

**RITUALS OF REHABILITATION:
LEARNING COMMUNITY FROM SHAKESPEARE BEHIND BARS**

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

In a panoptic society like ours, prison arts programs can guide us in the task of revitalizing human values and building ethical communities. The quasi-ritual practice of theater, especially, has the potential to develop community among its participants. This thesis takes Shakespeare Behind Bars, a prison Shakespeare program at Luther Lockett Correctional Complex, as a practical guide in addressing our alienation and developing ethical communal relations.

This investigation considers the operation of ritual and ritualized practices within the playtext of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* and the 2014 SBB production, the structure of the SBB program, and the inmate actors' everyday interactions in order to see the relationships among imaginative play, ritualized practices, and our construction of ethical communities. I argue that SBB models genuine communal engagement and helps inmate actors develop rehabilitative modes of being with others that reinforce the moves of ethical life.

Shakespeare's *Much Ado* explores the power of ritual to rebuild after a moral wrong. I contend that the SBB production delivers practical answers to interpretive quandaries in the scholarship concerning Claudio and the efficacy of ritual.

Outside the boundaries of ritual proper and the dramatic stage, Catherine Bell (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*) and Michel de Certeau (*The Practice of Everyday Life*) show how incorporating the transformative power of ritual into everyday practice reinstates human and ethical significance in routines that become mechanistic within the

prison system. I argue that SBB demonstrates—in their approach to appropriating a canonical script and in their everyday greetings—how ritualized activities aid in resisting the dehumanizing effects of a power structure that values efficiency over personal relationships.

Ritualized practice carries meaning that the dominant discourse cannot subsume. The ambiguity of these practices then holds the potential to unify participants, creating community and organizing a redemptive social order. SBB actors enact their own rehabilitative rituals that aid in creating a liminal space where it becomes possible to reconstruct meaningful ethical relations. The result is a transformative experience for the inmates and the audience, revealing, by extension, a means of moving toward ethical rehabilitation for the isolated modern subject, as well.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the 2013-2014 Shakespeare Behind Bars circle at Luther Lockett Correctional Complex. Without these generous and courageous men, none of this would have been possible.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

“IT’S HARD TO BE GOOD IN HERE”

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world;
And for because the world is populous,
And here is not a creature but myself,
I cannot do it. Yet I'll hammer it out.
(*Richard II* 5.5.1-5)

This soliloquy kicked off the opening act of the 2014 performance of Shakespeare Behind Bars, a company of inmates at Luther Lockett Correctional Complex, a men’s prison in Kentucky, who come together to study and perform Shakespeare’s works. These lines were spoken by a boy who could easily have been one of my students, a member of the younger troupe called the Journeymen (for 18- to 21-year-olds). This group of eight young men was responsible for the pre-show, before the Shakespeare Behind Bars cast presented a full production of *Much Ado about Nothing*. Each delivered a monologue or a sonnet he had chosen, most relating to themes of exile, loss, and imprisonment. For the finale, they performed a choral reading, an ensemble piece that involves giving lines back and forth as if it were a conversation, from Romeo’s monologue about being banished.

One began with a whole portion of the monologue:

'Tis torture, and not mercy. Heaven is here
Where Juliet lives, and every cat and dog
And little mouse, every unworthy thing,
Live here in heaven and may look on her,
But Romeo may not. ...

They are free men, but I am banished.
And say'st thou yet that exile is not death?
Hadst thou no poison mix'd, no sharp-ground knife,
No sudden mean of death, though ne'er so mean,
But 'banished' to kill me?—'banished'?
(*Romeo and Juliet* 3.3.29-33, 42-46)

Then the men split into two groups, the first group insisting, “This is dear mercy,” and the second contending, “and thou see'st not!” “This is dear mercy,” “and thou see'st not—Tis torture.” “Tis torture,” the first group agreed, turning to face the audience and repeating at a shout, “Tis torture. Tis torture!” Following it in unison, “Not mercy.” Then each man peeled off from the group and exited the stage with his head hung low, whispering, “Banished.” Banished. Banished. Banished. It was a powerful scene to see performed by young men in state-issued boots and khaki.

