The Heart's Abundance: Seduction and Bad Faith in The Reign of King Edward III

by David P. Gontar (December 2014)

— "*from the heart's abundance speaks the tongue*" — *King Edward III*

Arguably the first literary employment of a 'Freudian slip' occurs in Shakespeare's *The Reign of King Edward III*. The early part of this largely unrecognized play is concerned with protagonist Edward's love of another man's wife, the Countess Salisbury. Though he is supposed to be readying an invasion of France, he becomes so distracted by her that he has trouble concentrating on business. When the Earl of Derby attempts to report the cooperation of the Holy Roman Emperor, he is only half heard by a giddy Edward.

KING EDWARD

What news with you?

AUDLEY

I have, my liege, levied those horse and foot,
According as your charge, and brought them hither.

KING EDWARD

Then let those foot trudge hence upon those horse,
According to our discharge, and be gone.
Derby, I'll look upon the Countess' mind anon.

EARL OF DERBY

The Countess' mind, my liege?

KING EDWARD

I mean the Emperor. Leave me alone.

AUDLEY (*to Derby*)

What is his mind?

EARL OF DERBY

Let’s leave him to his humour.

KING EDWARD

Thus from the heart’s abundance speaks the tongue:
‘Countess’ for ‘Emperor’ – and indeed why not?
She is as imperator over me, and I to her
Am as a kneeling vassal that observes
The pleasure or displeasure of her eye.
(Sc. 3, 29-42)

But the lapse of focus is revealing.

Like a practiced analysand, Edward understands its meaning: the Countess rules over him as might a monarch. By use of this device, Shakespeare is showing us how to read his dramatic poetry, not by taking things at face value, but by treating even minor inadvertences as symptoms of unacknowledged feelings. This principle applies across the board, not just to Edward alone. As we learn about him by hearkening to his use and misuse of language, so we can and should approach other characters in this manner, including Countess Salisbury.

King David II of Scotland has made incursions on the marches, holding Countess Salisbury hostage at Roxsburgh Castle. Both he and Sir William Douglas harbor designs on her, (Sc. 2, 42-47) but are interrupted by the approaching English army. The Countess is making use of her status and charm as a means of shielding herself from the more hasty ravishments of the foe. As the Scots flee, Edward and his peers occupy the stage, where the King is instantly smitten by her. In interpreting their dialogue the reader will understand that she is a mature and savvy woman unaware of neither her beauty nor the impact she has had on King David, Lord Douglas, and now on England’s sovereign. As the Chorus in *Henry V* bids us exercise our imagination in approaching the history plays (*King Henry V,* I, i, 23-31), let us discreetly observe the Countess. As she kneels and bows before Edward, does she not reveal a calculated décolletage? (Sc. 2, 107) Again, she can hardly ignore his reaction: he is stunned. (Sc. 2, 128-136) Repeatedly she begs him to stay, which under the circumstances means to spend at least several days and nights under her roof. She makes the obligatory reference to her

husband, realizing that this will have a stimulating rather than a dampening effect on the royal ardor. (Sc. 2, 121) Then follows her full invitation. Each segment should be parsed with care. Notice in particular that Edward's encomium is cast in rhyme. (Sc. 2, 128-136) Though she may not overhear what he says, her own words continue the fulsome rhyming, most unusual in this play.

COUNTESS SALISBURY

1. Let not thy presence, like the April sun,
Flatter our earth, and suddenly be done.

King Edward is compared to the sun which might warm the earth but soon vanish. If the sun is male, then must the earth in this setting be a woman. A real man does not shine on his world and vanish the next moment; for he has the power to endure, to prove himself. Use of the verb 'flatter' shows Edward that the Countess is pleased with his manner and ministrations.

