Shakespeare's Grandiose Old Men

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This essay intends to be a consideration on the different and sundry ways in which the topic of ageing and deteriorating occurs in Shakespeare's works. Shakespeare divides human existence into seven phases (seven was a sort of magic number in the culture of his time): Jacques, in *As You Like It*, after illustrating the first six ages of man, ends his monologue describing the seventh age:

> Last scene of all,
> That ends this strange, eventful history,
> Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (Act II, Scene vii, 64-66, p. 266)[1]

In the same scene, the melancholic Jacques had just reported the profound declaration of Touchstone, one of Shakespeare's wise fools: "And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, / And then from hour to hour we rot and rot." (Act II, Scene vii, 63-64, p. 264) Undoubtedly, there are several equally gloomy and disconsolate quotes about old age in other Shakespeare's plays; and in his sonnets he dedicates numerous verses to the anguish of the passing of time, the impassive time that carves deep marks of ruination on man's body and face. Frequently, time is described as the never resting

1 All references to Shakespearean texts are from William Shakespeare (1964), *The Complete Works*, ed. by Peter Alexander, London: Collins.

agent that brings about annihilation and destruction, as Guiderius states in *Cymbeline*: "Golden girls and lads all must / As chimney sweepers come to dust." (Act IV, Scene ii, 262-263) And in describing old age in Sonnet 2, Shakespeare underlines the signs that time engraves on man's face, ploughed through by wrinkles compared to trenches:

> When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,
> And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
> Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
> Will be tattered weed, of small worth held. (p. 1308)

Shakespeare here employs two brilliant and impressive metaphors. The first one is linked to the image of war, and the verb to besiege expresses the idea of an unremitting battle between man and time. The second one relates to clothing: appearance becomes substance, as the proud livery will become tattered weed.

The fact that ageing is such a significant theme in Shakespeare could be proof of his own anxieties about growing old, as the first stanza of Sonnet 73 suggests:

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang. (p. 1320)

The final couplet of the same sonnet, though, could suggest, on the contrary, that Shakespeare's interest in the subject of growing old demonstrates the serenity (as we find in Latin poets such as Catullus) with which he faced the prospect. "This", that is to say the twilight of his life, tells the poet to the young man is addressing, you perceive, and "makes thy love more strong / To love that well which thou must leave ere long" (Sonnet 73, p. 1320).

It is obvious that at the time ageing and death were omnipresent and, so to speak, part of daily life. Shakespeare died when he was 52, but we must bear in mind that in his time life expectancy was of approximately 35 years: it is a fact that Shakespeare outlived many of his friends and relatives, even one of his own children, and experienced death as a familiar and prominent

aspect of everyday life. The twilight of one's existence was something to be serenely accepted as a precious aspect of life, not necessarily as a harbinger of death. Some Shakespearean philologists claim that in the last verse the poet is saying that the young man should now understand that he will lose his own youth and passion and that therefore Sonnet 73 ends on a deeply melancholic and not on a serene note; at least in this particular case sensibility should prevail over philology.

The topic of ageing undoubtedly crops up throughout Shakespeare's texts in various and even contradictory ways, but *King Lear* is the most significant play for a reflection of ageing in his work. *Lear* is a tragedy in which all the principles that we think of as protecting our recognition of humanity are attacked: children turn on their parents, and the elderly are tortured. As the social, ethical and familial bonds between people are severed, individuals lose their sense of self and go mad. The play centers on an old man, an old king, who loses his kingdom, his daughters and his mind after having handed over authority to his children. Having done this, as he is old and has no power, he is doomed to be mistreated and discarded.

At the beginning of the tragedy, Lear announces his decision to abdicate. According to the map he has reflected on, he intends to divide his kingdom into three parts in order "to shake all cares and business" from his age. He seems to accept the fact that he is no longer capable of ruling his kingdom and that therefore he should confer his power to his young daughters ("younger strengths") while he will crawl towards death.

Lear describes his abdication as an act of divestiture of rule and "cares of state": he is yearning to be a free man, to become a private citizen, but he is not aware of the consequences of his decision.

Unlike Shakespeare's other tragic protagonists, Lear has no soliloquies, no moments to reflect privately on his state of mind and on the action of the play. The Fool, who is the only character allowed to speak the truth to the old king (Kent is banished in the first scene for attempting to counsel him) provides a means for Lear to use a more intimate and unguarded voice: he vividly figures Lear as putting down his "breeches" so that his mother-daughters may use 'the rod' on him. The Fool's image suggests that Lear himself is responsible for creating disorder by promoting his daughters above their king and father. But his greater mistake has been not to take into account the weakness of old age.

