

# Review of Richard van Oort's "Shakespeare's Mad Men: A Crisis of Authority" (Stanford, 2023)

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Richard van Oort has followed up his remarkable *Shakespeare's Big Men: Tragedy and the Problem of Resentment* (University of Toronto, 2016) with a somewhat more sharply focused monograph. Where *Shakespeare's Big Men* considered five of the tragedies (*Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus*) the new work limits its textual discussion to two plays, *King Lear* and the "problem comedy" *Measure for Measure*. The previous study used an anthropologically informed analysis—and specifically the heuristic and terminology of Eric Gans's originary hypothesis—to examine Shakespeare's working out of the dramatic implications of a central paradox also identified by Gans, namely, that for those on the periphery "identification with" the figure occupying the center "is inseparable from resentment of him." [i] Such over-arching issues are still relevant to the current book, but the concern now is "a subcategory" of such figures, centralized "mad men," [ii] and as its subtitle indicates, the problems their madness and position pose for legitimacy, authority, and the just or unjust exercise of political power, broadly understood.

Van Oort points out the consistent linking, in Shakespeare, of that position and condition: in his famous plays "all mad men are also big men." [iii] Indeed, madness itself is closely, but in specific ways, connected to centrality. The bard's view of madness we might characterize as anthropological, or as van Oort puts it, "ethical" rather than psychological: madness in fact is the condition afflicting Big Men whose attempts to renounce the center are inadequate, inconsistent, "fake or insincere." [iv] One might say these protagonists, unlike Frodo Baggins, have not made or been required to make full enough a sacrifice of their own desires to enable them to escape the corrosive effects of their rings of power. Call it a particular formulation of the tragic paradox, a specific form of *hamartia* that professes renunciation and innocence but is inflected and ultimately undermined by self-deception.

The structure of *Shakespeare's Mad Men* affords itself, therefore, a very thorough investigation of the thematic cruxes of the two plays, of which we can only provide here a simplified overview. First read is *Lear*, whose ethic is the gradual recovery of "moral reciprocity" through the dissolution of "bad-faith hierarchy," [v] a process revealed in the parallel narratives of *Lear* and Gloucester. Perhaps the most interesting feature of this specific permutation of what GA formulates as the over-riding dilemma of love and resentment is that it is experienced, by the audience as much as by the protagonists, not

from the periphery but looking outward from a center those tragic figures cannot acknowledge themselves as occupying. Their experiences are of the resentments of others—Gloucester of those of his wronged son Edgar, Lear of those of his not fully enfranchised daughters and subjects—and the process dramatized is a progression from what GA calls the victimary to an ownership of their sins, through stations of self-pity, shame, recognition, regret, and repentance. This schema requires a reading of the play which, though it builds explicitly on certain strains of previous Shakespearian criticism, must persuade us of a particularly skeptical idea of the behavior and sufferings of these central figures, especially initially, and a more sympathetic understanding of those they have wronged. Van Oort seeks to persuade us not to mimic the protagonists' bad faith, but finally to see them as less sinned against than sinning and to read in their fates the tragic expression of a certain kind of justice—the ancient moral of the genre.

*King Lear* depicts a “duel between Vanity and Faith,”<sup>[vi]</sup> and so long as the former prevails its thralls must confront “the violence that lies at the secret heart of the human social order.”<sup>[vii]</sup> Where previous commentary has frequently seen a turn, in Lear himself especially, to the latter as early as Act III when he flees his sharp-toothed daughters out into the cosmic storm and begins there to attend to the sufferings of others, van Oort's analysis, while conceding some faltering initial steps towards love, is less forgiving. If the king's famous curse is “hopelessly self-pitying and resentful”<sup>[viii]</sup> and his exile “self-inflicted,”<sup>[ix]</sup> even his subsequent “interpretation” of that storm remains “egocentric,” reflecting only “his preoccupations.”<sup>[x]</sup> One is to “discern” a crucial degree of hypocrisy and blindness, a fatal absence of irony, in all his “diatribes on the heath,”<sup>[xi]</sup> a waste to which he has resorted out of what Kent calls his “sovereign shame.”<sup>[xii]</sup> Shame is the key to much of Lear's behavior through the middle parts of the play, even his madness is finally “a screen”<sup>[xiii]</sup> to conceal his true and shameful self, and his persistent shame implies not a redemptive turn to love but a lingering, indeed “grotesque”<sup>[xiv]</sup> clinging to the perquisites and assumptions of centrality, an inverse expression of pride. When he “implores the gods to wreak havoc on himself and his enemies” in Act IV, he is still “invoking the sacred power of the center,”<sup>[xv]</sup> which he continues to feel authorized to wield. Van Oort is very good at registering for us the lingering implications of this pride-in-shame, that make Lear back away from his loving daughter's embrace, even very late in the play.