2. More happy do not make our outward wall
Than thou wilt grace our inner house withal.

Readers of Shakespeare will know that he commonly treats the human body as an enclosing wall. (See, *e.g.*, *Twelfth Night*, I, i, 44-45) This concept emerges naturally from courtly speech which customarily veiled amorous references in decorous but easily deciphered terms. "Our outward wall" would thus allude to the Countess' body. In that context, "inner house" refers to what might be termed her corporeal "privy" chamber. On the surface she says, "Don't just make the outer walls of this castle glad with your presence; enter, come inside, and grace our warm rooms with your strength and becoming appearance." A coarser but quite reasonable acceptation would be: "Don't just feast your eyes on my face and figure; come make love to me."

It should be noted too that the Countess' discourse is prefaced with the fact that she is married. So, for that matter, is Edward. The King and his court know full well that the Earl of Salisbury is off in the defense of his country, which creates a "David and Bathsheba" atmosphere. Indeed, the Countess has just fended off a "King David" (of Scotland). And isn't Bathsheba the gal who chose to take a bath on her rooftop in full view of the King? What was she thinking? The Countess is her descendant. Rather than putting on modesty and simplicity, Countess Salisbury goes out of her way to play the vamp, or, in Elizabethan language, the wanton.

3. Our house, my liege, is like a country swain

Whose habit rude, and manners blunt and plain,
Presageth naught, yet inly beautified
With bounty's riches and fair hidden pride.

Here there is an apparent gender switch. The Countess' house, which had been a feminine object suitable to enter and possess, now with the presence of the King of England becomes a "country swain." Is there any reader of Shakespeare who doesn't know that in Elizabethan England "country" was on occasion used as an oblique reference to the pudenda? (See, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, III, ii, 111-115; A similarly notorious play on words is found in *King Henry V*, III, iv, 1-55.) In fact, even "countess" can be used with the same off-color connotation. Husband Salisbury is not a "count" but an earl, while his wife is a "Countess." "Country swain" may therefore be glossed as "a virile commoner engaged in sexual intercourse." This is supported by "habit rude" and the phallic "blunt and plain." "Naught" is but a short step to "naughty" and also points to vaginal vacancy. Recall King Richard's upbraiding of Sir Robert Brackenbury in *King Richard III*:

Naught to do with Mrs Shore? I tell thee, fellow:
He that doth naught with her – excepting one –
Were best to do it secretly alone.

BRACKENBURY
What one, my lord?

RICHARD GLOUCESTER
Her husband, knave. Wouldst thou betray me?
(I, i, 99-103)

"Bounty's riches" is polymorphously perverse. "Fair hidden pride" is robustly phallic.

4. For where the golden ore doth buried lie,
The ground, undecked with nature's tapestry,
Seems barren, sere, unfertile, fruitless, dry
And where the upper turf of earth doth boast
His pride, perfumes and parti-coloured cost,
Delve there and find this issue and their pride
To spring from ordure and corruption stied.

What's this? It seems an almost metaphysical disquisition on nature. The trope setting forth a contrast between barren surface and rich, pungent depth is extended. Though the exterior may

appear dry and “unfertile,” the act of “delving” will find “issue” (that is, generation) and a foundation of lush decadence. That is to say, “I appear to be plain and lacking in sensuality, but if you plumb me to my depths you will find me moist and yielding.” Keep in mind that the Countess’ ostensible purpose is nothing more than a perfunctory proposal that the King of England take rest in her castle. How the above words might be construed and confined to that end is hard to see. Bear in mind that within this castle is the Countess’ bedroom, just as within the body of this allegedly austere woman is her sex.

> 5. But, to make up my all-too-long compare,
> These ragged walls no testimony are
> What is within, but like a cloak doth hide
> From weather’s waste the under garnished pride.
> More gracious than my terms can, let thee be:
> Entreat thyself to stay a while with me.
> (Sc. 2, 149-161)

The exterior/interior theme is reiterated. The outside may be plain, but wonders within await. What could they be? Edward is solicited to tarry, not in the Salisbury manse, but “with me.” A concealing “cloak” beckons for removal. This lady does everything but wink. Words and metaphors exuding a frank sexuality are put in play, a veritable orgy of sensual signifiers. And at whom is this “perfumed” stream of discourse aimed? At the man standing before her, whom she must know by his every expression and gesture is utterly dazzled by her. The Countess could hardly be more seductive without disrobing in front of him. We have here not a mere Freudian slip but a veritable down-hill slalom of innuendo. Or to shift the metaphor, she is not making a Freudian ‘slip’ but wearing one. Her sibilant discourse makes her appear “slippery.” (*The Winter’s Tale*, I, ii, 275)

The interesting question – the question of the ages – is whether the Countess is speaking deliberately and conscious of the unavoidable construction that vulnerable Edward would put on her words, or whether, as in the case of the Freudian slip, the use of these terms is somehow not actually so construed by her. Could she have missed her own meaning?

