Song in Shakespeare

It is common to talk of celebrity autobiographies as being ‘ghost-written’ by a professional writer. This is an appropriate metaphor, for it is not too difficult to imagine the voice of the writer hovering behind the voice of the figure they are personating in this instance. This ghostliness is present in any act of prosopopoeia, a word which, etymologically, means ‘person-making’.

A song is a special case of prosopopoeia. For, when a character in a play voices a song, their words are not their own in a unique and perhaps seemingly obvious way.

In Act IV Scene II of Othello, as Emilia is dying, she makes reference to the “Willow Song” that Desdemona gave voice to in Act IV Scene III:

What did thy song bode, lady?
Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swans
And die in music: [Sings] ‘Willow, willow, willow.’
Moor, she was chaste; she loved thee, cruel Moor;
So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true;
So speaking as I think, I die, I die.

In singing as she dies, Emilia echoes Barbary, whose song it was, and who ‘died singing it’ as Desdemona tells us. Emilia is a prosopopoeia, and the shade of Barbary is speaking through her. The voices of both maids coincide. Desdemona’s voice is also in Emilia’s words, and moves the easy correspondence between the voices of the two maids off centre. Despite her insistence that she the one speaking her words (‘as I speak true; / So speaking as I think’), Desdemona’s maid’s voice is not wholly her own at this point. This makes what Emilia herself would see as her moment to set the record straight, in her own words, rather more complicated. A further complication arises because ‘I will play the swan / And die in music’ is proverbial. Emilia seems to be a vehicle for the sort of collective, folk wisdom that is embodied by the “Willow Song”. In a sense, as Emilia says things like ‘she was chaste; she loved thee, cruel Moor’, the audience is hearing not Emilia’s voice, but Desdemona’s. Even if this speech didn’t refer back to Desdemona’s song, and we had just these words, it would still be possible to think of Emilia as personating Desdemona’s voice. It is impossible to hear Emilia expressing how Desdemona felt without also hearing Desdemona uttering these sentiments herself: “I was chaste; I loved thee”. We cannot describe someone else’s subjective feelings without speaking for them in some way. And in speaking for them we become a prosopopoeia for their words.

In the patterning of the line ‘Moor, she was chaste: she loved thee, cruel Moor’, there is not only the anguish of Emilia, but also the tenderness of Desdemona. The symmetry of the line makes the words appear impersonal, and gives them the ring of many voices which in another context might be the ring of prophesy. Quite apart from the shadowy echoes of the personae of Barbary and Desdemona, the sudden, considered patterning of

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1 Gavin Alexander (ed.) p.98
2 Norman Sanders note to l.245-6 5.2. Othello (p.181)
Emilia’s speech creates the sense that she is speaking with a voice that is bigger than her own, as is often the case when Shakespearean characters speak just before their deaths. Emilia’s voice takes on the tone of a classical chorus; all the more so because she is passing judgement upon Othello in these lines. Earlier in this scene, Emilia has said ‘twill out, ‘twill out. I peace!’ This contributes to the impression that she is merely serving as conduit to some impersonal voice of Judgement or Truth. If this is the case, she is personating this voice, but this personation does not take place without this voice being inflected by her own. It is not simply impersonal, or simply personal, but both at the same time. The last words Emilia speaks are also doubled: ‘I die, I die.’ The effect achieved changes considerably depending on whether or not both phrases are voiced in the same way. Were the second ‘I die’ or ‘twill out’ voiced with a different volume, tone or emphasis, this would paradoxically unify the two instances of the repeated phrase. There would be a sense that a single persona was voicing both; that it was deciding to alter the sound of the second version as a reaction to how the first version sounded. There would be a feeling of progression and continuity between across the two instances. This voicing would be particularly conducive to melodrama, as the actor saying the words might be tempted to over-act the second phrase, on the assumption that the exact vocal repetition of the phrase would make the semantic repetition superfluous. An actor thinking along these lines would conclude that the only acceptable reading was one in which the sounding of the second phrase was altered.

