# Redression as a Structural Imperative in Shaffer's *Equus*

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In a note prefaced to the printed text of his play *Equus*, Peter Shaffer offers praise for John Dexter, the director of the original London production: "Dexter directs powerfully through suggestion. Into the theatrical spaces he contrives, flows the communal imagination of an audience" (7). Shaffer's statement tells us more about his own conception of the theatrical experience than it does about the method or merit of Dexter's direction. At first reading, the statement may seem somewhat aphoristic: the notion that drama is communal has been a commonplace of dramatic theory. But when we consider that *Equus* is a play predicated on the dichotomy of deviance and normalcy, it becomes apparent that Shaffer's reference to "the communal imagination of an audience" invites us to redefine the nature and function of the communality of the theatrical audience. Further, it provides us with a point of departure toward understanding why *Equus* is the play that it is--a play in which the ethos of the audience is critical to both the determination of structure and the resolution of conflict.

Writers of plays, it seems, have been habitually aware of a prevailing disposition of shared expectations, assumptions and values in their various audiences--what I refer to in this paper as the ethos of the audience.[1] Recent drama theorists have acknowledged that the communality of the audience, of which the ethos is a manifestation, is a significant determinant of what happens in the theater.[2] At the same time, critical emphasis has seemed to shift progressively toward a consideration of the psychology of audience response as a creative force in the theatrical event. Marco De Marinis, for one, has concluded that

> theatrical pleasure arises and is maintained in an unbroken dialectic between the frustration and satisfaction of [the audience's] expectations. . . . To upset this balance in either direction means

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> threatening the success of the complex communicative interactions which constitute the very life of the theatrical performance. (112)

It is somewhat puzzling to note that De Marinis, throughout his provocative analysis, makes no overt differentiation between the singular spectator and the plural audience. When he asserts that "the spectator is a relatively autonomous 'maker of meanings' for the performance; its cognitive and emotive effects can only be truly actualized by the audience," (102) one wonders why "spectator" does not read "spectators," for the collectivity (if not the communality) of the audience is implicit in his entire argument. As De Marinis himself takes some pains to point out with reference to the manipulation of theatrical environments, the audience of the 1967 Living Theater production of *Antigone* became "the people of Argu[sic]s" (106)--a political entity, not an assemblage of individuals. It is precisely in the communality of the audience that the psychology, anthropology and politics of the theater converge. The autonomy of the spectator is a collective autonomy.

Many of the rhetorical conventions of drama--choruses, prologues and speeches or actions that deliberately subvert dramatic illusion--are devices by which writers of drama have attempted to reconcile (or sometimes exploit) the immediate tension between the subjective integrity of the literary text and the communal expectations of the audience, as part of the process through which a theatrical text[3] is actualized. When Tom Stoppard's Guildenstern peers out over the footlights and complains, "What a fine persecution--to be kept intrigued without ever being quite enlightened" (41), we are given to understand that his problem is pretty much the same as our problem at this moment in the play. We are all in the same metaphysical pickle, because none of us has enough immediate information to know what Stoppard is up to--yet we are all necessarily implicated, in our roles as performer or audience, in the creation of a theatrical text. It is noteworthy in this regard that Sartre coined his remarkable phrase "theatrical procedure" (Genet 10)--which appears to acknowledge that the actualization of a theatrical text is itself a fundamentally conventionalized undertaking--in his discussion of the cognitive "de-realization" (13) which confounds spectators of a crossgendered staging of Genet's *The Maids*. It is difficult to think of an instance in which the presumed ethos of the audience has had a more radical effect on the nature of the theatrical event. Jouvet's decision to countermand Genet's wishes and cast the play with women in the roles of Solange, Claire and Madame profoundly affected the theatrical text of 17 April 1947 and of any subsequent production, regardless of the physiological gender of the players.