The following encounters of King Edward and this seductress have, however, a sharply contrasting tone: when approached by him for intimacy, she is shocked. One passage suffices.

> KING EDWARD
>
> I wish no more of thee than thou mayest give,
> Nor beg I do not, but I rather buy –

That is, thy love; and for that love of thine
In rich exchange I tender to thee mine.

COUNTESS SALISBURY

But that your lips were sacred, good my lord,
You would profane the holy name of love.
The love you offer me you cannot give,
For Caesar owes that tribute to his queen.
That love you beg of me I cannot give,
For Sarah owes that duty to her lord.
He that doth clip or counterfeit your stamp
Shall die, my lord: and will your sacred self
Commit high treason ‘gainst the king of heaven
To stamp his image in forbidden metal,
Forgetting your allegiance and your oath?
In violating marriage’ sacred law
You break a greater honour then yourself:
To be a king is of a younger house
Than to be married. Your progenitor,
Sole reining Adam o’er the universe,
By God was honoured for a married man,
But not by him anointed for a king.
It is a penalty to break your statutes,
Though not enacted with your highness’ hand;
How much more to infringe the holy act
Made by the mouth of God, sealed with his hand!
I know my sovereign – in my husband’s love,
Who now doth loyal service in his wars –
Doth but so try the wife of Salisbury,
Whether she will hear a wanton’s tale or no.
Lest being therein guilty by my stay,
From that, not from my leige, I turn away.
(Sc. 2, 417-444)

This lecture would be all well and good had it not been preceded by effusive flirtation. The gentleman has been led on. Where are the lovely rhymes we heard before? Except in the emphatic couplet (“stay,” “away”) they are gone. Later, to prevent Edward’s intrusions, Countess

Salisbury goes so far as to threaten suicide. (Sc. 3, 165-183) Why, then, in the absence of her esteemed husband, was the lady so intent on taking into her house the ardent King of England? Why seek to draw him in with silver tones laden with erotic imagery? If courtly etiquette required a conventional gesture of hospitality, it could have been kept straightforward and to the point: “If my leige be weary of broils, he can rest himself here in our home.” Period. Nothing more would have been required. While in objective terms we regard her attractive, how much more fetching would Countess Salisbury would have been for us had she been blessed with the gift of artless speech, of “russet yeas and honest kersey noes”! (*Love’s Labours’ Lost*, V, ii, 413) Alas, she is forthright only in conflict and chastisement. Remember that King Edward at first declines the invitation to spend the night. (Sc. 2, 126-126) There was no wooing then. Considering her concern with propriety and her professed horror of infidelity, how can we account for her persistence once her offer is refused by Edward? How explain the titillating form of her importunacy?

We witness this sort of behavior in other Shakespearean heroines. For example, Isabella, the beautiful religious postulant in *Measure for Measure*, in seeking to persuade Lord Angelo to spare her brother’s life, defends her chastity in language so graphic that Angelo becomes increasingly libidinous.

ANGELO

Admit no other way to save his life —
As I subscribe not that nor any other —
But, in the loss of question, that you his sister,
Finding yourself desired of such a person
Whose credit with the judge, or own great place,
Could fetch your brother from the manacles
Of the all-binding law, and that there were
No earthly mean to save him, but that either
You must lay down the treasures of your body
To this supposed, or else to let him suffer —
What would you do?

