareness and in turn autonomy.

IV

The analogy between the fantasy of self-effacement and the imaginative process of theater itself brings this chapter to its final phase. As the fantasy in the plays is conditioned by historical, social, and familial structures, so those same relationships are implicated in Shakespeare's relation to his audience and to his art. In its psychological dynamics, for example, the fantasy bears a resemblance to the process of sublimation in the artist's experience. By giving up gratification in the world of action, the artist may create substitute worlds, projecting himself into or, colloquially, living through his art. Effacing himself, he aspires to transfiguring imaginative resurrection.

Since Shakespeare was a dramatist, this is not as abstractly figurative a connection as it might appear. For sublimation has a palpable analogue in the experience of the actor-playwright who is in a position every day of his working life to suspend his identity in order to live onstage in the character he plays in the heightened reality of the drama. For such an artist resurrection would be ambiguously real insofar as he was living out his own creation, watching it come to life around him, personages and place alike, in performance. What is more, in the theater all deaths are ultimately play-deaths.

The analogy does not necessarily stop here. Shakespeare participated in a system of artistic patronage that made deference a condition of recognition and reward. As prologues and epilogues insist, the artist lived by pleasing. As patron, "Mr. W. H." would be "the only begetter" of the poems, a symbolic father with whom the poet submissively identifies himself, as if the patron creates through the artist as the patriarchal father works his will through an obedient, seemingly transparent son.

Titles such as As You Like It and What You Will similarly profess that the audience is the true creator. Moreover, in the theater, audiences, and especially aristocratic audiences, were inclined to dramatize themselves by disrupting the performance, forcing the playwright to devise strategies for accommodating their self-assertion. Usually Shakespeare preempts resistance to the play by a mixture of flattery and self-deprecation, as when the actor Prospero begs the "indulgence" of the spectators to set him free. Despite the sly ironies—the dramatist has had the audience under his spell as Prospero has bewitched those within the play—the epilogue feigns total deference.

Shakespeare's humility as an artist disguises striving for autonomy. If he is Puck, he is also Oberon; if he is the entertaining servant, he is also Prospero the master magician. The extremes of the artist's role parallel the ambivalent valuation of art in the Renaissance. In the world-as-stage trope the play may express the essential nullity of man's earthly existence or, alternatively, man's power to shape himself and his world. Like the artist, art is nothing and yet supreme:

Elizabethan public theaters like the Globe were, by a symbolism inherent in their very structure, models of the world. As scholars have observed, they represented emblematically the hierarchical order of the universe, as conceived by late-medieval thought. Still more significant . . . is their ambivalence as emblems. They may imply that life is no more real than a play, that 'the great globe itself' will dissolve . . . and leave not a rack behind. But they may also point to the immense, godlike power of human creativity.

[Greenblatt 1973, p. 45]

Immediately self-effacing, the dramatist may nevertheless be "godlike" in the larger transaction that is the play.

Authorities in the real world made it risky for Shakespeare to assert the artist's potency too boldly. Fears of blasphemy and sedition clearly affected the content and production of plays. Not surprisingly, Shakespeare repeatedly mocks himself and his art even as his art asserts disturbing truth about the world. Had he not been so disarming about his claims—his artistic will—he might well have provoked retaliation, as the playing of Richard II nearly did during the rebellion of Essex. The Winter's Tale he mocks as "an old tale," disqualifying it as a criticism of life. Autolycus, the comic figure of the artist as low-life impersonator and trickster, provides the crucial disguise or fiction that allows Perdita to fulfill the oracle and resolve the play. "Though I am not naturally honest," he quips, "I am so sometimes by chance" (4.4.716–17). Also protected as well as undercut by irony is the play's comic apotheosis of the artist as godlike creator, Julio Romano. In the play of course there is no actual Julio Romano, and yet tacitly the illusory statue of the queen does defy death and "beguile Nature of her custom" (5.2.106–7). For by indirections Shakespeare asserts the power
of imagination, himself creating the living illusion of Hermione and thereby holding momentary sway over an asentting audience in every enactment or resurrection of the play in the theater.

