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My Language!

The first time I read Shakespeare was in August 1967. The first play was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I was twelve, having just entered the second year of my secondary schooling at St Mungo's Academy, Glasgow. The school was run by Jesuits of the Marist Order and its main aim, grounded in a sense of charitable mission, was to give a Catholic education to the under-privileged boys of Townhead, a working-class area of tenements whose people were marked by a high degree of economic poverty. In addition, though, the school also admitted a small number of boys from elsewhere in Glasgow – often, in fact, from even more disadvantaged areas – through a scheme that allowed the Jesuits to cream off what it saw as academic talent at age eleven; and these boys were to be given a more advanced academic education. I was one of these, joining the school from the East End of Glasgow initially in August 1966. For those of us who were selected in this way, school was already 'marked' in the sense that it was equated with ideas of escape, primarily the escape from poverty through a good education. Shakespeare, as I discovered in 1967, was supposed to form part of that education.

In what follows here, I want to explore how it is that I moved from what was my initial profound dislike of Shakespeare – more than, and different from, stereotypical schoolboy griping. How did I move from such dislike of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that autumn to an entirely different point of view, now, as one who 'professes' literature and who thinks something of Shakespeare probably quite literally every day? The route, insofar as I can reconstruct it from memory, is rather indirect – or it will at first appear so. We will pass from Parkhead in the working-class East End of Glasgow, via Lisbon and Paris, to my present position. On the road, we will find out what Shakespeare might mean to one who teaches and thinks about English and other literatures: me. The Shakespeare who emerges is different from the Shakespeare of 1967, obviously; and so am I different and still differing, sensing this differing as something that stems from Shakespeare and that is equated in my mind with a kind of freedom.

A dream of availability

Why did Mr McDermott, our English teacher, decide to start with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? What is it that makes this play so often the first play that

schoolchildren read or study when they encounter Shakespeare? After all, although a comedy, it is actually a rather difficult play. It involves, among other things, fairies who seem keen on child abduction, a nether-world that parallels the real world, an Indian boy who is stolen by fairies and then fought over, the usual Shakespearean troubled parenthood and childhood, with anxiety-driven relations between fathers and daughters, a queen playing about with ideas of bestiality, a self-reflexive play-within-play motif, gender and class troubles and so on.

Perhaps needless to say, this is not how it is usually presented to a twelve-year-old; or, at least, it is not entirely how it was presented to me. Rather, this play was essentially to be viewed as a harmless comedy, a romp of sorts, through which a moral message about love, duty and a social order of things was to be conveyed. In this reading, the central character is always Bottom; and he is followed closely by Puck. From the point of view of Bottom, it is a comedy of character: the man is an ass, and Shakespeare is showing him up as such, but in an affectionate manner. Puck is slightly more devilish or mischievous: a prankster-director whose practical joking makes for comic difficulties in which he finds himself having to resolve complications of his own making.

Who might find these kinds of thing *available* at the age of twelve or so? I think it is fair to say that there were some governing assumptions going on in the distribution of this play to the allegedly academically gifted in a partially selective-intake school. (I say 'partially selective' because the actual school-mix was very extensive, reaching across from the economically disadvantaged of the centre of the city through all social classes to boys who commuted in from rather more posh suburbs near the West End.) Those assumptions might have held true for some readers but not for others; and, where they held true, the play would have been more easily and readily accessible than it would be for those – among whom I number myself and my classmates – for whom the assumptions were simply false.

Imagine a certain kind of childhood, where the house you live in stands alone, apart from other houses, and enjoys a good deal of space. Imagine, further, that your parents actually own the house and the land on which it stands. Outside, there is a garden, where you have domesticated parts of a wilder nature. Inside, you have your own room. Maybe there are books in your room, for there certainly are books elsewhere in the house. At night, your parents do not seem to be exhausted; but have time and energy to read to you. They read from books of fairy-tales, perhaps, or romances that involve princes whose wealth, while greater than that of your parents, is not different in kind. Here, heritage will be important; for love-relations will probably be tied to land or power and will certainly be tied to questions of authority. Here, moreover, people may seem to change partners, their amorous commitments being somehow more open, more liberal. In this household, in some cases, children go away from home for long periods, to be cared for by others while

living together in a kind of nether-world, the childhood-world, of a dormitory. The child brought up in such an environment has a way in to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* simply in terms of a certain set of expectations of what one does with its story and language.

