

Invisible Shakespeare: Shakespeare in Adam Smith

Readers of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS*) are barely four paragraphs into the work before Smith moves from describing the ways in which observing the sufferings and joys of our fellow humans affect us to discussing how interacting with literature replicates these same effects:

Our joy for the deliverance of those heroes of tragedy or romance who interest us, is as sincere as our grief for their distress, and our fellow-feeling with their misery is not more real than that with their happiness. We enter into their gratitude towards those faithful friends who did not desert them in their difficulties; and we heartily go along with their resentment against those perfidious traitors who injured, abandoned, or deceived them.¹

¹Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 1), ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), p. 10.

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We see Smith turn to literature as an analogue for lived experience throughout *TMS*. A little later, when he reminds readers that we seem to have a built-in measuring stick for injustice, Smith turns to literature as an example: "The villain, in a tragedy or romance, is as much the object of our indignation, as the hero is that of our sympathy and affection. We detest Iago as much as we esteem Othello; and delight as much in the punishment of the one, as we are grieved at the distress of the other."² And when he explains the way we realize our general rules about human behavior, he points out that it is partially as a result of our responses "when we read in history or romance."³

Charles Griswold's *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* points to the strong appeal that literature had for Smith as a way to speak about important contemporary moral concerns: "Not only plays, novels, and poems but tragedies, in particular, intrigue Smith. Together they completely overwhelm his relatively rare references to properly philosophical texts The notion that we are to understand literature and drama as sources for moral theory and moral education is clearly and

²Ibid., p. 34.

³Ibid., p. 160.

strikingly evident in *The Wealth of Nations* as well.”⁴ This attraction towards the literary as source material for moral arguments is easily seen simply by leafing through the footnotes to any of Smith’s works. His references to literature are myriad and most have been well-documented. In *Economic Sentiments* Emma Rothschild outlines the most famous of the references when she examines the connection between Smith’s idea of the “invisible hand” and the workings of the same idea in *Macbeth*. She writes:

The earlier intellectual history of invisible hands turns out to be generally grim. The most famous invisible hand in Anglo-Scottish literature is that of *Macbeth*’s providence. “And with thy bloody and invisible hand,” *Macbeth* apostrophizes the night in Act III, immediately before the banquet and Banquo’s murder; he asks the darkness to cover up the crimes he is about to commit:

*Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale.*⁵

In addition to explicit quotations from literature—like this use of the invisible hand—Smith’s writing, steeped in poetry, novels, and drama as it is, often draws from the storehouse of his memory to allude to or quote from literature.

For example, in his discussion of pride, Smith notes that:

⁴Charles L. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 59.

⁵Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 118-19.

The proud man is commonly too well contented with himself to think that his character requires any amendment. The man who feels himself all-perfect, naturally enough despises all further improvement. His self-sufficiency and absurd conceit of his own superiority, commonly attend him from his youth to his most advanced age; and he dies, as Hamlet says, with all his sins upon his head, unanointed, unanealed.⁶

The quotation from *Hamlet* is apt and interesting, but equally compelling is the observation, in the footnotes to the Glasgow edition, that “Smith is misquoting from memory. It is the Ghost, not Hamlet, who speaks thus of his own death:

*Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhousell’d, disappointed, unanealed;
No reckoning made, but sent to my
account
With all my imperfections on my
head:*
(*Hamlet*, i.v.76–9.)⁷

“Unanointed” is an ideal example of the kind of “memory skip” that happens when someone who knows another writer’s works well quotes from memory. The word makes sense in context and is a portmanteau of Shakespeare’s actual words—“unhousell’d” and “disappointed.” Smith misquotes similarly in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres* (though it is worth remembering that these are student’s notes on Smith’s lectures and the errors may not be his). He refers at one point to “the slings and arrows of adverse Fortune,”⁸ and later to

⁶Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 258-59.

⁷*Ibid.* (note).

⁸Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (Glasgow Edition of the Works*

Shakespeare's comment that we need to "*bravely arm ourselves* and stem a sea of troubles."⁹ Both of these errors are precisely the kind of memory skip every lecturer has made, particularly when lecturing about material with which we are so familiar that, as Smith's student notes of Lecture XXI, "this Lecture was delivered intirely without Book."¹⁰

This particular kind of mistake suggests that Smith had a particular kind of relationship with Shakespeare's work, and with the works of other literary figures he frequently references. He knows these works the way that many economists know Hayek or Mises. They are a part of his mental furniture. This means that for students of literature who turn their attention to Smith, there is a sense of delight—but no surprise—to find Shakespeare infusing Smith's text not only in direct references and passing quotation from memory, but also in a series of buried, perhaps half-conscious or unconscious, references that (to amuse myself) I am calling "Invisible Shakespeare."