These lines likening banishment to a peculiar kind of torture, even death, clearly resonated with the inmates who spoke them inside the chapel at Luther Luckett that May evening. I was in the audience that night because I had heard about the Shakespeare Behind Bars program through Hank Rogerson's 2007 documentary of the same name, and I wanted to learn more about this group of men who volunteered their time and dedicated themselves to studying and performing Shakespeare while incarcerated. I spent nearly three weeks in La Grange, Kentucky in May of 2014, visiting several rehearsals and performances for both inmate and public audiences. The main event, their production of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, takes center stage in the observations and analysis to follow, but this opening act is also revealing. It encapsulates the deep relevance of prison arts programs such as these,¹ indeed of the experience of violent criminals in prison (a population we are typically quick to dismiss as different

from us), to the pervasive desire for meaningful relationships with other human beings that we all share.

Scholars who visit the Shakespeare Behind Bars program often marvel that Shakespeare would have been delighted to have convicts performing his work. But these lines have been resonating with the ordinary person for centuries. We have all felt the pang of exile, the loneliness that feels worse than death, the anxious suspicion that we are not at home here. The Journeymen's palpable discouragement at their own banishment felt eerily familiar.

Commiserating with Richard II and Romeo, Hamlet (also featured in the opening act) ascribes this distinct anxiety to the disorienting shift from premodernity to modernity: "The time is out of joint" (*Hamlet* 1.5.189). For Hamlet, his father's untimely murder symbolized the death of old values, and his uncle's rise to the throne with Hamlet's mother as his wife signified a dramatic reevaluation of values. Hamlet was caught in the middle of the upheaval, unsure of how to act and who to trust. Hamlet's sense of the disjointedness of the age persists into postmodernity. For Hamlet and for us, the ethical norms are changing, and it is unclear what it is our duty to do. Like the banished Romeo, Hamlet no longer feels at home in the world. "Denmark's a prison," he says (2.2.239), and in the words of the assistant facilitator for Shakespeare Behind Bars, Carol Stewart, "it's hard to be good in here," in the home that is a prison. Again, we can relate to Hamlet's anxiety over doing the right thing and knowing how to act in a state of instability.

In our particular moment, the work of thinkers like Foucault and Heidegger are apt for describing this alienation. With Foucault, I take the prison to be exemplary of modern life, inundated with technologies of discipline and surveillance that we, the subjects of these techniques of power, have been trained to exercise on ourselves and each other. These individualizing practices are one way to account for the fragmentation and isolation that we relate to in Romeo's banishment speech. Using Shakespeare to explore the timbre of our alienation, however, counteracts the Foucauldian narrative that would suggest that it is unique to our age. Hamlet's lines remind us that these commonplaces about the disjointedness of *modern* life reflect a persistent feature of *human* life and culture. The prison example we get from Foucault, Shakespeare Behind Bars, and Hamlet demonstrates how we all experience our individual contexts as closed systems that are out of our control and in which it is hard to be good.

Of course, the inmates who participate in Shakespeare Behind Bars have experienced a more extreme form of ethical alienation than most, having violated the ethical community themselves. A medium security facility, Luther Lockett houses a range of men who have committed violent crimes. According to SBB artistic director (and primary facilitator) Matt Wallace, about half of the men in the program are doing time for murder, roughly the other half for sex offenses. Hamlet's paralysis at not knowing how to be good finds its epitome in the prison inmate whose entire life hangs suspended in time, without a clear indication of how to repair the wrongs done and return to ethical life in a community. But the task of constituting communities of responsive ethical subjects persists beyond the prison fences. We too find ourselves

isolated and alienated from others, dominated by the dogmatic claims of scientific rationality, economic efficiency, and stubborn individualism. Heidegger ascribes this condition to the proliferation of a technological view of the world that reduces the pulsing abundance of being presented in the human person to a mere “human resource” to be used as a means to our ends. In the face of such values dominating our culture, how can we summon the creative freedom to consciously and conscientiously build communities of meaning? This is the question I brought to Kentucky. The men in Shakespeare Behind Bars helped me uncover some answers in the way they established their own rehabilitative modes of interacting with each other that build a supportive ethical community that responds to the needs of its members with empathy, generosity, and honesty.

