

Generalization Must Be, but Woe unto the Generalizer: A Reply to Jonas Barish*

ROBERT CROSMAN

Jonas Barish is a Shakespeare scholar whose opinion I value most highly and I feel honored that he has taken the trouble both to correct and to praise aspects of my article on Shakespeare's prose. Especially convincing is his pronouncement that "Shakespeare . . . deals with each local situation on its own terms, as it arises, for whatever dramatic values it proves to contain or imply" (265).

Any generalization will prove inadequate to describe Shakespeare's practice with complete accuracy—this is the force of Professor Barish's advice to look at "each local situation." I couldn't agree more ardently. And I also agree that each scene, often each *part* of a scene, must be thought about in *dramatic* terms: what effect is Shakespeare trying to achieve *here*, and how did he achieve it?

Yet generalizations, however gross and approximate, are a necessary aspect of thinking about anything, as Professor Barish himself illustrates when he formulates what he calls his "local option," and I would call the Rule of Local Situations:

Shakespeare remains less bound to any formula than to his own freedom at every moment to pursue the destinies of his characters and to extract the optimum theatrical excitement afforded by a given situation. (268)

After having admired this dictum for some time, it occurs to me that although I can scarcely think of a truer generalization, it *is* still a generalization, and hence fatally subject to falsification by specific

*Reference: Robert Crosman, "The Pivotal Position of *Henry V* in the Rise and Fall of Shakespeare's Prose," *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 1-15; Jonas Barish, "Hal, Falstaff, *Henry V*, and Prose," *Connotations* 2.3 (1992): 263-68.

instances. In other words, Professor Barish has himself announced a "formula," and like any other such formula, I fear, it will not prove entirely adequate to describe Shakespeare's practice.

For example, take the lecture on the Salic Law with which the Archbishop of Canterbury favours Henry, and us, in *Henry V* 1.2. This is, I believe, the longest and dullest monologue in all of Shakespeare, and when I ask myself why it is there I am forced to conclude that Shakespeare found the legal justification of Henry's invasion of France an interesting topic—and expected his audience to find it so too, however flatly and baldly he wrote it. Now it is admittedly possible that Shakespeare's contemporary audiences—at least the one at court—found this speech interesting, but modern audiences are put to sleep by it, and I don't think there is any use in pretending that Shakespeare handled the Salic Law with any particular dramatic adroitness. No: unless "dramatic value" is merely whatever a particular audience happens to find interesting, for once we have caught Shakespeare being "ideological" at the expense of "dramatic values."

The generalization derived from this example is: when we generalize about Shakespeare we can be sure that exceptions to our rules will sooner or later be found; yet analysis cannot be done without generalizing, and so we go on doing it. Which is a roundabout way of pleading that even if Professor Barish has found an exception to my claim that King Henry is "equal to every rhetorical task that a King must deal with" ("The Pivotal Position . . ." 10), still the rule is true often enough to be worth formulating.

But let's see if I can make a case for my "formula" even in 4.1, where Professor Barish finds it particularly inadequate. In the sub-scene where the disguised King encounters the three common soldiers, his rhetoric is directed at arguing that each of them is a free moral agent, and thus each is responsible for his own salvation or damnation if he should die in battle; two of the three soldiers immediately concur, and the third, the taciturn Court, does not *disagree*. If we assume that it is Henry's rhetorical purpose to make the three soldiers also ask forgiveness for their sins so that, falling in battle, they would die in a state of grace, then he appears to accomplish it.

Therefore it does not seem to me correct to say, as Professor Barish does, that this sub-scene shows that Henry's rhetoric is unequal to the task in hand. Henry meets the three by chance; it is *they* who engage *him* in conversation, not vice-versa, and in disguise he speaks brutal honesty to them about the morale of the troops, and of the King himself. Whereas Professor Barish assumes that it is Henry's aim to win friends for the King among the troops, it looks to me as though he is seeking accusers, so that he may look as deeply as possible into his own soul.

Shakespeare needs a note of discord at the point where the soldiers exit so that Henry can soliloquize on the troubles of kingship, so Professor Barish's Rule of Local Situations helps explain why Henry fails to convince Williams that he was not lying about the ransom. This failure may constitute a small exception to my generalization that Henry is "equal to every rhetorical task that a king must deal with," but if this is the worst charge that can be leveled at it, then mine is a fairly suitable "formula."

To summarize then: The Law of Local Situations, certainly one of the most reliable guides for understanding a Shakespeare play, must nonetheless be acknowledged as sometimes overridden by other concerns—in this case by Shakespeare's privileging of matters of doctrine, or what has come to be called "ideology." Certainly if we look at the play as a whole the Archbishop's lecture on the Salic Law has a dramatic purpose, but only in the overall design and impact of the play: locally it is a disaster, dramatically speaking, and one wonders if not even Shakespeare may have cut it from performance, or at least shortened it drastically. Ideology and drama are not at odds, however, in 4.1, as Henry's theorizing on the individual Christian's responsibility for his own salvation is effortlessly woven into the clash of temperaments and world-views between him and the three soldiers. Professor Barish's "formula" is thoroughly convincing and nearly always will pan out. And yet, if we require of a generalization that it admit of *no* exception, then it is *never* safe to generalize about Shakespeare's practice, and yet we must. So let us not hold ourselves to quite so high a standard.

I am uncomfortably aware that in all this I have left any consideration of Shakespeare's *prose* far behind. Professor Barish's conclusion, already quoted in part, is that

Despite the rough guidelines provided by rank, realism, and (shall we say?) risibility, as criteria for prose, Shakespeare remains less bound to any formula than to his own freedom at every moment to pursue the destinies of his characters and to extract the optimum theatrical excitement afforded by a given situation. (268)

And yet for some reason Shakespeare's plays broke out in a rash of prose from about 1595 to 1601. If Falstaff is the reason for this outbreak, still it spread to such un-Falstaffian characters as Rosalind, Henry, and Hamlet—among the most charming and "noble" (in every sense of the word) characters Shakespeare ever created. Doubtless he enjoyed the new possibilities that writing prose dialogue for noble characters created. But why did he then walk away from this resource? Perhaps he lost faith in the ability of kings and commoners to talk the same language, or perhaps he merely lost interest in the idea. Probably there are many plausible answers, none definitive. Still, this is a question that it is rewarding to think about, and I am grateful to Professor Barish for helping me to think a little harder about it.

University of Alaska
Anchorage