It must also be observed that the structural conventions of certain dramatic idioms have existed to help reconcile the desires of the playwright with the demands of the audience. In his examination of one such convention,

Northrop Frye demonstrated convincingly that the "festive" ending of Elizabethan comedy and romance was more than just a charming trope; it was a deliberate attempt to satisfy the audience's expectations of a harmonious conclusion and an orderly resolution to the problems inherent in the action--a "desirable solution" (Frye 130). Moreover, Brecht's lampoon of Gay at the end of *The Threepenny Opera* reveals that the festive ending has been a convention with considerable stamina, that it retained enough force to be the target of a rather brutal comment by the omission of the obligatory dance in favor of a polemic song. Most importantly, Brecht's ending shows us that the audience's mandate for a harmonious resolution is actually an expression of social will--in this case, the sentimental desires of the bourgeoisie.

Some earlier theorists argued that the politics of the communal audience is rooted in the ritual origins of theater and its refinement in the context of religious and community festivals. Martin Esslin stated this point of view succinctly:

> In ritual as in theater a human community directly experiences its own identity and affirms it. . . . All drama is therefore a political event: it either reasserts or undermines the code of conduct of a given society. (29)

While no audience is homogeneous in an absolute sense, Esslin rightly contended that the viewers of drama have a political identity as an audience, and that they collectively share, and assert, certain assumptions about conformity and deviance. Moreover, the *communis sensus* of the audience has an affinity for normative behavior and a corresponding abhorrence of (and fascination with) chaos.

Victor Turner's explorations of the "anthropology of performance" (*From Ritual to Theater* 13) provide us with still richer insights into the political dynamics of De Marinis' "unbroken dialectic" and the reflexive traffic between playwright and audience which is essential to the realization of a theatrical text. While Esslin's thesis was grounded in the historical notion that theater derives from ritual, Turner has emphasized instead that theater and ritual may be considered as rather distinct expressions of the same dynamic socio-cultural processes. Turner's model of the structure of conflict situations in the type of public actions he refers to as "social dramas" (*From Ritual to Theatre* 106) indicates that there may be concrete reasons why the continuum of frustration and satisfaction is integral to any dramatic event. Turner identifies four sequential stages of process--breach, crisis, redressive action and reintegration--which are part of a society's management of deviant or contra-normal behaviors, "egoistic" behaviors which he further describes by a phrase of Frederick Bailey's: the "symbolic trigger of confrontation or encounter"

(1982:107). Throughout his discussion, Turner asserts an "explicit comparison of the temporal structure of certain types of social processes with that of dramas on the stage . . ." (110). We have seen that Frye focused his attention on the reintegration which occurs at the end of Shakespeare's romances--an emphasis on the coda which has been characteristic of critics who have considered the teleology of dramatic structures. But in Turner's exposition, the "redressive phase" of the process is equally crucial, the phase in which "symbolic action reach[es its] . . . fullest expression" (108).

Turner's model suggests that a theatrical audience, confronted with a dramatic action in which vital norms of cultural and social harmony have been breached, would naturally exert its will on behalf of redression. It further suggests that in the case of a play like *Equus*, for which redression is the central problem of the action, the audience would experience the accomplishment of redression as a gratification of its communal expectations.

It is impossible to read much commentary on *Equus* without encountering a vocabulary of shock and disgust at the action which precipitated the play. Shaffer's own account resounds with this vocabulary: "alarming . . . horrible . . . dreadful" (*Equus* 9). The anecdote which gave rise to the fable of Shaffer's play would seem to be a veritable archetype of deviance, simultaneously revolting and compelling. Shaffer tells us that he reacted himself to his friend's story of the boy and the horses with "an intense fascination" (9).