Now imagine something different, even opposite to that described above: a house in a tenement block shared with seven or more other families; the house rented from the council, not owned; no private space and certainly no garden; noise of neighbours above, below, beside you; not many books, if any; parents working overtime, sometimes in hard physical labour, maybe weaving or as joiners, carpenters and the like, and not having endless reserves of energy to read to their children; and so on. The child of this house, Bottom's house, has to find or make an entirely different route into the play, for there are probably no normative expectations at all regarding what one does with its story, its language, its problems. The play is simply less *available* to this child; or, at best, it is available in entirely different ways. This child reader of the play is 'located' by the norms and expectations that are taken as standard by the more advantaged child described above, in ways that that more advantaged child is not.

In short, then: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is offered *not* to all twelve-year-olds; rather, it is understood that a certain kind of twelve-year-old is the norm; and the play is set in the curriculum for them. The interesting issue here is what happens when you take the second kind of child and treat him as if he were of the first. This is one part of the background to my engagement with Shakespeare. My dislike of Shakespeare was not at all dislike of the play, even if I thought it was: in fact, I couldn't *read* the play at that time. Perhaps I still can't. I do not wish to make the issue of class central to the presentation of my predicament here; yet I will stick with it for one moment longer to suggest something that I did learn about how we read Bottom.

Bottom is, of course, a hugely interesting character. The play mocks him in some ways for his sense of self-importance; but we are certainly never encouraged to despise him. On the contrary, Bottom is probably the most well-liked of the characters for any audience. Why is that so? The man is an ass, certainly, and at one point literally so. Although he has a little learning, he does not wear it as well as the lords and ladies, Helena and Hermia, or Lysander and Demetrius, whose very names indicate that they are at home in the foundational myths of entire civilizations. Bottom is aspirant as well; and, although he shows himself up, it would be wrong – the play seems to suggest – for us to mock such a person. They may be asses, but it is not their own fault that they are thus. My contention is that the point of view that thinks thus sits more comfortably in my first childhood scenario than it does in my second. And, who am I – child of that second scenario – who am I, I think, as I read this play? Am I not also an aspirant, not-yet well-enough educated person; isn't my mother a tailor, like Starveling; and isn't my new best friend's

father a joiner, like Snug; my neighbour at home a carpenter, like Quince? If I mock this Bottom, however gently, what am I doing in relation to my founding environment? What values am I starting to imbibe here?

When the education authorities set this play as a set text for eleven- and twelve-year-olds in the 1960s, they had in mind a very specific audience: the benignly conservative middle-classes. And, when my school set it for us, they were inculcating us into the norms of that audience. For me, it was an exercise in dealing with certain kinds of unfamiliar value-systems. The school streamed and set its classes: 1:A1 was the 'advanced' first-year class; and we heard speak of the legendary 1:Z10 where the boys did not have the chance to read Shakespeare. Instead, those in this 'bottom' set engaged in things like woodwork or joinery and so on while we, by now in 2:A1, read plays about, well, joiners and woodworkers, Bottoms, Snugs, Quinces and the like. The setting of the play in the curriculum was part of a structure that established a social organization in terms of a stratified, sedimented and layered society.

I don't want to make too much of this, except to say that the educational thinking that lay behind the setting of Shakespeare for us is a mode of thinking that persists and lingers to the present time, despite the many critiques made of it all through the 1970s and 1980s. Education, if anything, has become *more* a matter of socialization than ever before; and its politicization is, of course, now more and more explicit. Part of the shift in my attitude to Shakespeare over the years came about by my realizing – and this is partly due to this first engagement with his work – that the plays might help offer a critique as well as an endorsement of established social orders. That is what I need now to show.