Very early in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* the reader encounters one such reference, previously unnoted in Smith scholarship, during Smith's meditations on human nature as demonstrated in comparison with the nature of dogs. The section is a justly famous one. It is elegant in both its content and its diction as well as in its explication of the social advantages and "conveniency" that arise from the human ability to "truck, barter, and exchange":

and Correspondence of Adam Smith, vol. 4), ed. J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), p. 28.

⁹Ibid., pp. 30-31 (italics added).

¹⁰Ibid., p. 117.

By nature a philosopher is not in genius and disposition half so different from a street porter, as a mastiff is from a greyhound, or a greyhound from a spaniel, or this last from a shepherd's dog. Those different tribes of animals, however, though all of the same species, are of scarce any use to one another. The strength of the mastiff is not, in the least, supported either by the swiftness of the greyhound, or by the sagacity of the spaniel, or by the docility of the shepherd's dog. The effects of those different geniuses and talents, for want of the power or disposition to barter and exchange, cannot be brought into a common stock, and do not in the least contribute to the better accommodations and conveniency of the species. Each animal is still obliged to support and defend itself, separately and independently, and derives no sort of advantage from that variety of talents with which nature has distinguished its fellows. Among men, on the contrary, the most dissimilar geniuses are of use to one another; the different produces of their respective talents, by the general disposition to truck, barter, and exchange, being brought, as it were, into a common stock, where every man may purchase whatever part of the produce of other men's talents he has occasion for.¹¹

This passage has been analyzed often. What has gone unnoticed, however, is that Smith's passage alludes to an equally well-known passage from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. (The play may have been brought to Smith's mind by his use of the word "porter" early on in the passage, reminding him of *Macbeth's* famous Act II "porter scene.") Suborning Banquo's murder in Act III, Macbeth discusses

¹¹Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, vol. 1), ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner and W. B. Todd (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), p. 30.

human nature with the murderers for hire in almost precisely the same terms that Smith uses in the above passage:

First Murderer: *We are men, my Liege.*

Macbeth: *Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men;
As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels,
spaniels, curs,
Shoughs, water-rugs, and demi-wolves are clept
All by the name of dogs: the valu'd file
Distinguishes the swift, the slow, the subtle,
The housekeeper, the hunter, every one
According to the gift which bounteous Nature
Hath in him clos'd; whereby he does receive
Particular addition, from the bill
That writes them all alike: and so of men.*

(*Macbeth*, 3.1.90-100)

The similarity of wording, of subject matter, even of the dog breeds mentioned make it clear that as Smith wrote his passage on dogs and human nature, Shakespeare's lines were in his mind.

Thus, it was a great pleasure to find another apparent reference to *Macbeth* in *TMS*. In his section on "The Effects of Prosperity and Adversity upon the Judgment of Mankind with regard to the Propriety of Action" Smith gives an extended account of the dangerous risks associated with desiring too rapid and easy a rise to a position of wealth and esteem:

To attain to this envied situation, the candidates for fortune too frequently abandon the paths of virtue; for unhappily, the road which leads to the one, and that which leads to the other, lie sometimes in very opposite directions.

But the ambitious man flatters himself that, in the splendid situation to which he advances, he will have so many means of commanding the respect and admiration of mankind, and will be enabled to act with such superior propriety and grace, that the lustre of his future conduct will entirely cover, or efface, the *foulness* of the steps by which he arrived at that elevation. In many governments the candidates for the highest stations are above the law; and, if they can attain the object of their ambition, they have no fear of being *called to account* for the means by which they acquired it. They often endeavour, therefore, not only by fraud and falsehood, the ordinary and vulgar arts of intrigue and cabal; but sometimes by the perpetration of the most enormous crimes, by murder and assassination, by rebellion and civil war, to supplant and destroy those who oppose or stand in the way of their greatness. They more frequently miscarry than succeed; and commonly gain nothing but the disgraceful punishment which is due to their crimes. But, though they should be so lucky as to attain that wished-for greatness, they are always most miserably disappointed in the happiness which they expect to enjoy in it. It is not ease or pleasure, but always honour, of one kind or another, though frequently an honour very ill understood, that the ambitious man really pursues. But the honour of his exalted station appears, both in his own eyes and in those of other people, *polluted and defiled* by the baseness of the means through which he rose to it. Though by the profusion of every liberal expence; though by excessive indulgence in every profligate pleasure, the wretched, but usual, resource of ruined characters; though by the hurry of public business, or by the prouder and more dazzling tumult of war, he may endeavour to efface, both from his own memory and from that of other people, the remembrance of what he has done; that remembrance never fails to pursue him. He invokes in vain the dark and