However, in Samuel Beckett’s Footfalls, Beckett gives the direction ‘Forgive me again. [Pause. No louder.] Forgive me again’ to the actor playing V. If the repetitions in Shakespeare were voiced in this manner, it would be far from clear that there was a unifying voice behind the two identical utterances. A sort of mirror-effect would result, and the persona of Emilia would fracture into two separate personas. It would be as though an echo was operating within her voice; as though a conversation was taking place between two voices within a single voice. It would be impossible to conclude that one of these voices was Emilia’s own voice: neither voice is entirely her own, and the fracturing of her voice creates the impression that she does not have one single, personal voice, but is rather a collocation of different voices. This voicing would be suggestive of disintegration rather than unification. The second manner of voicing seems to develop more naturally out of the text. The symmetrical doubling of utterances recalls the fact that characters too are doubled: Barbary, the maid, is Emilia’s shadowy double, and Desdemona’s mother, whose maid Barbary was, seems to correspond to Desdemona as she appears before the audience.

In Much Ado About Nothing, Balthasar’s song acts like a choral voice in a similar way. It is worth recalling that the choruses of classical plays would have been sung. The first verse of his song is

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea and one on shore,
To one thing constant never:
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into Hey nonny, nonny.

What strikes an audience first about this song is the question of where the sentiment of ‘Men were deceivers ever’, (together with ‘The fraud of men was ever so’ in the second verse) is coming from. It seems like an indictment of the male characters in the play, especially Claudio. The voice seems to address ‘ladies’ in general, as folk songs are wont to do, but also more specifically female figures within the play, and we might think it is talking more to Hero than to anyone else. Balthasar cannot be conscious of this, but the song and its author are. As such, the song’s voice is a voice from outside the play, a voice which we might be tempted to call authorial. When the voice of the song is personated by Balthasar, a raisonneur seems to shimmer briefly into being onstage. But Balthasar cannot serve this role, he can only give body to the voice. Because the raisonneur is not any character in the play, but a voice, it is easier to imagine it as being outside of the dramatic unity of the play, and we might more readily identify it with the voice of the author. Balthasar has little role in the play beyond his role as a singer. Whilst the voice of the song is surely not his own, his status as singer means that he can serve as an impersonal mouthpiece for it. By contrast, the “Willow Song” in Othello cannot simply speak through Desdemona or Emilia. It is rather coloured by their personalities and over-layered with their voices as characters.

Emilia and Barbary are not quite the same person. When Emilia dies singing the “Willow Song”, it is not a case of history repeating itself. Emilia only mouths an incoherent snatch of the song she heard her lady sing earlier. She does not hold the song in her memory: only the words ‘Willow, willow, willow’ have stayed in her mind. It is not certain how far Emilia can be said to be singing the same song as that which Desdemona sang at all. The song is not quite fixed: it is not something which will simply spill out of the mouths of maids in these situations. It is shifting and mutable. Emilia is hardly reciting a song from memory. She is imperfectly remembering, and this means that she is to a degree authoring her own song. Perhaps Shakespeare is inviting us to look at the words ‘Willow, willow, willow’ not just in the context of the song which inspired them, but rather in the context of Emilia’s life and of her dying speech. Even Desdemona couldn’t recall the song perfectly, saying ‘Nay that’s not next.’ As Desdemona says this line, the audience might be reminded that the body on the stage that they think of as Desdemona is an actor speaking lines that they have committed to memory. An actor has had to memorise a line which effectively says “I cannot remember”. Who is performing at this moment? Desdemona performing a song is at the same time an actor performing Desdemona performing a song.

In Act I Scene II of The Tempest, it is the song that is doing the remembering. Ferdinand exclaims ‘The ditty does remember my drowned father’. Here, remember means something close to “commemorate”. But the song is not simply a memorial of Ferdinand’s father. The relation of personal selves to songs is not an easy one, as apparent in Othello when Desdemona says of the “Willow Song”: ‘An old thing ’twas; but it expressed her fortune’. In this line, the ‘but’ shows that songs
express the personal despite rather than because of their nature. There is an element of wishful thinking at work in both cases: it is comforting for Barbary and Ferdinand to imagine that their sorrow has found expression in song, and has even been felt before, many times by other people. But the songs are only comforting because they have an emptiness which allows people like Barbary and Ferdinand to read the personal into them. If one stares long enough at wallpaper, a pattern will emerge, but it will be found only in the mind of the observer, and not the wallpaper will remain nothing more than wallpaper. What allows the characters to see themselves and others remembered in songs is actually a subtle substitution of the process of authorship for the process of memory, or rather the fact that there is no clear line between the two: they are part of the same thing.