Mr McDermott, then, came into the classroom armed with the books for the year's work. Top of the pile was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We knew that this was the serious business, more serious than the J. Meade Falkner *Moonfleet* that followed. Had I known about Bourdieu, I would have understood issues of cultural capital. If we were indeed to make it in the world (whatever that meant, probably that notional escape from poverty), then we'd need to get on top of this, to get Shakespeare under our belts. The book looked unattractive: the edition was 'the Junior School Shakespeare' edition. To my amazement, when I received my own copy, there was already a familiar name – not just that of Shakespeare – inside it. It was traditional for many pupils to write their names on the inside cover of their books, so that, often, you'd receive a book with about a dozen names all inside, all scored through except the last one. I myself preferred not to do that: I already had a fetishistic respect for the material object of the book which prevented me somehow from writing in it. Yet this copy had obviously been sitting in the school cupboard, untouched, for about a decade.

The name inside was that of my own brother, who had gone through the school ten years before I did. There he was: his name, his class. He had also

signed the book about halfway through, with a flashy autograph that he was obviously trying to perfect. He had left a little graffiti on the pages and, tellingly, on the inside back cover, the details of his financial position. It was not good. He owed a friend 6/11d (six shillings and eleven pence: about 35p in today's money, but a huge sum in 1957, when he had the book); he owed my sister 7d (about 3p) and my other brother 2/- (two shillings: 10p). His total position was a debt of some 9/6 (47p or so). These would have been extremely significant sums for a boy of his age in 1957. As I sat there, I thought that these figures might help to explain why he had decided not only to abandon Shakespeare and any further midsummer night's dreaming, but also to leave school just a year further on, following my father into the shipyards where he could make some money to help clear his debts.

And now, I still have the book in my possession. At the end of that year, Mr McDermott was more lax than he ought to have been about collecting the texts back in. I could have taken it into school and made sure it was returned; but I didn't. Instead, I kept it. Given that I hated Shakespeare – indeed the whole Shakespeare experience – so vigorously, it is interesting that I nonetheless stole this bit of cultural capital: a small piece of cultural capital detailing the lack of economic capital that helped determine the life of my brother, but that also determined my own life very differently.

Mr McDermott struggled to get us to engage with the opening scene where Theseus tells Hippolyta that 'our nuptial hour / Draws on apace ... but, O, methinks, how slow / The old moon wanes! She lingers my desires, / Like to a step-dame or a dowager / Long withering out a young man's retinue.'

'Why is it "like to", sir? Why not just "like"?'

'It's needed for the scansion.'

'...'

'Scansion,' he repeated.

'What's that, sir?'

'The rhythm of the lines. The beat.'

'Rhythm?'

'Yes: five beats to the line. Pentameter. Hasn't Mr McConville started you off on this in the Latin class yet?' We were beginning to 'read' Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book 2. 'You know,' he went on, 'dactyls, spondees, trochees, all that malarkey.'

We groaned. But two things were being driven home: firstly, the ostensibly unwelcome news that English could be as foreign as Latin; and secondly, more positively, that there was a semiotic aspect to language – rhyme, rhythm, sound – that helped carry the semantics. Needless to say, we hadn't a clue what was going on – yet. Mr McDermott had to demonstrate, placing the stresses in an exaggerated fashion: 'Four DAYS will QUICKly STEEP themSELVES in NIGHT,' he sang, his hand cutting the air with each beat or stress.

We started to sing along, making fun of the text and emptying it of whatever semantic content it had under our steady beat. We could make neither head nor tail of the text; but it sang to us in some way. Then, scene two comes along, and we're in prose, not singing. This, of course, is the realm of the workers. This is where the complications start for us. These workers are recognizable, given that we are all, or mostly, from such working families. Yet, the play is presenting them as odd in some way, as an anomalous deviation from certain norms that have been set up in the opening. Above all, this is a question of language: while the opening scenes were incomprehensible semantically to us, we at least found a solace in the regularity of their semiotic aspects. Here, we are among people whom we should recognize, but it is their language that is alienating us all the more, now that we have been given a means of grasping the opening scene with its rhythmic verse.