dismal powers of forgetfulness and oblivion. He remembers himself what he has done, and that remembrance tells him that other people must likewise remember it. Amidst all the gaudy pomp of the most ostentatious greatness; amidst the venal and vile adulation of the great and of the learned; amidst the more innocent, though more foolish, acclamations of the common people; amidst all the pride of conquest and the triumph of successful war, he is still secretly pursued by the avenging furies of shame and remorse; and, while glory seems to surround him on all sides, he himself, in his own imagination, sees black and *foul* infamy fast pursuing him, and every moment ready to overtake him from behind.¹²

While Smith follows this with a reference to Caesar, I suspect that *Macbeth* was very much on his mind as he wrote it. The outline of the story that Smith tells here is the outline of the play. Overcome with desire to become king, and prodded incessantly by his wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan—for-saking the path of virtue for the path of fortune—and is, for the remainder of the play “miserably disappointed” in the results. For, while he does become king, Macbeth is, as Smith says, “in his own eyes and in those of other people, polluted and defiled by the baseness of the means through which he rose to it.” As Angus notes of Macbeth late in the play: “Now does he feel / His secret murders sticking on his hands; / ... now does he feel his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe / Upon a dwarvish thief.” And surely, Macbeth’s encounter with the ghost of his murdered best friend, Banquo, and Lady Macbeth’s famous sleepwalking scene are best described as their being “secretly pursued

by the avenging furies of shame and remorse; and, while glory seems to surround him on all sides, he himself, in his own imagination, sees black and foul infamy fast pursuing him, and every moment ready to overtake him from behind.” Or, as the Doctor notes, “Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles.” Equally, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s repeated pleas for the return of their ability to sleep peacefully are echoed in Smith’s “He invokes in vain the dark and dismal powers of forgetfulness and oblivion” and in Macbeth’s continued recourse to the witches for information and prophecy.

But Smith’s passage has more than just plot lines in common with *Macbeth*. Scholars have long noted the prevalence of the words “fair and foul” in the play. The witches shriek “Fair is foul and foul is fair / hover through the fog and filthy air” before flying off stage after the play’s opening scene. And the first words spoken in the play by Macbeth, just a few moments later, are “So foul and fair a day I have not seen.” Smith’s repetition of words like “foul” and “defiled” sound a chime with close readers of his work and Shakespeare.

The most telling connection, though, is Smith’s assertion that “In many governments the candidates for the highest stations are above the law; and, if they can attain the object of their ambition, they have no fear of being *called to account* for the means by which they acquired it.” This is inarguably Macbeth’s assumption about his status at the beginning of the play. And when Lady Macbeth sleepwalks and revisits the arguments she used to persuade Macbeth to murder King Duncan, she uses the same phrasing that Smith does here, to ask why they should be afraid of being caught: “What need we fear who knows

¹²Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 64-65 (italics added).

it, when none can *call our power to account*?”

It would be more surprising if someone who knew *Macbeth* as well as Adam Smith did, and who already had the play in mind when working on *TMS*, did not reference it during a discussion of ambition. For what more powerful literary representation of the evils of “vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself / And falls on th’other [side]” could there be than *Macbeth*, who declares, “For mine own good / All causes shall give way”?

But *Macbeth* is not the only Invisible Shakespeare in Smith’s work. For example, his discussion of the ways in which our sympathetic sufferings mirror, but fall short of, the experiences of the real sufferer cannot help but bring to mind one of the most famous scenes from *King Lear*. Smith writes:

What can be added to the happiness of the man who is in health, who is out of debt, and has a clear conscience? To one in this situation, all accessions of fortune may properly be said to be *superfluous*; and if he is much elevated upon account of them, it must be the effect of the most frivolous levity. This situation, however, may very well be called the natural and ordinary state of mankind. Notwithstanding the present misery and depravity of the world, so justly lamented, this really is the state of the greater part of men But though little can be added to this state, much may be taken from it. Though between this condition and the highest pitch of human prosperity, the interval is but a trifle; between it and the lowest depth of misery the distance is immense and prodigious. Adversity, on this account, necessarily depresses the mind of the sufferer much more below its natural state than prosperity can elevate him above it.¹³