In short, we find a solution in the creative and communal practices of the dramatic arts, following a rich tradition in the history of philosophy that sees a role for the arts in the formation of ethical subjects. Thus, I take the Shakespeare Behind Bars community as my practical guide in addressing the anxiety of exile and exploring the problem of how to rehabilitate those who have been exiled from an ethical community. The program has been designed with such restorative aims in view. The troupe’s approach to acting emphasizes empathy and honesty over deception, and the habits they develop as a group reinforce the ethical lessons they’re practicing on stage. For these men, developing ethical relations is not a side effect of their work together; it is a priority. “The play is *not* the thing,” one of them told me. They know that the work they’re doing is rehabilitative and significant.

Indeed, when I first introduced myself and told the inmates that I knew about Shakespeare but not about acting, they warned me I wouldn't learn that here: "The secret is, we're not acting," I was told. Instead, they are striving to relate empathically to a character, inhabit honest emotions on stage, and "tell the truth" (a motto of theirs, thanks to the program's founder, Curt Tofteland), skills they will need to practice for their eventual reintegration into society. Honesty—that's the number one rule in the SBB circle, as they call it. It structures the expectations the men have for their interactions with each other and the way they approach acting. The men choose their own parts, and then they work over the course of a full year to relate honestly to the character as a full-bodied and complex human being, be it a persona analogous to their own or one more akin to an enemy, a victim, or the person they wish to become. They reflect on what motivates their own everyday decisions and strive to understand another person's reasons for behaving as they do as they work to bring a character to life.

This exercise in self-reflection and empathy extends to the whole group: when two men want the same role, they must talk it over, examine their reasons, and decide together not who deserves the part, but who *needs* it more. These men are committed to developing their community and strive to be attuned to each other's needs. Furthermore, unlike sex offender programs or substance abuse treatment plans, for example, SBB men receive no time off their sentences for participating. The rewards are entirely personal and immaterial. Nevertheless, the group has no trouble garnering interest; quite the contrary, they have to maintain rigorous standards for membership. New members must be sponsored by veteran members, and the whole circle must approve a new recruit. In

addition, the program requires the men to have one year of good behavior before they can join, and disciplinary infractions are taken very seriously, sometimes meriting their own repercussions within the group aside from the official sanctions.

Over the past 19 years, this group has developed principles and practices that develop ethical relations within their community—that develop a cohesive community within a prison, no less!—and that support the personal transformation and rehabilitation of individual members. The sense of accountability among these men is paired with a great sense of artistic freedom in making choices on stage. Their process of setting a Shakespearean script on its feet contains numerous object lessons in ethical life, underscoring the difficulty and vital importance of taking responsibility for one’s choices, responding to others by improvising within the boundaries of a given script, and striving for honesty and empathy.

I have come to understand the transformative force behind the SBB practice as akin to that of ritual, a fraught term that merits careful determination in the pages to come. The significance of their performance of the canonical Shakespeare supersedes repetition and entertainment; it is an appropriation of a cultural icon that restores agency and power to disenfranchised actors. In addition, their everyday acts of honest self-reflection and compassion for one another develop a ritual community that supports their personal growth. This result may be unsurprising to one familiar with Victor Turner’s work in ritual studies, for Turner likens theater to a quasi-ritual performance that transforms participants by drawing them into a liminal space of free creativity before returning them to society to take up their place anew. The real explanatory insight,

though, in my judgment, comes from two theorists, Catherine Bell and Michel de Certeau, who operate within a Foucauldian conception of power relations as constitutive of ourselves and our reality. Within that framework, these two thinkers draw our attention to the ways that our reality is constructed in a repressive and ethically suspect way, subjugating creativity and basic human values to the hegemony of claims to scientific truth and economic efficiency. Bell and de Certeau locate sources of resistance to that dominant discourse in individuals' appropriations of it. As we will see, a combination of Bell's work on ritualization (in contrast to ritual proper) and de Certeau's ideas about everyday practices as subtly subversive gives us a productive way to understand the potential SBB holds for ameliorating the condition of panoptic individualization that has persisted from Hamlet's disjointed time into our own.

In her comprehensive treatment of the empowering practice of ritualization in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Bell suggests that the potential to resist the dominant structure and reinstate human values lies in the ritualization of common practices. In its very nondiscursivity, Bell explains, ritualized practice is capable of infusing our actions with meaning that the dominant discourse cannot subsume. The ambiguity of these practices then holds the potential to unify diverse groups of people, creating communal relations and organizing a redemptive social order for the individual.