It is not the case that we had some strong class allegiance that made us feel insulted or anything of the kind. Rather, the difficulty is that we understood so little of what was going on. We also knew that we were in the presence of high art, a high art that was to become part of our identity through our acquisition of it as cultural capital. Thus, the linguistic difficulties that we have here become redeemable, in that we see that we are not yet adequate to the text. In short, what is going on, as I now understand (but at the time only vaguely felt), is that we are about to become mildly alienated from our backgrounds: we were to start to become the norm, singing along, five beats to the line, as we prepared ourselves to assume the commanding roles of the normative verse-speakers. The singing was more important than it had first seemed, after all: it gave us a solidarity, even the identity to be found in a mindless solidarity, such as we knew and recognized from Saturday afternoons at football matches.

Yet I resisted. The play was about fairies but my objections to it had nothing to do with the subject-matter, which I simply didn't understand. My objection, voiced loudly in class discussion, was about the language, which I described as 'flowery'. Why did Shakespeare have to go all round the houses in saying whatever it was that the characters had to say? I had so little understanding of the operations of poetry, so little awareness of the history of the language, that I simply would not believe Mr McDermott when he suggested that the language I was reading here was somehow readily understood by an earlier audience. He conceded readily that ordinary folk didn't speak like the characters in the play – not even those working weavers and joiners. The language was contrived, certainly – 'poetic', he called it, even in the prose passages. However, he maintained that the language did not occlude the sense for Shakespeare's audience, for his contemporaries; and that it should therefore, in principle, be understood by us.

To the extent that we did manage to glean some understanding of the subject-matter (admittedly not much), again we found reason to object.

The driving force in our education – why we had given up our friendships in our locality to attend this school – was aligned to a sense of growing sophistication. We were about progress, especially progress as achieved through the intellect and reason. We were certainly not at this school to read fairy-tales or to be seduced by the irrational world of this play. The play was rank with superstition: by contrast, we were entering the realms of science and analysis, a realm that rejected the world of fairy as something childish and unsophisticated.

So we began the process of analysis, admittedly in a naive fashion. We turned to the characters we found interesting, especially Bottom. We knew we were supposed to laugh at him, in his earnest desire to be the most important and the most noticed of the actors, in his keen eagerness to be in a lead role and so to be someone, to be noticed and to feel he *exists*. Yet we already had a double attitude to him, partly given by the language problem. As we tried to paraphrase, we began less to laugh *at Bottom* and more to laugh *with Shakespeare*, we felt, as he encouraged us to laugh *with Bottom*. We looked closely at the characters as they prepare to rehearse in Act 3, Scene 1. There, their concern is about illusion, and about the possibility that they will upset their audience, especially the ladies. In what is actually a sophisticated discussion of the theatrical *bienséances* – dramatic propriety – we are invited to laugh *with* these characters at ourselves, at the possibility that we can be deluded by mere theatre. Importantly for my present case, the other major element of comedy in this and other scenes is the malapropism. As the characters say the opposite of what they mean, we see their own struggles with language; and we recognized those struggles, for they are the struggles of people who are aspiring to escape from their everyday circumstances and to identify themselves with another class of people. Like us schoolboys, they know a little; and they strive to know more. The key to their elevation and freedom will be the mastery of a language, of the adoption of a role that is, for the moment, beyond their capabilities. We were watching ourselves. Given this, and given that we were laughing, we were also learning a fundamental rule of critical analysis: the avoidance of pomposity, the avoidance of an unjustified self-assurance, the avoidance – in short – of the kind of judgements practised by the lords and ladies of the play.