ISABELLA

As much for my poor brother as myself.
That is, were I under the terms of death,
Th’ impression of keen whips I’d wear as rubies,

> And strip myself to death as to a bed
> That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
> My body up to shame.
> (II, iv, 88-104)

Is this, perhaps, a tad more than called for? Why not just refuse? Again, the woman here is speaking to her would-be seducer, to the one professing love and need for her. (II, iv, 141) Is this the ideal moment to chat about being stripped naked, adorned with bleeding wounds resembling rubies, as one trundles off to a "bed" of death? Prominent critic Jonathan Dollimore has gone so far as to denominate this language as pornographic. The fact is that no woman is going to use such words to preserve chastity – unless her mental condition is disintegrating.

Think of Lucrece, the victim of rape at the hands of Prince Tarquin in Shakespeare's long poem. Why in the absence of her husband does she invite the Prince into her home and share a long intimate meal with him late at night? Why, in a house heavily guarded, does she not struggle or scream? (Gontar, 206, ff)

The answer to these questions is that the human mind is complex, and what emerges superficially may not convey all that lies within, in our "heart's abundance." King Edward is asked about the Emperor, but accidentally answers referring to the Countess. The Countess Salisbury may be chaste, but speaks far too enticingly to a man she knows is lusting after her. So does Isabella in *Measure for Measure*. The behavior of Collatine's wife is congruent.

What these passages demonstrate is that powerful impulses can't easily be papered over. When we tell a simple untruth, we deceive someone. But when we try to smother our own deepest urges, we must deceive ourselves. There lies bad faith. Countess Salisbury, Isabella, and Lucrece blind themselves not merely to their own sexuality, but to the significance of their ribald utterances and conduct for men who pursue them.

The most thorough attempt in modern thought to address this syndrome is that of Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre is unique in being both a playwright and trained philosopher. His treatment of bad faith is part of a complete metaphysical system too complex to be presented here. But it may be useful to give an indication of how one of the few thinkers to tackle this sort of bad faith proceeds. It isn't suggested that Sartre answers all questions, but rather that Shakespeare and Sartre explore a little understood aspect of human life. Here is a representative section from "Patterns of Bad Faith" in *Being and Nothingness*.

> Take the example of a woman who has consented to go out with a particular man for the

first time. She knows very well the intentions which the man who is speaking to her cherishes regarding her. She knows also that it will be necessary sooner or later for her to make a decision. But she does not want to realize the urgency; she concerns herself only with what is respectful and discreet in the attitude of her companion. She does not apprehend this conduct as an attempt to achieve what we call "the first approach"; that is, she does not want to see possibilities of temporal development which his conduct presents. She restricts this behavior to what is in the present; she does not wish to read in the phrases which he addresses to her anything other than their explicit meaning. If he says to her, "I find you so attractive!" she disarms this phrase of its sexual background; she attaches to the conversation and to the behavior of the speaker, the immediate meanings, which she imagines as objective qualities. The man who is speaking to her appears to her sincere and respectful as the table is round or square, as the wall coloring is blue or gray. The qualities thus attached to the person she is listening to are in this way fixed in a permanence like that of things, which is no other than the projection of the strict present of the qualities into the temporal flux. This is because she does not quite know what she wants. She is profoundly aware of the desire which she inspires, but the desire cruel and naked would humiliate and horrify her. Yet she would find no charm in a respect which would be only respect. In order to satisfy her, there must be a feeling which is addressed wholly to her *personality — i.e.,* to her full freedom — and would be a recognition of her freedom. But at the same time this feeling must be wholly desire, that is, it must address her body as object. This time then she refuses to apprehend the desire for what it is; she does not even give it a name; she recognizes it only to the extent that it transcends itself toward admiration, esteem, respect and that it is wholly absorbed in the more refined forms which it produces, to the extent of no longer figuring anymore as a sort of warmth and density. But then suppose he takes her hand. This act of her companion risks changing the situation by calling for an immediate decision. To leave the hand there is to consent in herself to flirt, to engage herself. To withdraw it is to break the troubled and unstable harmony which gives the hour its charm. The aim is to postpone the moment of decision as long as possible. We know what happens next; the young woman leaves her hand there, but she *does not notice* that she is leaving it. She does not notice because it happens by chance that she is at this moment all intellect. She draws her companion up to the most lofty regions of sentimental speculation; she speaks of Life, of her life, she shows herself in her essential aspect — a personality, a consciousness. And during this time the divorce of the body from the soul is accomplished; the hand rests inert between the warm hands of her companion — neither consenting nor resisting — a thing.