Ultimately a play is an event, an interaction of the dramatist’s, the actors’, and the spectators’ imaginations. As such, the play’s integrity depends on consensual goodwill, the will to understand, which Theseus illustrates by his empathetic openness to the performance of Pyramus in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Puck’s epilogue mocks our experience of the play as an empty hallucination even as he insinuates it has the authority of Oberon’s spell, and invites us to appreciate the imaginative community we have shared in the enactment. If, as C. L. Barber maintains, the plays bring to new life or resurrect repressed material that may enhance self-awareness, then the process of clarification and release depends for its efficacy on the willingness of everyone in the theater to overcome the divisions of hierarchy and share in the drama.6 By responding to Pyramus, with its inadvertently wise parody of their own self-involved and destructive infatuation in the wood, the Athenian lovers share in a comic purgation analogous to the spectators’ experience of the play as a whole. The last act moves toward a moment of vicarious insight and identity, a marriage of minds: “The dramatic experience in which playwright, actors, and audience all participate... becomes a kind of secular ritual of communion, with the play itself the focal illusion whose existence and significance are created by a collective imaginative act and whose value lies partly in the fact that it enables a sharing of inner experience otherwise inaccessible. The play and the audience imaginatively unite and mutually transform each other in the act of knowledge.”37 Insofar as this model of vicarious mutuality allows the artist to achieve autonomy even as he honors the bonds of community, it complements his self-effacement with a mode of action and mastery that represents a solution to conflicts at the heart of English life.

It goes without saying that Shakespeare the dramatist was both child and father to his culture, shaped by and himself reshaping its imaginative forms.18 Like other artists, in idealizing or satirizing or simply entertaining alternatives to what exists, he must have risked alienation. Many of his plots get their energy from a motion away from an intolerable normative society—to a wood outside Athens, a stormy heath, to Eastcheap, dazzling Egypt, or an enchanted island. This motion is akin to the artist’s imaginative disengagement from his culture, a means to perspective and a source of creativity. The more authoritarian the society, the more the artist must disguise or efface, signs of alienation in himself and his art. As a form related to the core ideas of the fantasy of self-effacement, the model of dramatic communion described above seems to have been for Shakespeare a means of reconciling in art conflicting imperatives of submission and autonomy, community and individuality, and stasis and growth. Other plays, especially the tragedies, are by no means so sanguine about the possibility of community. And even in A Midsummer Night’s Dream Puck is too much like a mischievous child or a Plautine servant (“As I am an honest Puck”) to inspire enduring confidence. Still, in the context outlined in this essay, the play’s projected marriage of minds makes the theater itself one solution, however provisional or ultimately illusory, to the alienation of art from culture and, given the force of historical change in Shakespeare’s own lifetime, of culture from itself.59
Chapter 2

1. Cf. this Dutch variant: "In 1620 a thirteen-year-old who had perpetrated manslaughter was committed to the Digbihus or House of Correction" because of his youth, having been symbolically decapitated in public, with a sword swung over his head, dogged and branded before admission." See Simon Schama, *The Embodiment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), pp. 18–19.

2. In Shakespeare's *Creation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), I have described two opposed modes of identity exhibited by Shakespeare's characters, one socially determined, the other dramatically generated from within. The self-effacing fantasy can be seen as a strategy for controlling that opposition (see pp. 67–70). See also Terence Eagleton, *Shakespeare and Society* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), esp. chaps. 1 and 2.


4. R. W. Chambers, "King Lear: The First W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture" (Glasgow: Jackson, 1940), p. 44.