Thus, we began to learn that Shakespeare, while certainly a major element in an arrangement by which social order was to be maintained, also gave us a way into criticize that order, even as we were entering it. In a word: he gave us the possibility of difference. Needless to say, at the time, we did not use this kind of language to describe what was going on; but it was important to us that we found such a way to do two things: firstly, to deal with our discomfort when we saw the rude mechanicals; secondly, to find a means of engaging with questions of language, comprehension and misapprehension.

A detour

At the time, however, we had other things on our minds, things that seemed infinitely more important than all this.

The single greatest event of 1967, as we all know, took place on 25 May that year, in Lisbon, Portugal: Glasgow Celtic, effectively a local team from Parkhead in the east of the city, won the football European Cup, the first British team ever to do so, beating the famed Italian side, Inter Milan, 2–1. The event was important because it was not simply a game of football. It will sound pretentious to claim but this match was part of a series of historical and ideological events of some magnitude that would lead to attempted political revolutions across Europe just one year later, in the famed *événements* of May 1968. More locally, it was also a formative event in terms of my relations to culture, to language, to my schooling and to Shakespeare.

We should not forget that Shakespeare himself knew about football, a game that, in his time as in ours provoked strong responses from the public. Dromio of Ephesus, kicked around in *The Comedy of Errors* by Adriana, protests, asking ‘Am I so round with you, as you with me, / That like a football you do spurn me thus? / You spurn me hence, and he [Antipholus] will spurn me hither: / If I last in this service, you must case me in leather.’ Yet more directly, Kent, in *King Lear*, commits a professional foul or, more precisely, a ‘sandwich tackle’, with Lear himself, on Oswald. When Lear strikes the brazen Oswald, Oswald objects, saying ‘I’ll not be stricken’, to which Kent replies, tripping him up, ‘Nor tripp’d neither, you base football player.’ Perhaps more relevant to the upcoming revolutionary spirit of May 1968 was Camus, the goalkeeper, who famously asserted that all that he had ever learned that was of value in the field of ethics and human relationships, he learned from football. His Algerian descendant, Derrida, whose own thinking was to prove so revolutionary in the field of literary criticism, also had dreams, like my friends and I had in Glasgow, of becoming a professional footballer. Like him, ‘we would play until the dead of night, I dreamt of becoming a professional player’.¹

What happened in Lisbon that day in 1967 was part of a spirit of the times; and it was to affect the core of my own literary and critical development. Revolution was already in the air and the match was a part of it; but, for us in St Mungo’s Academy, it was a very special part and very pertinent to us. As many will know, Glasgow at the time was riven by religious division and bigotry: traditionally, Roman Catholics supported Celtic (a team established by priests in the working-class community in 1888); and Protestants supported Rangers. The boys in my school were, for the most part, passionate supporters of Celtic, football being the main component of our mental and physical activity every day. But what was at stake was not just the destination of the European Cup; rather, what was at stake was an entire attitude to life. Inter Milan were famous for their extraordinary success, grounded in

a system of play that was based on solid defence: the system of *catenaccio* ('door-bolt') devised by their manager Helenio Herrera. Their back line of four players (novel at the time, but more or less standard now), with an additional sweeper, was impenetrable; and they depended on ensuring that the opposition could not score. The opposition, unable to score, would grow frustrated and impatient, allow concentration in their own defensive lines to lapse; at which point the Inter Milan sweeper would push the ball forward, releasing and launching the solitary attacking move of their game in which they would score. 1–0 was the usual result. It was dull, the dourest and cynical pragmatism; but it was effective, machine-like in its near-industrial grinding-out of victories.

By contrast, Celtic were making a reputation for adventurous play. Their manager, Jock Stein, was a man who saw the romance of ambition. His team were all more or less exclusively born within a couple of miles of Celtic Park (Paradise, as it was known to supporters); and so this was essentially a local team, drawn from the tenements, almost like the scratch-teams that played all over Glasgow on Saturday mornings. They played as if they had nothing to lose but were willing to risk it all. We identified closely with them.