In another place, Shaffer indicates that his reaction to the blinding of the horses compels him to call, in effect, for his own sort of redressive action:

> There is no question that the boy has done a criminal act, and that something must be done about it. There's no question that the boy himself is in deep pain and distress. . . . Dysart must do something about that, too. (*Vogue* 136)

This suggests that, as in Turner's model, the breach or deviant act demands that the playwright, as well as the protagonist, undertake a redressive process, the final aim of which will be to permit some sort of reintegration. It is important to realize that both Shaffer and Dysart are subject to these imperatives. Indeed, Shaffer's statement in his "Note on the Play" could seem to apply to either: "I had to create a mental world in which the deed could be made comprehensible" (9). There is a structural imperative in operation from the earliest moments of *Equus*--in the literary text, even before the play itself begins. It vitiates the conflict of the play and gives an unsettling sense of inevitability to the choices which are made by both the author and his protagonist.[4]

At the very beginning of the play, Dysart speaks directly to the audience, not merely in a bit of character exposition, but as if to acknowledge that Alan's act will serve as a legitimate "trigger," in Bailey's sense: "The *extremity* is the point!" (18). We realize that Shaffer has called our attention to Dysart's role as a maker of the theatrical text, since the dramatic action which begins moments later is in apparent flashback. One of the first things Shaffer does is to call into question whether Dysart's response to the outrage committed by Alan will be consistent with the prevailing ethos:

HESTER: Because most people are going to be disgusted by the whole thing, including doctors.
DYSART: May I remind you that I share this room with two highly competent psychiatrists?
HESTER: Bennett and Thoroughgood. They'll be as shocked as the public.
DYSART: That's an absolutely unwarrantable statement.
HESTER: Oh, they'll be cool and exact. And underneath they'll be revolted, and immovably English. Just like my bench.
DYSART: Well, what am I? Polynesian?
HESTER: You know exactly what I mean! (19-20)

Dysart may know, but the audience does not; at this stage all *we* know is that Dysart has "doubts" (18). The spectators of the play, whose primary involvement with the action to this point has been to respond to the "extremity" of what Alan has done, are now left with an undefined suspicion that Dysart's response will somehow be different, perhaps beyond the boundaries of the ethos. The nature of this difference will be made graphically clear in scene 5 when Dysart, speaking again in soliloquy to the audience, reveals his dream of ritual infanticide.

Dysart's dream is shocking enough--Shaffer's language ensures that: "I part the flaps, sever the inner tubes, yank them out and throw them hot and steaming on to the floor" (24). It might be inviting for the audience to assume here that Dysart's empathy with Alan is based on some sort of identification with an "important ritual" of "sacrifice" (24) and mutilation which is deviant only according to the standards of the "immovably English," represented later in the play by Dysart's own dour, frigid and "worshipless" wife (62). But in the dream, Dysart exposes himself as deviant even in the context of his supposedly Homeric fantasy. Shaffer seems to insist that his audience consider Dysart's nausea at the sacrifice of the children as an analogue to his previously expressed "doubts" about himself as a psychotherapist--"the implied doubt that this repetitive and smelly work is doing any social good at all" (25). And in

scene 6 Dysart rather conveniently reveals to Hester that "it's [Alan's] face I saw on every victim across the stone" (26). Shaffer has told us elsewhere that

> it's not a conflict between leaving the boy as he is and *not* leaving the boy as he is. It's a conflict in having to not leave him as he is and, at the same time, possibly to *eviscerate* him. (*Vogue* 192; second emphasis mine)

In this way, the playwright is attempting to frame the central conflict of the play as the apparent internal conflict of his protagonist. How successful he his in doing so in his construction of the literary text may be open to critical question.

For the analogy to work, the audience must accept that psychotherapy involves a certain metaphoric disembowelment, and that the sacrifice of Alan's passion and his odd form of worship for the sake of reintegration is something worth puzzling over. Shaffer himself has contended that "audiences react to *Equus* the way they do partly because, I suspect, they collectively dislike their analysts immensely and want some way of showing this in public" (*Vogue* 192). But *Equus* is hardly some sort of modern *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, with the psychiatrist in the role of the scold. For even if we grant that Shaffer's analogy may provoke the audience to some degree because of its shared suspicions of psychiatry, it is *still* true that the disposition of the audience must ultimately be that a boy who blinds six horses with a spike should unquestionably be treated by psychotherapy, notwithstanding the troubled dreams and soliloquies of a particular therapist. Furthermore, whatever sympathies the audience may feel for Alan as a "victim" must only serve to reinforce that disposition.