10. Historians continue to disagree about the origins and development of individualism in England. In Alan Macfarlane's view, "the majority of ordinary people in England from at least the thirteenth century were rampant individualists, highly mobile both geographically and socially . . . market-oriented and acquisitive, ego-centered in kinship and social life." See *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property, and Social Transition* (Oxford: Basil-Blackwell, 1978), p. 163. Cf. E. M. W. Tillyard's formulation: "Those who know most about the Middle Ages now assure us that humanism and a belief in the present life were powerful by the twelfth century, and that exhortations to condemn the world were themselves powerful at that time for that very reason. The two contradictory principles coexisted in a state of high tension." See *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), p. 5. I have been focusing my argument on Elizabethan doctrine and theory in order to minimize speculation about actual historical behavior, although of course the two are ultimately inextricable.


12. In *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1600–1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), Lawrence Stone theorizes that the "deferential society is itself a reflection of the defence mechanism of the ego when it discovers a basic conflict between its own impulses to autonomy and . . . obedience ruthlessly enforced by its parents. Thus the deferential behaviour of the children is a defensive response to ego repression, as the only way to survive, while the authoritarian . . . behaviour of the parents is an expression of the original desire for autonomy." (p. 178).

13. Carl Bridenbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). Laslett points out that ordinarily "neither peasant, pauper, nor craftsman nor even gentleman in the preindustrial world ever changed his reference group in such a way as to feel aware of what is called relative deprivation." *The World We Have Lost*, p. 184. As *The Temper* dramatizes, however, one of the changes that must have called social roles and reference groups into question was growing awareness of the New World.


15. In the allegories of alchemy it seems likely that the same superstition contributed to the belief that the secret "virtue" of alchemical processes lead may become gold. See Christopher Levet, *A Voyage into New England* (1648), in Bridenbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen*, pp. 31–32.


18. Complementing Esler and germane to this point is Stephen J. Greenblatt's *Sir Walter Raleigh* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979). In 1603 while imprisoned Raleigh attempted suicide in a sort of play-death, which he followed by a brilliant assertion of autonomy in the subsequent trial. As C. L. Barber suggested to me, Raleigh's behavior fits the Shakespearean pattern.

19. Laslett warns that "we know very little indeed about child nurture in preindustrial times" (The *World We Have Lost*, p. 120). Recent studies, including Stone's *Marriage*, have been most persuasive when exploring upper-class childhood and cross-cultural evidence of child-rearing. See Leah S. Nanney, *Marriage, Childhood and Cultural Despair* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978), p. 341. In an important article Deborah Shuger gathers evidence from Lancetor Andrewhes, Richard Hooker, and others for a Renaissance conception of the father as nurturant and noncoercive. Such a conception sharply qualifies the conventional picture of the authoritarian patriarch. See *Reflections of the Father: Patrimonial, Politics, and Narcissism*, *English Literary Renaissance: forthcoming*, 1980.

20. In "Recurrence and Renaissance: Rhetorical Imitation in Ascham and Sturt," *English Literary Renaissance* 6 (1976): 156–79, Marion Trousdale argues that the theory of *copia* postulates an essential Platonic idea that persists when students turn out imitative variations on a model. Like priests, i.e., fathers and tutors bring the student closer to immutable origins. In this way sterile exercises may actually serve an initiatory function.

21. The conventional association of disobedience with patriarchy is evident in a conduct book such as Bartholomew Batty's *The Christian Man's Closet* (1681), which judges the disobedient son a "cruel murder' of his parents." See Lu Emily Pearson, *Elizabethans at Home* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1950), p. 246.


23. The practice of naming a younger child after an older sibling who died suggests a belief that identity can be lost and yet tacitly resurrected as well.

27. F. G. Emmison, Elizabethan Life: Disorder (Chelsmford, Eng.: Essex County Council, 1970), p. 136. See also Keith Wrightson, "Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England," Local Population Studies 15 (1971): 10–22. Some authorities, including Laslett, are more guarded about this problem. There is some agreement among historians that at this time the English held children in higher regard than they had earlier. For Keith Wrightson, in English Society, 1580–1680 (London: Hutchinson, 1982), "it seems that, even more than the main parents, the unborn child was, in the last resort, brought up and brought by their children, following their progress with both anxiety and satisfaction, and that they demanded little in return" (p. 317).