Discussion of the precise nature of necessity, combined with a description about precipitous falls from fortune, and the use of the word “superfluous” make it inevitable that Shakespeare fans will think of the scene in *King Lear* when Lear’s daughters strip him of his retainers and turn him out into the storm:

Goneril: *Hear me, my lord;
What need you five and twenty, ten,
or five,
To follow in a house where twice so
many
Have a command to tend you?*

Regan: *What need one?*

King Lear: *O, reason not the need: our
basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
Allow not nature more than nature
needs,
Man’s life’s as cheap as beast’s: thou
art a lady;
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou
gorgeous wear’st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But,
for true need,—
You heavens, give me that patience,
patience I need!*

(*King Lear*, Act II, Scene 4)

Smith’s sober observation that “but though little can be added to [the state of man’s happiness], much may be taken from it” is a fine summation of the theme of *King Lear*, and particularly of this scene where Lear’s lost power begins to be evident. In the following scene, during the storm on the heath, Lear finally realizes how little sympathy he has had for the suffering of others. He finally recognizes, in other words, the “immense and prodigious” distance that has existed be-

¹³Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 45 (italics added).

tween himself and the

*Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you
are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless
storm,
How shall your houseless heads and un-
fed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness,
defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have
ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to
them,
And show the heavens more just.*

(*King Lear*, Act III, Scene 2)

His moment of realization/conversion is accompanied by a repetition of that word “superfluous” upon which Smith seizes. And Lear’s hyperbolic personal suffering and descriptions of other’s pains have often left his character open to the observation Smith makes that “Adversity, on this account, necessarily depresses the mind of the sufferer much more below its natural state than prosperity can elevate him above it.” Again, the links between Smith’s philosophy and Shakespeare’s play are, as with *Macbeth*, both linguistic and thematic, and it is easy to see why *Lear* would have been in the back of Smith’s mind as he wrote.

Less conclusive, perhaps, are the echoes of *Othello* in a passage that follows shortly after Smith’s observation that “We detest Iago as much as we esteem Othello.” In a discussion about our reaction to excessive passion in others, Smith writes:

Those amiable passions, even when they are acknowledged to be excessive, are never regarded with aversion. There is something agreeable even in the weakness of friendship and humanity. The too tender mother, the too indulgent father,

the too generous and affectionate friend, may sometimes, perhaps, on account of the softness of their natures, be looked upon with a species of pity, in which, however, there is a mixture of love, but can never be regarded with hatred and aversion, or even with contempt, unless by the most brutal and worthless of mankind. It is always with concern, with sympathy and kindness, that we blame them for the extravagance of their attachment. There is a helplessness in the character of extreme humanity which more than anything interests our pity. There is nothing in itself which renders it either ungraceful or disagreeable. We only regret that it is unfit for the world, because the world is unworthy of it, and because it must expose the person who is endowed with it as a prey to the perfidy and ingratitude of insinuating falsehood, and to a thousand pains and uneasinesses, which, of all men, he the least deserves to feel, and which generally too he is, of all men, the least capable of supporting. It is quite otherwise with hatred and resentment. Too violent a propensity to those detestable passions renders a person the object of universal dread and abhorrence, who, like a wild beast, ought, we think, to be hunted out of all civil society.¹⁴

Positioned as it is, only six pages after an explicit reference to *Othello*, it is not surprising that these descriptions of excessive attachment and excessive hatred and resentment return the mind of the reader to *Othello*. The evidence is not as strong here, though, as it is in the *Lear* allusions, and certainly not as strong as in the allusions to *Macbeth*.

Taken as a group, however, I think these moments of “Invisible Shakespeare” in Smith’s work help to remind us of the centrality of literature to the way

¹⁴Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 40.

that Smith thought about the world. I think that, particularly with the references to *Macbeth* that exist in both *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*, they allow us to respond productively to what has been called the “Adam Smith Problem” of reconciling the market-oriented *Wealth of Nations* to the other-regarding *Moral Sentiments*. Work by Vernon Smith, Dierdre McCloskey, and many Adam Smith scholars suggests that this problem is more of a construct than an actual problem. The *Macbeth* evidence is further indication that Smith saw similar concerns and considerations lying behind both works. When we make the invisible Shakespeare visible—when we see the unseen—we are taken just a few more steps into the complexities of Smith’s thought, and gain just a little more insight into the preoccupations that made the mind that preoccupies ours.