In the match, Inter Milan took an early lead and Celtic went in at half-time that dreaded single goal down. What followed in the second half was a relentless assault, attack after attack on that famed defence. It wasn't quite all caution thrown to the wind: the forty-one year-old Ronnie Simpson (known as 'Faither' because of his age), the Celtic goalkeeper, did stay in his own half; but he was virtually the only player there for much of the game (keeping an eye on the dentures that belonged to the Celtic players, apparently all left in his cap behind the goalposts). When Celtic won, it did not just signal the first ever British team to win this most challenging of competitions; rather, what was signalled was a new future for the game, the validation of an adventurous sense of life's possibilities, a belief in the local people of Glasgow that they were capable of anything, if they could just allow their wild Romantic selves to flourish. 'Total football' and 'the beautiful game', as Pelé referred to it, was just around the corner: and we, in the East End of Glasgow, had turned that corner first. As it happened, Tommy Gemmell, the left-back who scored the equalizing goal, wore suits that were made-to-measure for him by my mother. Starveling's son, as it were, was that close to the match and its adventure.

Had we been more knowledgeable, we would have perhaps cast this as a contest between ruthlessly efficient Enlightenment models of the industrial grinding out of results, set against an untutored romanticism, full of spirit, imagination – and, crucially, *poetry*. It was also much more than this: it gave us a sense of the aesthetic – the sheer beauty of the Celtic style of play, the very fact that there *was* such play, playfulness, like Friedrich Schlegel's *Spielen*. This aesthetic adventure was to triumph over the dull but ostensibly successful modes of industrialization: those brought money, but ours brought happiness

and joy. Industrialization, of course, was the daily routine for the families I knew from our school: my own father (two years dead by this time) and brother in the Clyde's shipyards; the fathers of my friends working as boiler-makers in the railways; sometimes (if they were lucky), others working as craftsmen (carpenters, plumbers, painters and decorators). Aesthetic play and the play of aesthetics was more than just football: it was politics, and we sensed this, even though we did not have the vocabulary at the time to articulate it.

As a schoolboy in St Mungo's, this game marked 1967 as special. More than this: it marked *us* as special. For the first time, we became visible on a world stage where we were validated, and we were validated through our identification with the spirit of romance, adventure and a style that could even trump Italy (itself a by-word for style from the 1950s). And we were visible also in Shakespeare: remember, in the following August when we read the *Dream*, we realized that Shakespeare has the audience watching itself. But, at the forefront of our minds was the fact that the summer of 1967 was truly a summer of love: love of football. We returned to the new school year in August of that year, charged with a new sense of ourselves: as Catholics, as working-class boys who were on their way to make good in the world, as adventurers.

It was thus that we approached *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The notes

Struggling with the play, I turned to the Notes at the back for help. Sure enough, my earliest fear – that this is as foreign as Latin – was confirmed. The first note in my edition explains 'nuptial hour', calling it 'wedding hour' and stating that it comes from 'Lat: *Nubeo, nupsi, nuptum*, to marry'. So far, so helpful; but foreign. I started to hear again how foreign 'my language' was to me. As a child, in working-class Glasgow, I was aware (actually quite explicitly) of at least three modes of speech, three Englishs. There was the language we spoke at home; then there as the slightly more formal language – polite usage, really, with a slightly modified accent – that I used when speaking to my teacher or to the doctor or priest; and finally, there was the BBC, as it were: a world of televised English. Whenever I watched TV (probably too much), I was aware of the authority of that voice, that speech. I also knew that I would one day be able to speak it, or would need to speak it if I were to accede myself to such authority (the authority, sought by Bottom, that means you count, you exist, you are listened to). The change would come about as a result of my education, an education that was partly built upon that incipient multilingualism. I inhabited different languages and changed as a person depending on which one I spoke. However, in Shakespeare, there was as yet no question for me of accent or propriety: this was a different kind of foreignness; and it irritated me that I felt excluded.