28. Thomas Becon, A Piill ... upon All the Sunday Golesples, vol. 2 (1566), in Arthur Kirsch, Shakespeare's and the Experience of Love (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 76. Marcus (Childhood, p. 29) points out that "both the Norton Catechism and Calvin's Institutions, widely used as a catechism in sixteenth-century England, extended 'honor thy father and mother' to encompass all of higher rank ... and reminded children that according to Exod. 21:17 any rebellion against due authority was punishable with death." Such evidence strongly suggests that infanticiadic motivation took many forms and persisted as children grew.

29. My treatment of projective distortions of the child follows deMauser, "The Evolution of Childhood." 


32. Cf. the "natural" cycle of aggression and compensation implied in this passage from Batts and Barolome (1638) cited in the Arden edition of King Lear, ed. Kenneth Muir (New York & London: Methuen, 1972), p. 118: "The Pellican louseth too much her children. For when the children be hauht, and begin to wax hoare, they smite the father and mother in the face, wherefore the mother smite them again, and slaine them. And the third day the mother smite her selfe in the side that the blood runneth out, and sheddeth that hot blood upon the bodies of her children. And by virtue of the blood the birds that were before dead, quicken again." Parental wrath is exasperated (and justified) by self-punishment. Smiting herself, the mother magically undoes the infanticide by repeating the murder. But her violence also replicates the violence of the children ("smite ... in the face").


35. Like a magician or actor, Harry Berger, Jr., notes, the ascendant Prospero "prefers the security of the one-way window relationship in which he may observe without being observed," and "hides either behind a cloak of invisibility, or behind a role, a performance, a relationship, which has been prepared beforehand." See "Miraculous Harp: A Reading of The Tempest," Shakespeare Studies 5 (1966): 275. In Prospero, according to this view, self-effacement and assertion deeply reinforce one another.


In a letter from the present chapter Calderwood reminds me that Shakespeare is also the 'father' of the audience, inasmuch as he, like Prospero, is employing his parental illusions toward the audience's education. Surely part of the irony of Puck's epilogue is that in it Shakespeare self-effacingly plays the role of pleasuring child to the audience's parent while actually playing the role of parent who has (like Oberon taking control of the [changing] child by way of illusory strategies) manipulated his child audience for its own good.

38. Raymond Southall's The Courtly Maker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) recognizes the Elizabethan world picture itself as a majestic public fiction attempting to mediate among men: "The doctrine of World Order was inconsistent both with the spirit of the old courtly tradition and with the new spirit of the Reformation; its promulgation as state doctrine by Elizabeth is simply a sign that the Reformation had been called to a halt" (p. 55).

Chapter 3


3. At the time my daughter vowed to elevate the supermarket, television featured the animated cartoon "Masters of the Universe," whose villain Skeletor unmistakably descends from the grim reaper of medieval iconography, and whose hero, He-Man, bulges with pink, muscular, well-fed health.

4. Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, p. 80.

5. "Il Beato Agostino Novello e Quattro Suoi Miracoli Dopo la Morte." See Figure 1. Born into a noble Spanish family in Toràmìna, Sicily, holder of a doctorate in law from Bologna, the Augustinian friar became papal legate and confessor to Pope Nicholas IV. 6. Common in Renaissance England are pamphlets advertising news of "strange," "monstrous," or "mishapen" births. The pamphlets testify to the dread of the body that Becker is describing, though they invoke a religious context that moralizes the horror in cosmic terms and thereby promises to tame it. The same dynamics are evident in Christian iconography that gave demons grotesque body parts while idealizing the bodies of angels, say, with eternally youthful features.