At the beginning of the play we learn that he intends to abdicate but without parting with "all addition to a king". Lear is clearly vain and whiny as he declares that he has decided to divide his kingdom among his three daughters after having imposed on them a ludicrous and nonsensical love test (in itself a sign of inept senility). Before the test begins, we are enabled to understand that he has reserved the best part to Cordelia, his youngest daughter and his favourite one. Yet the question on which his final decision depends is absurd and foolish in the extreme: he wants to be told who loves him "most". Goneril and Regan speak first, using the vain and pompous rhetoric all expect of them. When it is Cordelia's turn, at first she declares that she has nothing to say and then she adds that she loves him according "to her bond". Her honest words incense him and in his anger he disinherits and repudiates her:

> Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
> Propinquity and property of blood,
> And as a stranger to my heart and me
> Hold thee, from this, for ever. (Act I, Scene i, 112-115, p. 1074)

Everyone is aware of the fact that, as his two daughters' speeches are nothing else than empty rhetoric, Lear's reaction is a sign of folly. And also, according to Goneril's consideration during the conversation with her sister Regan that takes place at the end of the same scene, a sign of unchecked senility.

> You see how full of changes his age is. The observation we have made of it hath not been little. He always loved our sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly. (Act I, Scene i, 287-291, p. 1076)

And Regan adds: "Tis the infirmity of his age." (Act I, Scene i, 294, p. 1076) The two sisters talk about their father in terms that we would now associate with dementia. They are concerned with his old age and his mental impairment: he is "rash", is given to "unconstant starts", is impetuous and irrational. And therefore they set about conceiving a plan in order to deal with a man who is at the threshold of senility and second childhood. The two things go together. As we have seen, also Jacques speaks of second childishness; but in point of fact it is Lear himself that

hints at such an identification when he says that he "crawls" toward death, an image that will often occur later in the tragedy.

The two sisters' plan is a conspiracy; but a conspiracy promptly triggered against a king who, in the very first verses of the play seems to admit that he is no longer capable of ruling his kingdom. In the third scene Goneril, describing her father to her servant Oswald as an "idle old man", prepares the ground for the first step of the conspiracy. "Idle" not only means "lazy", but, above all in this instance, also means "foolish": he is so foolish that he "still would manage those authorities / That he hath given away!" (Act I, Scene iii, 18-19, p. 1079). Lear is idle and infantile. Goneril underlines with lofty contempt the fact that her father has reverted to second childhood: he is a senile old man who must be dealt with exactly as one would with babies, scolding, rebuking and flattering him.

Another crucial word used by Goneril in the same scene is "dotage", a term that not only indicates the state of one who dotes, who is characterized (through old age) by an excessive fondness and a foolish affection for the woman he loves – or is just infatuated with. Dotage is a word also used in reference to the loss of cognitive powers. Being almost a synonym of senility and second childhood. Eventually, in the fourth act, Lear, after his return to sanity, recognizes his disgraceful mistake and the feebleness of his mind due to his age: "I am a very foolish, fond old man" (Act IV, Scene vii, 60, p. 1107), he says to Cordelia ("fond" is a synonym of foolish) and meekly begs her pardon.

The theme of Lear as an old man reverberates in the figure of Gloucester, whose age is not stated but who is referred to as white-haired (Regan picks white hairs from his beard). Edmund, his illegitimate son, whose plan to deceive him corresponds to the defiance of Goneril and Regan to their father, uses the same terms, "idle" and "fond", to express his revolt against the "aged tyranny" of his father.

The deeds of Lear and Gloucester and the corresponding ones of the two sisters and of Edmund strengthen the role of ageing in the tragedy. In the last scene, the concluding words pronounced by Edgard, Edmund's younger brother:

> The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (Act V, Scene iii, 325-326, p. 1113)

could suggest that the theme of the play is the clash between youth and age. But they could also be interpreted as the acknowledgment that Lear and Gloucester have achieved through suffering that kind of wisdom that only the old can achieve. In Shakespeare's plays we meet several old men who carry positive connotations, who are the epitome of wisdom, understanding and judgment, such as Duke Senior and Old Adam in *As You Like It*, or Gonzalo in *The Tempest*. Also the Earl of Warwick, counselor to the king, could be seen as a valid specimen of wise old man. His part in *Henry IV Part 2* is not a large one; but he is definitely the wisest of the king's counselors and the character who gives Henry IV an explanation of the "logic" of the events that occurred during his reign. Warwick is not always played by an old actor, but by Elizabethan standards he *was* an old man.

