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LITERARY ONOMASTICS IN PETER SHAFFER'S
SHRIVINGS AND EQUUS

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Onomastic imagery appears in the works of Peter Shaffer from his earliest detective novels. Already in 1951 in his first novel, The Woman in the Wardrobe, Shaffer characterized the personage of the all-knowing detective in the name assigned to him--Mr. Verity. Just as the plots, themes, and techniques of Shaffer's works have developed over the last twenty-five years, so has his use of symbolic names, all of which are in evidence in their fullest form in his last two plays, Shrivings and Equus.

In 1970, Shaffer presented The Battle of Shrivings on the London stage. Unlike all of his other plays, which have enjoyed successful runs throughout the world, The Battle of Shrivings received mixed reviews and never appeared on the New York stage. The playwright revised the work and published it as Shrivings in 1976; it is that version of the play that is of concern in this study.

From the very title of the play, Shaffer uses a name to set

Some of the ideas in this essay are included in my book Peter Shaffer, published in the Twayne English Author Series. The subjects discussed in this paper are treated in more detail in my book.

a mood: the name is Shrivings, the Cotswald home in which the play takes place. In the Middle Ages, Shrivings was a house of retreat, confession, and penance. In the play it begins as a house of peace and tranquility and ends as a house of verbal warfare.

The three acts of the play take place during one weekend in which three momentous events are to occur: Sir Gideon Petrie, a philosopher and the President of the World League of Peace, is staging a peace vigil in Parliament Square to protest the production of arms in the United Kingdom; Mark Askelon, now a renowned poet, is to be reunited with Gideon Petrie, his former teacher from Cambridge; finally, both Sir Gideon and Askelon are going to receive awards--Gideon for his twenty-fifth book of philosophical Explorations, and Mark for his Collected Poems. The weekend is more of a disaster than anyone could have imagined.

Mark both surprises and dismays Shrivings' household by ridiculing the Peace Movement, revealing secrets about Gideon's sex life, and finally by seducing Lois Neal, the philosopher's frigid secretary. Mark, too, is surprised and dismayed to find that his son David has left Cambridge to become a pot-smoking hippie, living under Gideon's roof. After he has finished accusing his son of being Gideon's lover and after he torments the boy about his possibly illegitimate origin, he tries to make up to his son for years of neglect. By the end of the third act, all four characters are lost souls.

It is not the story of the play that is the focus of this study, but rather the male characters' names, all three of which are of biblical origin. The protagonist is Mark Askelon, presently an agnostic, who was once a Catholic, and whose heritage is Jewish. He even toys with returning to the church some day--as soon as he is convinced that man's nature is evil and forever unalterable. His given name, Mark, is that of the first century Jew who adopted a Roman name and was the author of the first of the four Gospels. As was the case with the biblical Mark, Christianity is something new to this poet, whose surname is Askelon, which is doubly rich in symbolic value. The name is a distortion of the term Askenazim, the name given to Jews from Eastern Europe, to which his ancestors belonged. Also Askelon is a derivative of Ashkelon, one of the five major cities of Philistia. Mark's conduct throughout the play recalls behavior of the biblical Philistines.

Gideon's and David's names are also of biblical origin. Gideon was an Israeli tribal leader, who defeated the Midianites in the twelfth century B.C. He was offered the kingship of Israel, but refused it since no man can replace the Lord as the King of Israel. In the Bible, Gideon overcomes a philistine people, and in the play Sir Gideon survives (if only barely) his weekend with Mark, and wins the Battle of Shrivings--the battle of wills between the two protagonists: he never succumbs to the desires of

Lois and David to ask Mark to leave Shrivings. Finally, there is Mark's son, David, whose name in Hebrew means the beloved, as well the boy is to his father and his mentor. He is not the heroic, biblical soldier who slays Goliath and serves as the king of Israel, or even the majestic, marble David that Michelangelo sculpted, but more the innocent, child-like David of Donatello's bronze statue. If he shares any trait in common with his biblical namesake, it is that of being a bit morally irresponsible. The names chosen for these characters are not mere coincidences; their names are the clue to their personalities. Such is also the case in Equus.

Equus has received so much acclaim that it is not necessary to go into the details of the plot here. Briefly, it is the story of Dr. Martin Dysart, an overworked and possibly sexually impotent child psychiatrist, who is treating Alan Strang, a seventeen-year-old youth who stabbed out the eyes of six horses after his horse-god-lover made him impotent during his first attempt at sex with a woman. Dr. Dysart is jealous of his patient and envies that Alan could have felt the kind of passion that it must have taken to commit so bizarre an act:

"Such wild returns I make to the womb of civilization. Three weeks a year in the Peleponnese [sic], every bed booked in advance, every meal paid for by vouchers, cautious jaunts in hired Fiats, suitcase crammed with Kao-Pectate! Such a fantastic surrender to the primitive. And I use that word endlessly: 'primitive.' 'Oh, the primitive world,' I say.