Such a reading is particularly productive with the doubled plot of Gloucester and his children. *Shakespeare's Mad Men* innovatively reads Edgar's behavior both for its radical rejection of previous sin, and as Poor Tom, its “purification”<sup>[xvi]</sup> of soul, and for its angry resentment of his father, indeed, even, “fantasies of parricide.”<sup>[xvii]</sup> Gloucester, meanwhile, in van Oort's carefully detailed textual examination (building on and extending that of Stanley Cavell), is far more alert to the stakes than conventional readings of the later acts would suggest, and is likely aware, for example, of just who his ostensibly demented guide is, even in the famous mock-suicide of Act IV. Blinded, he now can see, and his compliance in his son's cruel and vengeful charade is an attempt at or offer of atonement,

an expression of shame and a means of allowing his son to purge himself of his (justifiable) resentment.

The approach also requires a perfectly good Cordelia, however, and more challengingly still, some sympathy for the erstwhile devilish other daughters. Lear's insistence on his hundred-knight perquisite derives from Vanity; Lear is behaving like a child, and Goneril and Regan's demands for cut-backs are, after all, "quite reasonable . . . who can blame [them]?"<sup>[xviii]</sup> Even more challenging, perhaps, is the defence mounted of Cornwall, to whom we are enjoined to "give credit where credit is due."<sup>[xix]</sup> It's to be granted that his blinding of Gloucester is "cruel," but the Duke too has his reasons and at least follows a semblance of due process, and we should not let his "actions blind us to Gloucester's faults." The Earl "loses his eyes because he . . . is blind to his own evil."<sup>[xx]</sup> Van Oort acknowledges Harry Berger's suspicious view of Cordelia's fateful decision not to play along with the love test, but his own Cordelia finally has no choice, is drawn ineluctably towards the center by an overwhelming power that must be understood anthropologically rather than as a function of character. As a person she does, however, throughout, "represent love," or even "is love," or at least "partly,"<sup>[xxi]</sup> and the part that does, or is, is drawn helplessly to desire a center that Lear has made only ambiguously available with his bad faith.

Finally, though, a noble, and truly tragic outcome is attained by recognition, an awakening from such self-deception, by both Lear and Gloucester. For *Measure for Measure's* Duke Vincentio, however, no such *éclaircissement* is attained, producing a murkier result, neither tragic nor comic. His task—van Oort makes it a version of the larger one of all post-ritualistic modern governance—is to manage the resentments generated by the freer and freer "pursuit of happiness" in a "market" system.<sup>[xxii]</sup> His madness consists in his attempt to evade the resentment that even an attempted central control of such a process inevitably generates, while refusing ever to vacate that center, as his tragic predecessors Lear and Gloucester eventually do. The Duke's apparent strategy, broadly speaking, is to delegate enforcement to a sacrificial substitute, Angelo, pretend to abdicate, then, as Angelo's attempts to restrain desire generate ever more threatening violence and disorder, return to pardon all in a "mad and extravagant display of potlach clemency."<sup>[xxiii]</sup> This peculiar plan, however, although it's sometimes read as an almost God-like (and successful) attempt to heal the realm through the demonstrated praxis of mercy, is actually the expression of his own resentments. This Big Man's hypocrisy or mad blindness, shall we say, is the source of the "problem" most audiences and readers have experienced in the outcome of this ostensible comedy.

Van Oort's solution of this problem—or explanation of why it is one—is persuasive. His reading of the Duke's sometimes cunning and sometimes strange and uncouth maneuvers deploys an anthropological heuristic in a situation that seems almost ideally suited to it. Here too earlier criticism is usefully engaged, but then extended—many readers of this curious play had noticed the untoward machinations of the Duke, but few had offered as

cogent a motivation. The play is read in detail, and its puzzling and provoking features—Angelo’s attempt to get the beautiful convent-bound Isabella to exchange her virginity for her brother’s life, the implausible but salaciously dramatic “bed trick” by which this intended abuse is ambivalently thwarted—are illuminatingly explored. What steadily and ever more emphatically emerges is the sheer oddity and ineptitude of the Duke’s project, its fumbled stage-managing, its increasingly dubious ethics, its casual cruelties and deceptions, its patent self-serving, the contradictions more and more obvious to other characters and audience alike. This is not quite Lear’s madness, but it is certainly and to a remarkable degree unhinged. Along the way, what began as tragedy descends towards comedy, or indeed, “a hopeless mishmash of conflicting genres.”[\[xxiv\]](#) The Duke’s ambiguous occupation and abandonment and reoccupation of the center is of course to blame—mere farce looms.