Once the first part of Ariel's song has been heard, Ferdinand wonders 'Where should this music be? 'I' th' air, or th' earth?' The music is notoriously difficult to locate. It comes from not one source, but many sources. It is broken rather than coherent. This quality of the song may be traced back to the structure of the song itself:

Come unto these yellow sands,
And then take hands;
Curtsied when you have, and kissed
The wild waves whist;
Foot fealty here and there,
And sweet sprites bear
The burden.

(burden dispersedly)

The irregular line length of the lines of this song is suggestive of many voices, and the rhymes create the impression of voices responding to one another rather than of coherence. This last point is underlined by the fact that Ariel finds himself rhyming with the Spirits: their 'bow-wow' chimes with his 'diddle dow.' Voices move across personae. Even the word 'burden' fractures, repeated perhaps by singers stationed around or under the stage, and then not in unison. No one voice can contain everything that the song expresses. There is an asymmetry in the sharing of the song. One portion is sung by Ariel alone, another by an indeterminate number of Spirits. Even if only a few Spirits were actually embodied onstage, their presence alone could perhaps suggest that innumerable other spirits were present. The song has no single author but is authored collectively and spontaneously. Ariel's 'Hark hark, I hear' is a response to the barking of the dogs produced by the spirit, but it also looks ahead to 'The strain of the strutting chanticleer'. Ariel is improvising, responding to the Spirits, but is simultaneously authoring, with a plot in mind. Again, in 'Hark hark' we find the doubling that coincides with the splitting of identity. 'The strain of the strutting chanticleer' is an allusion to Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale, so we are perhaps to imagine that the Nun's Priest is somehow caught up in amongst the sundry other voices.

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So, the song is fragile, and made of many pieces. It is a ‘sweet air’ in the musical sense, but there is also perhaps a hint that it is no more substantial than the ‘air’ that makes it up.

This is one part of the explanation for how Ferdinand is able to hear it as a remembrance of his father. The other part is the fact that Ferdinand is actually authoring his own song, and is arguably contributing towards the authorship of Ariel’s song:

Sitting on a bank,
Weeping again the King my father’s wreck,
This music crept by me upon the waters,
Allaying both their fury and my passion
With its sweet air.

These lines share a feature with many other songs in Shakespeare: the ‘dying fall’ that Orsino describes at the beginning of Twelfth Night. In Ferdinand’s words, the ‘dying fall’ or falling cadence, is most apparent in the words ‘waters’ and ‘passion’. In these cases the fall is more marked for coming at the end of the line. The falling cadence can also be found in Balthasar’s song in Much Ado About Nothing: ‘no more’, ‘ever’, ‘on shore’, ‘never’, ‘them go’ and ‘of woe’ are all dying falls that appear at the ends of lines. In Othello, Desdemona’s words before she sings the “Willow Song” are infected with the same cadence: ‘fortune’, ‘tonight’, ‘to do’, and of course ‘willow’. Desdemona says ‘That song tonight / Will not go from her mind’, and this is very much apparent, for its cadences have worked their way into her speech. In the final scene of the play, all that Emilia remembers of the song is a snatch of the refrain: ‘willow, willow, willow’. This string of falling cadences has stayed in her mind. The ‘dying fall’ is the “Willow Song” reduced to its essence. We see that from the beginning that its effect consisted not so much in its semantic content, but in its influence over the ear. In Shakespeare, far from being discrete set-pieces, the songs seem to bleed into the surrounding text. Voices and personae play freely across the borders of character and ostensive individual identity, and the pattern they make is an authorial voice which houses many voices.

The sonic patterning of Ferdinand’s words leads the audience to expect that Ariel’s song will similarly be characterised by dying falls. However, as it is, it is very different:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell.

The rhythm of the song is stilted, especially in the line ‘But doth suffer a sea-change’. The final syllables of the lines of the song are consistently strong,
confounding an audience whose ears have been tuned to expect dying falls. There is a marked contrast between the songs that Ariel and Ferdinand have constructed. When Ferdinand says ‘The ditty does remember my drowned father’, it looks as though the pseudo-song he has written is doing a better job of it. Ariel’s song with its strong terminal syllables resists identification with what is personal to Ferdinand. A soothing elegy for Ferdinand’s father would be written in the grammar of falling cadences. Of course, Ariel’s song does refer to Alonso. But it does not console Ferdinand, for he is comforted by the song he has devised himself. It is telling that the line, ‘The ditty does remember my drowned father’, itself more of a piece of comforting wishful thinking than a statement of fact, ends on a dying cadence, ‘father’. As he says these words, Ferdinand is, as it were, still singing. It is all part of the song he sings to console himself.