> We shall say that this woman is in bad faith. But we see immediately that she uses various procedures in order to maintain herself in this bad faith. She has disarmed the actions of her companion by reducing them to being only what they are; that is, existing in the mode of the in-itself. But she permits herself to enjoy his desire, to the extent that she will apprehend it as not being what it is, [not recognizing] its transcendence. Finally while sensing profoundly the presence of her own body, to the point of being aroused, perhaps – she realizes herself as *not being* her own body, and she contemplates it as though from above as a passive object to which events can *happen* but which can neither provoke them nor avoid them because all its possibilities are outside of it. (Sartre, 96-98, emphasis added by Sartre, except in line starting "But she . . .")

It is clear that Shakespeare is giving dramatic form to the same phenomenon Sartre approaches in an expository manner. Countess Salisbury savors the attentions of the King of England. It would be a feather in her cap to have him stay the night and be entertained in her home. Further, it is inconceivable that she is unaware of the inclinations and passions of the men around her (Sc. 2, 1-14); she can surely see the effect she has on Edward well before he announces his desires. She is not satisfied to accept the King's refusal to spend an unspecified time as her houseguest, and reacts by using all her feminine wiles to get him to remain with her. She enjoys his enthusiasm and his flattery, yet obviously doesn't admit to herself what she is doing when she cajoles him with florid and insinuating rhetoric. The Countess Salisbury is no dull housewife. She is thrilled by her exchanges with the King of England. In Sartrean terms, "she permits herself to enjoy his desire," stokes the fire and is astonished by the heat.

The reader will also recall that in *The Winter's Tale* King Leontes could not succeed in persuading his friend Polixenes to remain with him and his wife Hermione as their guest. He agrees that she should try herself to persuade Polixenes to stay, but when she prevails and he consents to remain, Leontes is consumed with jealousy, imagining that they are having a tryst. In *King Edward III*, the Countess, like Queen Hermione, succeeds in persuading a King to sojourn a while in her home. Like Hermione, Countess Salisbury is enchanting and flirtatious, and like Polixenes, Edward consents. But Polixenes is not in love with Hermione as Edward is with the Countess. In *The Winter's Tale* the bad faith lies in Leontes and his boundless and groundless jealousy. He cannot admit that Polixenes runs away not because of alleged guilt but because Leontes commissioned Camillo his steward to murder Polixenes. Camillo discloses this to the targeted houseguest, after which they both flee. Their escape fails to prove anyone's guilt except Leontes'. Because of his gross self-deception, we can say that Leontes is up to his eyeballs in bad faith. In the case of *King Edward III*, on the other hand, the Countess

plays a game of faux seduction, as though she really intended to allow Edward the intimacies for which he “delves.” The truth is she relishes being the object of his intense masculine interest, and cannot admit to herself that her behavior is actually inflammatory and misleading. When, quite predictably, he presses his case, the Countess rises into the stratosphere of remonstration, hardly believing that Edward would dare be so forward, overlooking the not-so-subtle role she herself played in encouraging his advances. The plays of Shakespeare are home to many deceivers. As Catherine says in *King Henry V, “O bon Dieu! Les langues des hommes sont pleines de tromperies.”* (V, ii, 116-117) But equally – if not more – vexatious in Shakespeare are the self-deceivers, those who can do anything so long as they know nothing about it.

WORKS CITED:

David P. Gontar, *Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*, New English Review Press, 2013

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel Barnes, trans., Philosophical Library, 1956

William Shakespeare The Complete Works, 2d Ed., S. Wells, G. Taylor, eds., Oxford University Press, Clarendon, 2005

David P. Gontar’s latest book is