The feeling of exclusion lingered for some time. However, relatively early on in my engagements with Shakespeare, we read *The Tempest*, another play that I found very difficult, but one within which I found the importance of translation. When Ferdinand meets Miranda, in Act 1, Scene 2, he hears her speak and exclaims, ‘My language? Heavens! / I am the best of them that speak this speech, / Were I but where ‘tis spoken.’ He is surprised that this foreign, wild, untutored girl speaks his language. What was important to me, though, was that he claims the language as *his*, that it is a matter of ownership; and that he distinguishes the quality of speakers dependent upon that ownership (‘I am the best of them’). My shock at this passage derived from the fact that I have never felt that language is a matter of ownership; rather, for me, it has always been a matter of imagination, something for the lunatic, lover and poet who can inhabit a philosophy undreamt of, in imagination. My attempt to learn French had already shown me that there were things that could be said in French that were, strictly, untranslatable: to speak French was to ‘think’ it, to inhabit the mind of a French persona, even to re-mould the shape of one’s lips, mouth and facial expression. Maybe to ‘hear’ Shakespeare was the same, I realized: a matter of acting, borrowing a persona, standing in the skin of someone I was not.

The note for line 11 put me in my place, telling me how to pronounce ‘Philostrate’ (‘in three syllables’, we are told, in case we need tuition on how to speak). But hold, what next? At line 14, we get a note on ‘companion’, which means ‘fellow, used contemptuously’. The note firstly affirms Latinate roots but then promises something more interesting: ‘Originally, one who ate with another. (Lat. *cum*, with, *panis*, bread.) *Fellow* and *companion* have exchanged meanings since Shakespeare’s time.’ What interested me here was that the meaning of a word changes with time, even to the stage where two words can exchange meanings: white becomes black, as it were. This opened up for me the question of translating from this Shakespeare-Latin: it is now a question of how a culture ‘lives’ a language, lives its words, and how those words can change meanings across time. Suddenly, the play opened to the real world in all sorts of ways, and told me that my language was a living and changing organic thing, tied to communities but open to difference.

At line 69, we are told that ‘Whether’ is ‘to be pronounced “where” as it is still in many parts of the country’. Now, there is a ‘correction’ of pronunciation, but a correction that allows for dialect variants, that even legitimizes the possibility that those with dialects have an authentic relation to the play and its language. Finally, in this brief introductory section of Notes, we get a note referring to lines 74–5 that tells us ‘Elizabeth was unmarried, and nothing pleased her more than to hear praises of a single life’. Shakespeare had a specific audience, then: the Queen, the famed Virgin Queen. Now, we can take our distance from this; but at least we have a place to stand, a language to speak and a sense that things in this text are not as solidly monumental an authority as we had thought.

Concluding, beginning

In sum, from these notes, we realized that Shakespeare was a foreign language, that the language required us to change (even to change physically) in order to inhabit it and that its standing as a culturally authoritative monument was not unchangeable: we could have a relation to that authority, we could make the words change meaning.

We were profoundly aware of the cultural authority of ‘Shakespeare’; and yet we resisted it to some extent. It would be many years before I realized what was going on in this preliminary series of engagements with these plays. Hannah Arendt helps explain. When she considers the fraught question of what constitutes ‘authority’, she points out that ‘Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence.’² She is adamant, however, that authority in fact both precludes the use of external or coercive force (for then authority as such would have failed) and that it is incompatible with persuasion ‘which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation’.³ Neither Mr McDermott’s physical threats, nor his arguments, would persuade us that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was good or enjoyable; for that, we would rely on Shakespeare himself. Here is the rub: as Arendt puts it, ‘Authority implies an obedience in which men retain their freedom’⁴ – or, I might add, in which we *find* our freedom. We can acknowledge an authority here, via this play, that allowed us to gain a freedom, the freedom conditioned by difference, by differing or, as Rainer Maria Rilke would have had it, by changing our life. By constantly changing language – that is, by continually reading – it has become possible for me to change my life and its possibilities. Shakespeare has been central to the edification of a self that constitutes itself as differing, as freeing itself from the tyranny of identity; and in that freedom is the sharing of languages.