
Discuss the Dramatic use made by Shakespeare of the Theme
of Exile in two or more plays

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From Bolingbroke's exile to France at the start of *Richard II* to Prospero's 12 years of exile in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare uses the theme of exile throughout his oeuvre. Dramatically, exile generally serves two functions. Firstly, it works as a destabilising mechanism; a character is excluded from the centre of power and this physical ostracism reflects their change in social position or mental state. This divergence from the status quo, as in *As You Like It*, *King Lear* and *Richard II*, sets up the central tension through the resolution of which the play will derive its specific effects. The second dramatic function of exile, particularly as seen in *Coriolanus*, is that this exclusion from the 'centre' serves to question the values of the status quo.

Firstly then, exile creates the tensions from which the rest of the play develops. In its simplest and most gratuitous form this dramatic use of exile can be seen in *AYLI*. Initially, Duke Senior and his contingent of nobles flee from the 'villains of [the] court' (2.2.2)¹ into 'voluntary exile' (1.1.98) in the Forest of Arden. The voluntary nature of their flight marks the use of exile in this context as a dramatic device, rather than as an intrinsic plot feature, from the outset of the play. Shakespeare uses exile specifically to draw the audience's attention to the difference between the forest and 'envious court' (2.1.4). While the forest scenes may seem fairly incongruous, even ridiculous, if one keeps in mind the context of civil war between Duke Frederick and Duke Senior, the express point of the exile is that it represents an escape from exactly these kind of machinations, so pervasive in the courtly context. Far from the 'painted pomp' (2.1.3) and false flatterers of the court — Amiens's fawning 'Happy is your grace/ That can translate the stubbornness of fortune/

¹ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd Edition, John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells, Eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp.655-80. All quotations from plays come from this edition.

Into so quiet and so sweet a style' (2.1.18-20) is cuttingly ignored — Duke Senior and his company, not to mention the quartet of lovers, are released into an egalitarian environment in which power, political and sexual, becomes friable and fluid. Rosalind for example, who manipulates the eventual resolution of the plot, is able to sidestep the limitations imposed upon her in the court by her gender. She can, admittedly, only do this by disguising herself and playing a man's role, however I would argue that this action does not elicit anything like the degree of censure it would have in the court; Orlando speaks not a single surprised syllable when Rosalind finally appears as herself, merely affirming his love for her, and even Phoebe's realisation that the love of her life has vanished in a puff of heteronormative smoke is mildly put: 'If sight and shape be true,/ Why then, my love adieu!' (5.4.118-9).

Contrast this with with the language of of concealment which pervades the court in Act 1 — Charles for instance thinks Orlando 'hath a disposition to come in disguised against me [in the wrestling ring] to try a fall' (1.1.118-9) — and it is clear that exile to the Forest of Arden represents more than just a change of scenery.² A major example of this are the pastoral associations of such a retreat to nature. Immediately referenced when Duke Senior and his noblemen's purpose is described as 'to fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world' (1.1.113) like honest, noble savages, such associations conflict with the intrigue and deceit inherent in the idea of the court. The tension between the two hence generates much of the excitement of the rest of the actions of the play such as the lovers' relations since the audience knows that they are to an extent idealised and that such frivolity in a pastoral context is only transient.

² Though of course, in the Elizabethan period the scenery would not have changed during the course of the play.

For it must be acknowledged that a return to the court is always implicit in *AYLI*. At one point Rosalind says that ‘Love is merely a madness’ (3.2.386) and, once the madness of mistaken identity has been resolved, there is no longer any reason for the characters to remain in the forest of Arden. The ostensible excuse for their return, the surprising volte face of Duke Frederick and his return of Duke Senior’s crown and ‘all their lands restored to them again that were with him exiled’ (5.4.162-3), is dispatched in 12 lines as an aside and, since it does not have any causal explanation in the plot, is thus shown to be a mere *deus ex machina*. The original reason for their presence in the Forest, because of the ‘butchery’ (2.3.28) and scheming of the ‘pompous court’ (5.4.180), is by the end of the play irrelevant. Shakespeare uses it only as a contrast to the ‘true delights’ (5.4.196) of the Forest, however ironically the melancholy Jaques may figure them, which the main characters enjoy by the end.