Whilst Ferdinand thinks Ariel’s song is remembering his father, the song that is really doing this is one he has authored. Shakespeare’s words have been remembered in later works of literature perhaps more than those of any other writer, and never are the processes of memory and authorship more confused than when a line from one work has migrated to another. T.S. Eliot remembers a line from Ariel’s song in The Waste Land. In the section entitled ‘A Game of Chess’, two voices trade the following words:

‘Do
‘You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
‘Nothing?’
I remember
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
‘Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?’

It is by no means clear that the persona who says ‘I remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes’ is actually remembering something from The Tempest, and is not in fact authoring something almost entirely new. When the words ‘Those are pearls that were his eyes’ are said, does the figure of Ariel appear briefly in the reader’s mind, or even in the pub, sitting with the two interlocutors? Is Ariel speaking through the persona who utters his words in Eliot’s poem, or have the words been so denuded of the meaning provided by the context of the rest of The Tempest as to have ceased to be Ariel’s at all?

Protopopoeia functions in a particular way in a work of drama: an actor is a protopopoeia for the voice of the character they are personating. Emilia draws attention to the fact that the audience is witnessing a performance of one or more kinds when she says the line ‘I will play the swan’. She assumes a persona in order to tell Othello how Desdemona truly felt about him. This is all the more evocative because Emilia is giving voice to something which cannot speak: a swan. Emilia’s words are protopopoeial in the most fundamental sense as well as on a more advanced, dramatic level. The word ‘play’ clearly carries another meaning here: Emilia will play the swan as a musical instrument. A song is unusual in that it cannot be fully embodied in words alone, but also requires music, though this need be nothing more than the music provided by the voice. There is a
difference in kind between words which feature in songs and words which occur elsewhere in Shakespeare’s plays.

The figure of apostrophe is closely related to that of prosopopoeia. Just as prosopopoeia is inanimate things talking or being given a voice, apostrophe is talking to inanimate things. Emilia is apostrophizing when she says ‘What did thy song bode, lady? / Hark, canst thou hear me?’ The effect is not quite the same as it would be were Emilia addressing some abstract, inanimate concept like Love: Emilia is so close to death that we wonder whether she is not addressing her lady as though she can see her; as though she were alive in front of her. But Desdemona’s body is visible on the bed onstage: from the audience’s perspective Emilia really is addressing an inanimate object. Desdemona features as a ghost in Emilia’s words, but the fact that her corpse is onstage also makes her a ghost in the scene, or a part of the scenery that affects the atmosphere of the scene in some general but palpable way. In Act II Scene IV of Titus Andronicus, Lavinia’s presence is also ghostly. She has lost her hands and her tongue, and for the actor playing her this means that they have effectively lost the ability to act. Lavinia the person, the character, is scarcely present onstage at all: all that is left is the actor’s body. The trick of theatrical performance has collapsed, and Lavinia’s body and the actor’s body now directly correspond. The body is just a symbol for Lavinia. The same thing has happened to the actor lying on the bed in Act V Scene II of Othello pretending to be dead. They have ceased to act and their body has become a symbol. But the difference in Titus is that Lavinia is still alive. This makes what Marcus is doing all the more striking: ‘Shall I speak for thee? shall I say ‘tis so?’ When another character is able to speak for a voiceless character in this way, this constitutes the effective dramatic death of the latter character. Marcus is a tentative prosopopoeia for Lavinia, but curiously, his speech is also an apostrophe, as though Lavinia were dead and he was speaking only to the onstage symbol of her body.

In Othello, Emilia resolves to ‘die in music’, and dies singing, just as Barbary ‘died singing’ the “Willow Song” before her. It is no accident that song and death should coincide in this way. In both instances the identity of the character is extremely fragile. When a persona sings or says someone else’s words, they necessarily give something of themselves up, and experience a species of death. As the self faces oblivion, other personae force themselves in to the vacuum as song, and identity becomes crowded with ghosts. As the specific life gives way to the general too, the individual self recedes to be replaced by a more universal self. The uncertain, multifarious, shifting identity held by a dramatic character who is singing is a natural partner to the liminal state a persona occupies on the threshold of death.
Bibliography


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