Discussion of this play has been too laden-over already with psychoanalytical baggage, little of which has added to our understanding of how the play works. In structural terms, the issue is fairly well settled at the point when the audience senses that it will insist that Dysart acquiesce to the treatment of Alan, which I contend takes place very early in the play. Purely in the terms of Turner's model, Dysart must conform to our expectations of redressive action for the play to be anything less than an outrage, or a heartbreak.

In effect, both Shaffer, as the maker of the literary text, and Dysart, as an important maker of the theatrical text, must make the decisions which we expect them to make; Dysart was correct, then, when he told us that "the *extremity* [of Alan's act] is the point." The play would not make the same demands upon us, or upon itself, if Alan were a shoplifter or a petty vandal. But since the problem of the play is what Shaffer has given it to us to be, we insist that the action on the stage and our expectations about what the action ought to be like must ultimately converge. One of the most important things

about *Equus* is that we are never in actual *dread* that Dysart will refuse to treat the boy.

It is interesting to note at this point an essential contrast between Shaffer's management of this structural imperative and the more complex sense of foreboding we experience when we are the audience of Shakespearean tragedy. When Samuel Johnson observed that the killing of Desdemona "is not to be endured" (8: 1045), he was giving definition to what effectually makes us an audience at that particular moment in *Othello*. We, as audience, know that Desdemona is innocent and we, as audience, want her to be spared the slaughter. Interestingly, it is at moments like these, moments at which the subjective integrity of the play and the wishes of the viewers *diverge*, that plays like *Othello* strike true chords of horror in us. Shakespeare had a knack for exploiting the structural inevitability of what Hamlet called "the fall of a sparrow." His tragedies define the terms of their own inevitability and are truly mimetic in the sense that their spectrum of risk may include the wanton destruction of innocence, as life does. We may have the impulse at these moments to rise from our seats and shout, "No!" But there is no such moment in *Equus*, unless it is at the very beginning of the play when we learn exactly what it is that Alan has done.

It would be wrong to conclude that the killing of Desdemona horrifies us simply because it recalls a ritual acting-out of the slaughter of innocence, although that resonance must be present in our response. As John Gassner pointed out in a lucid discussion of Aristotelian "universals" and plays like the *Oresteia*, "everything we consider universal in these plays was once very immediate--socially, politically, psychologically" (113). This does not mitigate the Turner model; it serves to suggest how the imperative for redression finds expression in the temporal frame of a theatrical performance which, while it is like ritual, is not the same as ritual. The defiance of Antigone, the abdication of Lear and *The Taking of Pelham 123* have all been frightful (and thrilling) to their immediate audiences because they are violations of certain norms of social, political and cultural order in which the spectators have a vested interest and a genuine emotional involvement. The audience's fear is a fear of chaos, made accessible to them by the immediacy of the correlative action on the stage--an action which is in turn redefined itself by the audience's anxiety and dread.

Similarly, as Shaffer's audience we must fear Alan. For the play to have any real impact, we must experience genuine anxiety that his blinding of the horses threatens patterns of order that we hold to be important. Otherwise the play would be reduced to a sterile rhetorical exercise. Dysart himself articulates this fear, albeit ironically:

> DYSART [*sarcastically*]: You mean he's dangerous? A violent, dangerous madman who's going to run around the country doing it again and again? (81)

Hester's response--"I mean he's in pain, Martin"--may serve to call the audience's attention to its own humane sympathies for Alan on a more logical level, but the primitive fear must still be there. There must be an apprehension that Alan--or some other Alan--might very well "do it again." That is why Alan must ultimately be dealt with--not just because we insist that he be freed of his pain, but because we insist to be freed of *him*.