'What instinctual truths were lost with it!' And while I sit there, baiting a poor unimaginative woman [his wife] with the word, that freaky boy tries to conjure the reality! I sit looking at pages of centaurs trampling the soil of Argos-- and outside my window he is trying to become one, in a Hampshire field! . . . Then in the morning, I put away my books on the cultural shelf, close up the kodachrome snaps of Mount Olympus, touch my reproduction statue of Dionysus for luck--and go off to hospital to treat him for insanity."¹

But professional considerations prevail, and the psychiatrist feels compelled to "cure" Alan of his pain and to return the boy to the world of the Normal. The doctor's reservations about curing his patient are embodied in his name, Dysart. He is an immensely talented psychiatrist and considered by the magistrate to be the only one within a hundred miles who has the ability to work with Alan. That explains the second syllable of his name--art. The first syllable describes his attitude toward his abilities. The Greek prefix dys indicates difficulty² and demonstrates that the doctor performs his art, but does so without much conviction or desire:

"I'll take away his Field of Ha Ha, and give him Normal places for his ecstasy--multi-lane highways driven through the guts of cities, extinguishing Place altogether, even the idea of Place! He'll trot on his metal pony tamely through the concrete evening--and one thing I promise you: He will

never touch hide again! With any luck his private parts will come to feel as plastic to him as the products of the factory to which he will almost certainly be sent. Who knows? He may even come to find sex funny. Smirky funny. Bit of grunt funny. Trampled and furtive and entirely in control. Hopefully, he'll feel nothing at his fork but Approved Flesh. I doubt, however, with much passion! . . . [sic] Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created."

(pp. 105-106)

The magistrate who brings Alan to Dr. Dysart is named Hesther Salomon. She embodies the beauty and compassion of the biblical queen Esther, who saved the Jewish people from destruction, and she accepts none of Dysart's arguments that he would be doing the boy a disservice by making him normal; she sees a boy in pain and she wants him to be relieved of his suffering. In her last name, Shaffer describes the wisdom of King Solomon: it is she who realizes that only Dr. Dysart can have an effect on Alan; she trusts him above his colleague who, ironically enough, is called Dr. Thoroughgood.

The patient's family name in Strang, which is only one letter away from being strange. And strange they are. The father is an atheist who appears to all the world to be as straight-laced as can be. But in reality, he is a man who receives his sexual gratification alone at night in adult cinemas. He holds his wife Dora responsible for his son's masochism, his sexual deviation, and his crime, because she reads to him night after night passages from the

Bible--passages describing Jesus' torturous climb to Calvary:

"A boy spends night after night having this stuff read into him: an innocent man tortured to death--~~thorns~~ driven into his head--nails into his hands--a spear jammed through his ribs. It can mark anyone for life, that kind of thing. I'm not joking. The boy was absolutely fascinated by all that. He was always mooning over religious pictures. I mean real kinky ones, if you receive my meaning. . . Call it what you like. All that stuff to me is just bad sex." (pp. 33-34)

The knowledge that Alan has about history, religion, and sex, he acquired from his mother. She taught him the relationship between sex and love and between love and God, much of which became confused in the boy's mind. She admits that the picture of Jesus that Alan replaced with one of a horse was ". . . a little extreme. The Christ was loaded down with chains, and the centurions were really laying on the stripes." (p. 44) However, she will not accept the guilt that her husband attributes to her for her son's condition: "Whatever's happened has happened because of Alan. Alan is himself. Every soul is itself. If you added up everything we ever did to him, from his first day on earth to this, you wouldn't find why he did this terrible thing--because that's him: not just all of our things added up. . . . I know only he was my little Alan, and then the Devil came." (p. 77)

In the long line of maladjusted adolescents, Alan is the one character in Shaffer's dramatic repertoire whose behavior is not

only strange but psychotic. On the night that his father caught him performing his secret ritual in his room, Alan was kneeling before a photograph of a horse (where once there hung the picture of Jesus being whipped by the centurions) and beating himself with a coat hanger while chanting a parody of biblical genealogy:

"Prince begat Prance. . . And Prance begat Prankus! And Prankus begat Flankus! Flankus begat Spankus. And Spankus begat Spunkus the Great, who lived three score years! . . . [kneeling] And Legwus begat Neckwus. And Neckwus begat Fleckwus, the King of Spit. And Fleckwus spoke out of his chinkle-chankle! . . . And he said 'Behold I give you Equus, my only begotten son'" (pp. 49-50).