The main reason to mention him here, though, is that *Henry IV*, *Part 1* and *Part 2* (along with *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) are the plays of the triumph – and the fall – of Falstaff, one of the greatest characters created by Shakespeare, that we can rate as an almost mythical figure, as Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and Romeo and Juliet are. Falstaff is an anomalous old man, not wise, not reliable, but utterly likeable as a stage character.

When the Lord Chief Justice, whom Falstaff, pretending to be young, addresses as an old man ("You that are old consider not the capacities of us that are young", Act I, Scene ii, 166, p. 519), on his turn addresses angrily Falstaff attributing to him the various conventional infirmities of old age, the fat "irregular humorist" replies that he is old only in "judgment and understanding" (Act I, Scene ii, 178, p. 519) and that although he limps because of his gout, he is still a vigorous man, capable of turning diseases to advantage. Falstaff is verbally imaginative, quick-witted, inexhaustibly witty. When he first appears in the play, in the second scene of the first act, he asks Page what the doctor has said about the analysis of his urine and Page tells that the urine is healthier than the patient (who *is* an old man), Falstaff pronounces one of his most brilliant and famous lines "I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men" (Act I, Scene ii, 10-12, p. 517).

Falstaff, being the English version of Plautus' *miles gloriosus*, informs the Lord of Justice of his military valour and of his deeds on the battlefield, where his name was "so terrible" to the enemy: which is why he is needed in the King's army. It is obvious (to us) that he is lying, but he is doing it with extraordinary self-assurance and acting ability. The fact is that Falstaff

is a shrewd actor, who lives in a "world of play" and who knows that old men are subject "to this vice of lying". But in spite of his "vices" he is an admirable character and the quintessence of vitality and joy of life.

Nicolas Rowe maintained that Queen Elizabeth was so pleased with his personage that she "commanded" Shakespeare to write a comedy based on Falstaff. The result was *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a play that W.H. Auden considered a failure, stating that its only merit resided in having enabled Giuseppe Verdi to compose his brilliant "commedia lirica" *Falstaff*. Shakespeare's comedy presents a different Falstaff from the one that appears in *Henry IV*. In *The Merry Wives*, Falstaff, in order to mend his fortunes, plans to court two wealthy married women; but as the two merry wives are obviously not interested in him, they decide to have fun at his expense pretending to be engrossed by his advances. The audience is supposed to have fun as well, and a compulsory happy ending concludes the play.

The protagonist of *The Merry Wives* is just a comic character who has little to do with the grand characters of the two history plays, whose reckless vitality, whose *joie de vivre*, whose brazenness, are accompanied by the awareness of the limits of age. In the second act of *Henry IV Part 2* Falstaff has a telling conversation with Doll Tearsheet, a sort of sentimental harlot in Mistress Quickly's tavern. Falstaff seems older and less vigorous than before, and acutely aware of his declining years: "I am old, I am old" he repeats. But Doll replies that she loves him better than "ever a scurvy young boy of them all" (Act II, Scene iv, 262-263, p. 528). The scene ends on a sentimental note, with Doll in tears and Mistress Quickly praising Falstaff for his honesty and true-heartedness. This explains why the spurning of Falstaff by Prince Hal, just become King Henry V, is such an emotional and dramatic event:

> I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.
> How ill white hairs becomes a fool and jester.
> I have long dreamt of such a kind of man,
> So surfeit-swelled, so old and so profane,
> But being awaked I do despise my dream. (Act V, Scene v, 48-52, p. 549)

The stress is on "old man", as if age could be Falstaff's main fault. Henry V cannot accuse the fat knight of doing what he himself has done. He accuses

him of being an old man who does not know how to behave as an old man. Fun is for the young, the elderly have to be happy to say: "We have heard the chimes at midnight." (Act III, Scene ii, 210, p. 533) Now that they are old, they must not hear them any longer. Such a belief was common sense in Shakespeare's time – and it is today.

But why not following instead Dylan Thomas's advice to his aged dying father?

> Do not go gentle into that good night.
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (2014: 193)

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