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TELLING TALES OUT OF SHAKESPEARE'S SCHOOL:
REREADING "THE BOARDING HOUSE" BY JAMES JOYCE

The title of this article is prompted by the lines from "Othello": *His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift*, lines which proved prophetic of future developments in Literature, of the literary school set up by the great bard. James Joyce was one of its disciples, judging by the way one of the characters from "The Dubliners" qualifies Shakespeare's plays as "thought-tormented music".

Published in 1914, this collection of short stories reveals the modernist Joyce, who, nevertheless, came from the Irish corner "to kiss the Holy Shrine" of Shakespeare.

It must be noted here that as far back as 1964, David Craig was the first to call attention to "the modernist spirit that does seem to belong integrally to "Measure for Measure" [1, p. 196].

In my turn, I would also like to read "The Dubliners" as a Joycean response to the increasingly complex nature of Shakespeare's plays, modernist not only in spirit, but also in form. It will be the purpose of this talk to establish some links and find parallels between "Measure for Measure" and "The Boarding House", one of the tales from "The Dubliners".

Though the gap separating the authors far exceeds three centuries, Joyce appeared to have shared his predecessor's concern for the core values of the society: passionate love and personal freedom, the abuse of power and the sense of honour, as well as the sense of purpose in one's life. Just as Shakespeare was preoccupied with the problem of loss faith and the predominance of formal regulations over human relations, so James Joyce affirms the humanist values and the triumph of love over anti-life, setting to the pillory the double-standard morality of his own age and striving for harmony of form and content – be it the work of art or social relations.

The similarity between "Measure for Measure" and Joyce's short story also springs from the plot and the theme itself, in both work there is a young man who has committed the sin of having intercourse before marriage with a shrewd judge presiding over the couple: an anxious mother, Mrs. Mooney, in "The Boarding House", the figure of Duke, in "Measure for Measure." Both works deal with moral problems, using "the public means that public manners breeds" to the best advantage. There is also a striking likeness between the contrasting pairs of characters, with tables slightly turned: in Shakespeare's play Isabel, the sister, comes to speak in favour of her brother Claudio, in Joyce's story the brother tries to defend the honour of his sister.

Though formally "The Boarding House" denotes a lodging house run by Mrs. Mooney, Polly's mother, the choice of the title seems to be inspired by the lines: *His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift*. One is also sure to pick up the reference to the Bawd House (the brothel) run by Mrs. Overdone in "Measure for

Measure”, where the homonymy of *bawd/board* becomes a source of jokes and rich comic invention. *The board of eleven years* sounds partly autobiographical, for the play marks the eleven-year period of Shakespeare’s career with the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. The word *board* triggers associations with the stage/theatre, especially due to the pun on the phrase *to break/pull down the house* ‘to demolish the house’/ ‘to get the round of applause for the performance.’ The *board* is also evocative of a ship sailing across the sea of life and literature, navigating through vagaries of human behavior (*my invention anchors on Isabel*). *The board* may also be taken as the poet’s writing desk; or his table of memories, and the kitchen table where the food for thought is being cooked. All these associations of the word are as relevant for Shakespeare, as they are relevant for Joyce (to whom it also designates the bench on which the Jesus followers say their prayers).

Coming out of Shakespeare’s boarding school, Joyce seems to take every significant detail aboard his ship, tapping the potential of the great master’s treasure trove of images.

For a start, the way the boarding house is managed by Mrs. Mooney is discussed in art-related terms/words: *population made of artistes from the music hall, shared in common tastes managed the house cunningly, sang comic song; likely artis’s, the music Hall dancers would oblige and Sheridan played waltzes and polkas; revealing their purpose by the little volumes in their gloved hands; the invention was to give her the run of the young men; eyebrows penciled about his little eye; she began to reconstruct the interview of the night before; allusions of this kind made him feel awkward; divine the intention; to face publicity; the details have been invented; to have drawn out every ridiculous detail <..> affair; her mother’s house was beginning to get fame; she was vulgar; but what did her grammar matter if he loved her, jacket of painted flannel; he echoed her phrase applying it to himself; music hall artistes made allusions to Polly* [2, pp. 66–75].

All of these phrases belong to the linear level of plot development, but they are also incorporated into the tale’s multilayer and poly-layer structure pertaining to book-writing and story-telling, so that the story may be perceived as a story about creating a story. Besides, the tale appears to be thriving on Shakespeare’s metaphor of life being a dream, treating literature as a wavery and elusive stuff the dreams are made on: *For sleeping England long time had I watched* (Richard II). Thus, the “Boarding House” is depicted as a sleeping house, i.e. place where people are having dreams. Missis Mooney *woke from her reverie*, while Polly *fell into reverie* (*reverie*, ‘having pleasant dream-like thoughts’). Mr. Doran *remembered well his delirium* (*delirium* ‘the state of mental disturbance characterized by disordered speech and hallucinations’).