No less strange are his naked, midnight rides on his horse/god Equus, the only source of his sexual gratification. Again, his behavior is ritualistic: he puts on Equus' sandals of majesty, which are made of sack; he then puts on the "clinkle-clankle," the reins; he takes Equus to the field of Ha Ha, and withdraws from the Ark of the Manbit the sacred stick, which he places in his own mouth "so's it won't happen too quick" (p. 70); and finally he gives Equus a lump of sugar as his Last Supper. At last he is ready to mount his god for his religious-sexual ritual:

And Equus the Mighty rose against All!

His enemies scatter, his enemies fall!

TURN!

Trample them, trample them,

Trample them, trample them,

TURN!

TURN!!

TURN!!!

The Equus noise increases in volume.

[shouting] WEE! . . . WA! . . . WONDERFUL! . . .

I'm stiff! Stiff in the wind!

My mane, stiff in the wind!

My flanks! My hooves!

Mane on my legs, on my flanks, like whips!

Raw!

Raw!

I'm raw! Raw!

Feel me on you! On you! On you! On you!

I want to be in you!

I want to BE you forever and ever!--

Equus, I love you!

Now!--

Bear me away!

Make us One Person!

He rides Equus frantically.

One Person! One Person! One Person! One Person!

He rises up on the horse's back, and calls like a trumpet.

Ha-HA!. . . Ha-HA!. . . Ha-HA!

The trumpet turns to great cries.

HA-HA! HA-HA! HA-HA! HA-HA! HA! . . . HA! . . .

HAAAAA!

He twists like a flame.

Silence.

The turning square comes to a stop in the same position it occupied at the opening of the Act.

Slowly the boy drops off the horse on to the ground.

He lowers his head and kisses Nugget's hoof.

Finally he flings back his head and cries up to him:

AMEN!

Nugget snorts, once. (pp. 72-73)

As is the case with Shrivings, the title Equus is the clue to the play's meaning. Shaffer chose the Latin word for horse in an attempt to capture the mythological implications, as well as the religious connotations associated with the animal which symbolizes speed, power, and virility. For the ancients, the horse was a religious symbol: "We can in no way consider it strange if to the Trojans--horse tamers extraordinary--the horse should sooner or later be regarded as a sacred animal. I suggest that this is exactly what happened and that the wooden horse was a religious object."³ There are also biblical associations. In the Book of Job the horse's strength, speed, and fier~~er~~ness are described at length:

"Hast thou given the horse his might? Hast thou clothed his neck with the quivering mane? Hast thou made him to leap as a locust? The glory of his snorting is terrible. He paweth

in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: He goeth out to meet the armed men. He mocketh all fear, and is not dismayed; Neither turneth he back from the sword. The quiver rattleth against him, the flashing spear and the javelin. He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage; Neither believeth he that it is the voice of the trumpet. As oft as the trumpet soundeth he saith, Aha! And he smelleth the battle afar off, The thunder of the captains, and the shouting." (39:19-25)⁴

Revelation 9:19 tells of the "power of the horses [that] is in their mouth,"⁵ and from Revelation 19:11-12 come the references to horses' eyes and words that Alan recites in the blinding scene:

"And I saw the heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and he that sat thereon called Faithful and True. . . And his eyes are a flame of fire. . ." This last quotation so stimulated Alan's imagination that he used the horses' eyes as the object of his revenge against his jealous and vengeful god, who, when Alan tried to turn away from Equus as his source of sexual satisfaction, made him impotent with women.

Onomastic imagery is nothing new to Shaffer's plays. He used it in White Lies (1967) and in The White Liars (1968), in both of which the name of the plays' rock music groups become the titles of the plays as well as the clue to understanding the characters. But nowhere else in his dramatic production are the characters' (and plays') names more important than in his two most recent works, in which every detail is made to contribute added meaning to these

flawlessly constructed plays.

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NOTES

¹Peter Shaffer, Equus [and] Shrivings; 4th printing (New York, 1975), p. 81

²I thank Dr. Brent Froberg, Chairman of the Department of Classics at The University of South Dakota, for accurately translating the Greek prefix for me.

³Julian Ward Jones, Jr., "The Trojan Horse, Timeo Danaos et dona ferentis," The Classical Journal 65 (1970), p. 245.

⁴The Holy Bible (New York, 1901). All biblical quotations are from this edition.