Dysart's sarcasm seems to me to be indicative of a strategy on Shaffer's part to anticipate and contend with the expectations of his audience. But his speech actually has the effect, by articulating the fear of unresolved crisis, of reaffirming that Dysart is beyond the ethos. The narrative of his shocking dream has already caused the audience to dissociate itself from him to some extent, a dissociation which goes a step further when Dysart, without any apparent motivation other than the whimsy of the moment, reveals the dream to Alan (36). The problem is that Dysart's sarcasm and misgivings do not offer any alternatives for the resolution of the crisis that Shaffer predicated for us at the beginning of the play. Only moments earlier, Dysart has been unable to offer any response to Dora's impassioned questions:

> *And me*? *What about me*? . . . It's *our* fault. Whatever happens, *we* did it. Alan's just a little victim. He's really done nothing at all! [*Savagely.*] What do you have to do in this world to get any sympathy--blind animals? (77)

If Shaffer assumes that the members of his audience "collectively dislike their analysts immensely," he has chosen to give this hostility its most cogent articulation in a speech which could be read (or heard) as Dora's desperate attempt to exonerate herself of responsibility. Yet it seems to me that Dora's unanswered questions provide a choral moment, an on-stage expression of the audience's building impatience with Dysart's ambivalence, the very ambivalence which has served as a playing field for the dialectical tension between the frustration and satisfaction of our expectations.

When the structural imperative is fulfilled at the end of the play, it happens in the teeth of Dysart's persistent contempt for "the Normal world" and his apparent contempt for his own "surrender" to the very inevitability of the solution (108). It is significant that Dysart frames the resolution of the problem in the very terms which had earlier served as an acknowledgement of the audience's anxiety: "Horses will be quite safe" (108). We are to be spared more alarming mutilations, happening "again and again" (81). Our fear of a

continuation of the crisis triggered by Alan's deviant behavior has been allayed; redressive action has been taken; reintegration--at whatever the cost might be to Alan's passion--has been promised. Shaffer involved us in a problem at the beginning of the play, and now he has given us its inevitable solution.

My analysis is not meant to deny the powerful response that *Equus*, by nearly all accounts, has elicited from audiences, but rather to suggest a basis for that response. The play is Dysart's play, and he does what we demand that he do. The pathos of the play is powerful because Dysart, the agent of redression, internalizes the problem that must be solved. It is compelling that Shaffer has Dysart speak "*directly to the theater*" at the conclusion of the play: "I stand in the dark with a pick in my hand, striking at heads!" (108). Dysart is fascinating because he carries within him the deviance that must be accommodated to the "Normal." But it seems clear that the conclusive force of the play is that, in the actualization of the theatrical text, the ethos prevails. We know that Dysart is a complex and problematical character, but this may only serve to add further weight to the satisfaction we feel, as an audience, when what we sense is inevitable is brought to pass by Dysart himself, in defiance of his own ambivalence and despair.

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## Notes

1. Shaffer's extensive revision of *Shrivings* and other playscripts reveals his own attention to the presumed ethos of his theatergoing public. Gene A. Plunka comments on Shaffer's revision throughout his *Peter Shaffer : Roles, Rites and Rituals in the Theater*. On *Shrivings*, see Taylor 24-26. Commenting on the changes he made to tailor *Amadeus* for an American audience, Shaffer acknowledged that there are textual revisions which, in effect, "audiences themselves make simply by watching plays" ("Scripts" 29).

2. Marvin Carlson has provided a valuable perspective on recent critical initiatives which attempt to apply response and reception theory to theater, and the implications of this work for our understanding of audience communities. See *Theater Semiotics: Signs of Life* xi-25 and 95-109.

3. I have adopted the terminology of "literary text" and "theatrical text" from De Marinis' "Dramaturgy of the Spectator." This terminology seems to me to be both useful and concrete. Una Chaudhuri's otherwise significant attempt to advance a "Spectator-response" criticism of drama leads to problematic conclusions concerning the textuality of plays because of a lack of adequate definitions of the metaphysics of performance and the locus of the text. See Chaudhuri's "The Spectator in Drama / Drama in the Spectator."

4. Chaudhuri discerns a different sort of "implied inevitability" in *Equus*, based on solutions which realistic dramas have conventionally offered for "the familiar dilemmas of democracy"--in this case, "the conflict between the individual--part free soul, part social product--and his society" (288).

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