The tell-telling names in Joyce may have been influenced by “Measure for Measure”. *Mrs. Mooney* is an appropriate choice for a person who runs the sleeping House. “Mooney” highlights the changing nature of life, bringing to mind the words of Duke: *For thy complexion shifts to strange effects/ after the Moon*. Both writers reveal in their works the inside state of man’s sublunary nature, typifying good and evil, joy and sorrow, the ugly and the beautiful. Phonetically *Polly* resembles the verb *to polish*, which becomes the recurrent detail in the story.

Doran polished his glass with a pocket handkerchief is reminiscent of Joycean intention “to hold up the polished glass to the Irishmen”, and of Hamlet “holding up mirror to nature/ to show virtue her feature, scorn her own/image, and the very age and body of the time his form and/pressure” [3]. *Polly* aptly rhymes with *folly*: 1) ‘an absurd idea’ or 2) ‘an extravagant picturesque building to suit a fanciful taste’. *Poly-* is also a Greek prefix meaning many, in such words as ‘polyfunctional’, ‘polyphonic’, etc. *Doran* means ‘warrior’ in Irish, celebrating the readiness to pave a new way; it may give a hint of time passage in ‘during’ being phonetically similar to it; for a literary-minded reader this name is sure to resonate with “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” a novel by Oscar Wilde about the purpose of art and the value of Beauty.

Not only do these names with a meaning articulate major themes and concepts of the story, they personify the qualities of human consciousness outlined in “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”: changeability, duration in time, its poly-layer character. These names also help to perceive the story as a tissue of delicately woven threads, interrelated and interconnected.

One of the narrative threads in the fabric of the story is the kitchen metaphor which functions in Shakespeare both as a political and metafictional instrument: *Even for our kitchen we kill the fowl of season/ Shall we serve heaven with less respect than we do minister to our great selve*. It also figures prominently in “The Boarding House”, where *collected pieces of crust and broken bread are used to make a good Thursday pudding*, which is meant to convey the idea that “the work is complex, multiple, divisible, separable, made up of its parts” [4, p. 164].

Polly’s occupation as a typist at a corn factory contains an elusive echo of “Measure for Measure”.

Duke to Marianna: Let us go. Our corn’s to reap.

Our corn’s to reap, for yet our tithe’s to sow [3].

To make this detail conspicuous and to enhance the irony, there is a specific word play on the literal meaning in “a corn factory” and the metaphoric in the idiom *Doran had sown his wiled oats*. *To sow wild oats* is ‘to lead the life of pleasure before settling down’. Corns and oats are known as cereal products used for making flour, thus being serviceable in the kitchen. They are also reaped after being sown, which is sure to evoke the Parable of the Sower or The Parable of the Wheat from the Bible (Matthew, 13). For both authors these Parables highlight the necessity of planting good seeds in a human soul.

Polly’s mother, Mrs. Mooney, is an efficient manager of the house. She *keeps everything under lock and key* (safe). This expression is charged in Shakespeare phraseology, for Claudio in “Measure for Measure” is kept under lock and key (in prison). Isabella is the chief key holder of the drama; she has the key to the garden door. She leads Angelo up the garden path, deceiving him. Mrs. Mooney herself is the butcher’s daughter, the choice of her father’s profession (the right man at the kitchen) hints at Shakespeare’s ironic assessment of his own craftsmanship (Ophelia “botches words up to the thoughts”) and the idea that John Shakespeare was a butcher, set out in John Aubrey’s “*Lives of Eminent Men*” (1813).

In full accord with Joyce's appreciation of classical art, one encounters the word *cleaver* 'an axe, heavy, short-handled axe-like tool, used especially for cutting up large pieces of meat.' Upon the first mention this word is to be taken literally: *he went for his wife with a cleaver*. When the word is used for a second time in the comparison – *she dealt with the moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat* – it becomes tinged with sarcasm, brought about by the discrepancy of incompatible notions and leveled at the hypocrisy of the society more preoccupied with material values than with morality or saving of the soul. The reader's perception of the word *cleaver* as an instrument and the doer of the action enhances the comic effect.

It must be noted here that *to cleave* is a Shakespeare word. It reminds the reader of the pivotal question which is at the heart and root of the moral dilemma in "Measure for Measure": *To save your head, to cleave a heart in twain. To cleave* is 'to divide into two parts'; it is used by Shakespeare to denote the struggle of good and evil in a human heart, and the redemption of the sin.

Moreover, in "Measure for Measure" *to cleave* is in close keeping with old use – to remain loyal to one's beliefs. One may also find the same formula in the Queen's words addressed to Hamlet: *You cleave my heart in twain* (i.e. breaking her heart, making her repent). Besides, in Shakespeare *to cleave* takes on religious overtones and is sure to evoke the verb *pierce* ('to cut through as a pointed weapon does; to penetrate with the eye or mind from') Chapter IV of "To the Hebrews": *For the word of God is quick, and speedy in working, and more able to pierce than any twain-edged sword and stretcheth forth to the parting of the soul and of the spirit, and deemer of thoughts, and of intents of hearts* (Wycliffe Bible).

Nevertheless, in both works *cleaving* stands for the moving exploration of human heart. Both Claudio and Doran are caught in a cleft stick – find themselves in a difficult position. Joyce's male character is forced into marriage for fear of losing his job at the winery, his job and his marriage become inextricably interwoven.