Not that the ethical, or indeed judicial and political issues raised are inconsequential, as van Oort’s useful survey of the various interpretations of the play’s thematic issues reminds us. But the reading *Shakespeare’s Mad Men* offers, in its anthropological orientation, is not finally moral or philosophical. The crucial engines of the play’s action are desire and resentment, and its characters’ various lusts and transgressions mediate each other, in an unstoppable and ongoing sequence. The Duke’s climactic pronouncement of the curative and resolving power of “marriage and mercy . . . is met with awkward silence”[\[xxv\]](#) and the curtain falls. The claims of centrality, that he who controls it can trump that “infinitely deferrable” mediation around the social periphery, are transparently empty in the world Shakespeare is writing about and for. Those on stage, for their own safety, remain mute, while for the rest of us, to “the Duke’s final blustering show of mad self-centralization,” the only appropriate response is “an ironic shake of the head.”[\[xxvi\]](#)

The case is made in considerable detail of course—to devote a full monograph to just the two plays, albeit canonical masterpieces, ensures this. If I found myself wishing for anything, it might have been an instance or two more. For example, another Duke, Prospero of *The Tempest*, has sometimes been compared to Vincentio, and even to Lear. He too, another irascible old man, loses, regains, and/or abandons centrality, and maneuvers in ways sometimes provocative of unease. Here, too, is a crisis of authority, and were the play not taking place in a genre we have come to call romance rather than comedy or tragedy, Prospero’s belief in his capacity to raise and still storms, to free spirits and chastise the guilty, to return his world to what he considers it proper order, might be wondered at, even be thought delusional. But if it isn’t, why finally does he abandon it, why drown his book? But perhaps Richard van Oort is already pursuing such questions and may be able to suggest some answers in time.

Overall, *Shakespeare’s Mad Men* is a fine and penetrating critical study as well as an excellent addition to the growing body of work exploring the implications and uses of generative anthropology. Its author notes that it had “its origins in [his] teaching,”[\[xxvii\]](#)

and I can testify to its accessibility and helpfulness to students, having had the good fortune this term to give an undergraduate course on Shakespeare whose readings included the two plays discussed. I both read and recommended the book, to good effect. Indeed, for all its depth of analysis, it has a certain jauntiness of style that perhaps suggests both its origin and purpose in academic education. We are urged to “put our detective hat on”[\[xxviii\]](#) to assess Gloucester’s guilt or innocence, told that the Duke’s bed trick is “100 percent kosher”[\[xxix\]](#) and informed that Isabella’s silence in response to his marriage proposal suggests the heroine “must be truly gobsmacked.”[\[xxx\]](#) Alas, in my age, I cannot say I have been quite so affected by the work under review, but certainly enough impressed by and grateful for its insights.

## Notes

[\[i\]](#) *Shakespeare’s Big Men*, x.

[\[ii\]](#) *Shakespeare’s Mad Men*, 1.

[\[iii\]](#) *Mad Men*, 1. Remaining references are to this source.

[\[iv\]](#) 2.

[\[v\]](#) 23.

[\[vi\]](#) 26.

[\[vii\]](#) 28.

[\[viii\]](#) 35.

[\[ix\]](#) 46.

[\[x\]](#) 35.

[\[xi\]](#) 37.

[\[xii\]](#) 4.3.43, cited on 91.

[\[xiii\]](#) 92.

[\[xiv\]](#) 45.

[\[xv\]](#) 47.

[\[xvi\]](#) 51.

[\[xvii\]](#)51.

[\[xviii\]](#)28.

[\[xix\]](#)59

[\[xx\]](#)59.

[\[xxi\]](#)17, 23.

[\[xxii\]](#)117.

[\[xxiii\]](#)118.

[\[xxiv\]](#)192.

[\[xxv\]](#)224.

[\[xxvi\]](#)224.

[\[xxvii\]](#)235.

[\[xxviii\]](#)52.

[\[xxix\]](#)201.

[\[xxx\]](#)221.