By focusing on the potential for ritualization in all human activities, Bell borders on de Certeau's theory of everyday practice as another source of resistance. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau distinguishes between *strategies* of power, which overtly govern the structure of society, and *tactics*, which work within the dominant

structure to appropriate and subvert its power. For de Certeau, everyday practices such as walking, reading, and cooking all hold potential for working tactically to return creative power to individuals and to restore human values such as generosity that are excluded from the strategic rationality of economic reasoning that has come to dominate. Reading de Certeau with a mind to rehabilitating the possibility of meaningful relations among human beings reminds us of the ethical implications of this resistance in a world governed by principles of economy and efficiency at the cost of human dignity.

Together, Bell and de Certeau present a solution to the problem of building community in a world organized by Foucauldian power relations: ritualizing the structure of our everyday practices to reinvigorate their meaning can change the way we interact with others and undermine the forces of economy and power that threaten the expression of our shared humanity in ethical communities. This is the lens through which I have come to understand the remarkable possibility that *Shakespeare Behind Bars* represents: a ritual community that rehabilitates individuals who find themselves exiled. It operates through ritualized practices that are themselves creative and tactical, suggesting how theater itself can be a rehabilitative and transformative mode of activity.

In the analysis that follows, I will employ the critical apparatus that Turner, Bell, and de Certeau provide as a tool for understanding the texture of the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* community, the expression of their founding principles, and the significance of their everyday practices. This investigation spans multiple levels of interpretation, considering the operation of ritual and ritualized practices within the playtext of *Much*

Ado, in the SBB production of that play, in the structure of the SBB program, and finally in the inmate actors' everyday interactions and activities.

After expanding upon the theoretical framework already outlined, I will examine some of the critical questions at stake in the scholarship around Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, focusing in particular on the Claudio-Hero plot. Beneath the crowd-pleasing romantic plot of Beatrice and Benedick runs a complex treatment of both ritual and reconciliation in Claudio's cruel rejection of Hero at their would-be wedding and the funeral penance Leonato assigns him to bring their love back to life at the end of the play. No strangers to violent offenses and the desire for redemption, the Shakespeare Behind Bars cast brings unusual depth and fullness to this often deflated aspect of the drama, especially to the character of Claudio. Thus, the SBB production also delivers relevant *practical* answers to interpretive quandaries in the scholarship concerning Claudio and the efficacy of ritual. First, in Act 4, the startling violence and then, in Act 5, the earnest sincerity of a Claudio attempting to reconcile with the family he has violated draws the audience out of the world of the drama to recall the setting and circumstances of this production behind bars. *Much Ado* provides a unique opportunity to examine ritual activity both within the drama and surrounding the circumstances of its production. This multi-layered analysis helps us to see the relationships among imaginative play, ritualized practices, and our construction of reality—not to mention the stark parallels between the age of Shakespeare's Messina and our own age.

Moving beyond the text of the play, behind the scenes at Luther Luckett, we see inmate actors who enact their own rehabilitative rituals that aid in transforming their

rehearsal space into a liminal space where it becomes possible to reconstruct meaningful ethical relations, even in the unhopefullest of places. The result is a transformative experience for the prisoners who participate and for the audience who attends, revealing, by extension, a means of moving toward ethical rehabilitation for the isolated modern subject, as well.

All together, this theoretical lens helps us to see how as the men in SBB bring to life the Shakespearean script—learning to make choices as actors, relating honestly to a character, and responding to each other on stage—they also practice the moves of ethical life and subtly subvert the dominant schema through tactical measures of resistance, everyday practices of touch and greeting, for example, that infuse their everyday routines with shared meaning. These gestures, or rituals of rehabilitation, transform their performance space into a ritualized, liminal space of transition. In this way, these men are able to restore an ethical community based on empathy, honesty, and responsiveness instead of on an economy of exchange and usefulness. Understanding the work of *Shakespeare Behind Bars* as a tactic of moral resistance through everyday practices provides a model for alienated individuals to rediscover their shared humanity as well.