Just as Shakespeare's play develops through dialogue and soliloquies, so "The Boarding House" is mediated through the consciousness of two characters – Mrs. Mooney and Mr. Doran – thereby their thoughts become intermingled and merge together. The reader, thus, takes the word *interview* at its morphological structure – *she reconstructed the interview of the night before* – so that 'meeting with someone whose view is to be published' comes to denote a change of the point of view.

What emerges from these streams in Joyce's tale is the use of the word *reparation* in a polyphonic chorus of voices. It first occurs as part of Mrs. Mooney's speech in a reply to a question she is asking herself: *The question was: What reparation would he make? – Marriage!* This question runs parallel to lines from Shakespeare: *What's the remedy – To cleave a heart*. Upon first occurrence the word *reparation* is tinged with military overtones, being appropriate for the reflection of First World War experience, as 'compensation for damage especially by a defeated enemy'. This military hue is backed up by the expression that

follows: *now the girl has to bear the brunt* ('to receive the main force of the enemy's attack'). Further on, the mother's inner speech is switched on to an ironic key, the elevated word *reparation* clashing with colloquial style: *There must be reparation in such cases. Some mothers would be content to patch up such an affair for a sum of money; she had known cases of it. But she would not do so. For her the only reparation could make up the loss of her daughter's honour: marriage* [2, p. 70]. The phonetic contrast of *Money/Mooney* outlines the main conflict of the story as the opposition of the heavenly and the earthly, the material and the spiritual.

As the story unfolds, the word is reverberated by the priest, whose turn of phrase *a loophole of reparation* becomes a part of Doran's memory. Thus, "reparation" is 're-verb-ed and rated' through the lens of the word *loophole*. Joyce brings together the legal acceptations of 'a mistake in a law', the linguistic understanding of 'omission in the text, resulting in ambiguity' and the domestic 'a small opening to admit light'. Being found in close proximity with *confession; to confess; sin; redeeming the sin*; the word *reparation*, upon the third mention, directs the perception into an important channel of meaning – religion.

When it pops up in Doran's head again, the word becomes internalized and made Doran's own: *What am I to do? He echoed that phrase and applied it to himself. What am I to do? The instinct of the celibate warned him to hold back. But his sin was there. Even his sense of honour told him that reparations must be made for such a sin.*

Thus, the word *reparation* becomes a linguistic issue, and a channel through which one stream of consciousness flows into another; a slippery stepping stone that leads from mind to mind. It also provides a link with Shakespeare, reminding the reader of the lines: *What's the remedy? Cleave a heart in twain*. Both *remedy* (a medical word) and *reparation* (military term) attain religious overtones. Thus, Joyce manages to bring the temporality (or historicity) with the eternity. It also helps to release the tension between the fear of marriage and irony, the two opposites that cancel each other out.

The concept of marriage is just as poly/functional in the story as it is in "Measure for Measure". On the linear level of the plot, it is "the marriage of true minds" that Mrs. Mooney aims at for her daughter. On the metafictional level, however, it partakes of marrying up, matching together form and content, one word to another.

Moreover, the romantic relations between two lovers are represented in purely Shakespearean terms.

He remembered well, with the curious patient memory of the celibate, the first casual caresses her dress, her breath, her fingers had given him. Then late one night as he was undressing for bed she had tapped at his door, timidly. She wanted to relight her candle at his for hers had been blown out by a gust. It was her bath night. She wore a loose open combing-jacket of printed flannel. Her white instep shone in the opening of her furry slippers and the blood glowed warmly behind her perfumed skin. From her hands and wrists too as she lit and steadied her candle a faint perfume arose [2, p. 73].

The candle symbolism in Joyce is the “expression of clarity, the supreme quality of beauty being a light” [4, p. 144]. Moreover, it looks back to “the torches ... not light them for themselves” in “Measure for Measure”. It also reminds one of the lines from *Othello* in which the Bard specifies the functions of Art by marrying up the Christian symbol of human soul and spirit of truth (Matthews 5:15) with the ancient Greek metaphors of light (or a lamp) as art, illuminating the mind, and the Prometheus fire enflaming the heart with the warmth and intensity of feelings:

*Put out the light, and then put out the light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me. But once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume. When I have pluck'd thy rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again,
It must needs wither. I'll smell it on the tree [3].*

Thus, analyzing the vertical context of Joyce's tale, one may say that “The Boarding House” becomes a place of confession, where Joyce found his Promethean heat “to relume the light” of art-nouveau and to experience the moment of epiphany (or ‘a light of revelation, and the twelfth night of Christmas’).

Drawing on powerful Shakespearean images, he created his own story of the mystery of art and the wonder of creation. Through the allegories of the kitchen, marriage and the candle symbolism the Irish writer developed his own aesthetic principles of the artistic work's integrity, harmony and clarity (*integratas*, *consonantia* and *claritas*) to be established and explained in “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.” His broad social concern is made manifest in the use of religious vocabulary and the words with military connotations.

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