In *Lear* and *RII*, exile is also used as a destabilising dramatic device, though the *modus operandi* is very different to that of *AYLI*; it is used not for contrast but to show the struggle for power. In *Lear*, banishment forms a part of Cordelia’s punishment. Lear says ‘Let her be thine, for we have/ No such daughter, nor shall ever see/ That face of hers again. Therefore be gone’ (1.1.262-4).³ Previously the favourite, she is exiled from the seat of power in England and loses all the influence she had there, not to mention her inheritance, the symbolic power of which is so important in a play focused on problems of monarchy and succession. Her physical ostracism reflects her reduced social status — Burgundy retracts his proposal when Lear tells him ‘her price is fallen’ (1.1.196) — and political power. Exile is thus used to relegate Cordelia to the sidelines for much of the rest

³ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd Edition, John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells, Eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp.1153-84.

of the play, dramatically writing her out of the discourse of power. Similarly, in *RII*, when King Richard exiles Bolingbroke he sets up the tension between those in the centre and those who are not and will try to assail it, that drives the action of the rest of the play. Incidentally, there is a symbolical analogy, between Richard and Bolingbroke's loquacity and their power, which the mechanism of exile helps to facilitate; causing Bolingbroke, taciturn even when present, to remain off stage for much of the play while Richard is condemned by his magnificent, arrogant grandiloquence shows that actions are more important than words.⁴

This idea of exile as a means for Shakespeare to create a centre which will subsequently be attacked can be taken in dialectic terms, as well as literal. Aside from physical locations and power structures, exile also represents estrangement from the value systems inherent in the status quo established at the start of the play. For example, in *Lear* Cordelia refuses to say she loves her father 'no more nor less' (1.1.93) than 'according to [her] bond' (1.1.93), rejecting the courtly status quo and hence questioning its validity. What, the audience is asked, is the value of ceremony if all it amounts to is giving hyperbolic lip service purely in order to attain an already decided reward?⁵ Even more pertinently perhaps, is the critique of Roman ideology inherent in Coriolanus's banishment from Rome in *Coriolanus*.⁶ That such a figure of such integrity, superlative in his field, can be roundly derided as an enemy to the very people whom he has just saved is surely a pointed critique of the system of governance that allows such an outrage to take place. Caius

⁴ For an analogous example, see Maurice Charney, 'The Dramatic Use of Imagery in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*', *ELH*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Sep., 1956) (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), pp. 183-193 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2871786>> Accessed: 11-12-2016 12:21 UTC.

⁵ Set against this is the adulation that an increasingly old and frail Lear feels he needs for his own self-esteem; he entreats from his favourite daughter 'Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again' (1.1.90).

⁶ William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd Edition, John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells, Eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp.1087-1122.

Marcus, ostensibly more a warrior of the battlefield than the ballot-box — by his own admission ‘oft/ When blows have made me stay, I fled from words’ (2.2.75-6) —, submits himself, however reluctantly, to the electoral process, and for personal, not political, reasons is falsely accused and driven out of the city.

However, importantly and unlike Cordelia in *Lear*, Shakespeare does not marginalise the exiled Marcus. Banished from the seat of power in Rome, Marcus makes his way to the major alternative to Roman majesty at that time, the Volsci, who represent a totally different form of governance based simply on meritocratic martial rule. As Hogg puts it, the Volsci are ‘an atavistic society not caught up in the cultural trappings of Rome’.⁷ As before, exile is at the heart of the play’s impulse, this time tragic; Coriolanus is doomed as soon as he is accepted by the Volsci, an act which seems inevitable given his brilliance in the heroic practices they value. However, exile is also used dramatically as a powerful exercise in cultural relativism, questioning the justice and democracy of the Roman constitution. The inception of this exercise comes in 3.3. When Brutus declares ‘There’s no more to be said, but he is banished’ (3.3.121) Coriolanus immediately reposts with a string of typically choice insults, culminating in the statement ‘I will banish you.’ (3.3.127). This completely reverses the ordinary, by Roman standards, mechanics of exile and means that the Volsci and their alternative system is seen on equal terms to the Roman system as a viable, and perhaps even preferable, alternative to the the political elite of Rome with their scheming and injustices. H. J. Oliver notes that ‘the theme of the play [is] the study of the place in a democratic society of the pure aristocrat’⁸ and, in the light of this, one can perhaps see Shakespeare’s use

⁷ Ian Hogg, *Preface to Coriolanus*, produced by Frank Warwick, BBC Archives, first broadcast 15/04/1984.

⁸ H. J. Oliver ‘Coriolanus As Tragic Hero’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter, 1959) (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1959), p.55 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2867024>> Accessed: 11-12-2016 12:21 UTC.

of exile as advocating a movement towards a system of rulership based on meritocracy to maintain stability.

To conclude, in Shakespeare, exile always presupposes some kind of return. It is a destabilising device which sets up a dichotomy between those in the centre and those not. It is the dramatic tension derived from the conflict of this dichotomy which often creates the plays' effects. Exile functions both as a structural device, framing the narrative, as in *AYLI*, or allocating stage time to as in *Lear* and *RII*, and also as a symbolic device in which the physical dislocation of exile becoming associated with a change in value system. Both are present in *Coriolanus* in which it is suggested, by the combination of the major part that Marcius plays after he has been banished and the Volscian conquest of Rome, that he, and the aristocracy he represents, that the values of the status quo are not above condemnation.

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