CHAPTER II
RITUAL AND POWER:
A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

The theoretical lens I use to examine the phenomenon of Shakespeare Behind Bars takes a Foucauldian starting point—his redefinition of power at the stage in his career when he writes *Discipline and Punish*. Together with Martin Heidegger’s critique of our attitude toward technology in his lecture “The Question Concerning Technology,” Foucault’s way of thinking affords a salient critique of the modern application of technological and economic values to what should be understood as distinctly human endeavors, such as education and morality. While these thinkers seem to tell a teleological story about the deterioration of our ethical sensibilities and express concern for the fate of modernity, others who begin with the same analysis of power are concerned with practical questions about how to refocus on human relationships and develop more ethical modes of engagement. My guides in this endeavor are two such students and critics of Foucault’s work, who each find hope for an ameliorated future in the potential for resistance to the oppressive dominant discourse within the power relations that structure that reality in the first place. Catherine Bell rehabilitates the activity of ritual as edifying to communities, and Michel de Certeau emphasizes the subversive power latent in our everyday choices and practices. One final thinker I draw upon in analyzing prison Shakespeare is Victor Turner, who illuminates the parallels

between theater and tribal rites of passage. By beginning with Foucault and by synthesizing Bell's notion of ritualization, de Certeau's conception of everyday tactical operations, and Turner's isomorphism between ritual and theater, I devise a framework for understanding prison theater as a model of ethical action. *Shakespeare Behind Bars* demonstrates the vivacity and efficacy of everyday ritualized practices in rehabilitating humanity and community that critics of modernity argue has been subsumed under the logic of technology and economy.

Modern Life in the Prison Machine

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* gives us reason to believe that the situation of the prisoner in the modern day correctional institution is analogous to the situation of the average human being in the modern world. For Foucault, the lynchpin between the prison and the rest of the world lies in his redefinition of power. He writes about power as a decentralized network of relations that constitutes the very fabric of reality. Reconceiving of power in this way allows us to view both knowledge and the individual as constructs resulting from power relations. It is this analysis of power as ubiquitous and formative that allows us to conceive of the analogy between the inmate's situation and our own. As we will see, it also allows thinkers after Foucault to describe some promising, inherent sources of resistance to the structures that come to dominate the society constructed. Regardless of Foucault's historical narrative, the prisoner has always exemplified aspects of the human condition that are more or less universal. His analysis of the prison machine shows us that the inmate's context is essentially our own

context. Thus, investigating prison Shakespeare teaches us as much about ourselves as it does about either prison or Shakespeare.

Foucault directs our attention to the prisoner as the paradigm of the social alienation that is endemic as a result of an emphasis on scientific rationality and economic efficiency. Foucault pinpoints the Enlightenment as the turning point toward an economized view of penalty that aims to manage crime by appealing to individuals' reason. The circumstances of the crime and the intentions of the criminal were subsumed under general categories (Foucault highlights the advent of the "delinquent"), and punishments became predictable, calculable, and certain (Foucault 93-101). Recalling Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we recognize this as a typical result of Enlightenment rationality based on a Kantian understanding of human reason: everything is classified into predictable and calculable (and therefore manageable) subsets or categories, and true individualities and extenuating circumstances are masked by new labels. Foucault points out that separating and grouping people in this way is rational, and so people go along with it. He writes, "A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chains of their own ideas; it is at the stable point of reason that he secures the end of the chain" (102-03). Because power relations constitute our reality and disciplinary techniques appeal to our rationality, we cannot help but exercise these techniques of power on ourselves and each other. Internalizing our own alienation and exile is built into the technological way of thinking that Horkheimer and Adorno, Heidegger, and Foucault all see as dominant.

From Foucault's analysis alone, it seems there is no way to resist the dominant social structure. Indeed, Foucault warns that the power of disciplinary strategies is secretly limitless: "... although the universal jurisdiction of modern society seems to fix limits on the exercise of power, its universally widespread panopticism enables it to operate, on the underside of the law, a machinery that is both immense and minute, which supports, reinforces, multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around the law" (223). As a result, those who wish to subvert the dominant discourse must make new use of the power relations already in play. The way to resist the isolating individualism of the endemic logic and economy of the prison industrial complex is not to transgress it but to work tactically within it, to turn its own techniques against it, so to speak, in the style of a *bricoleur*, not a rebel.

Such *bricolage* is necessary because inherent in this scientific approach to punishment is a neglect of the values that support community. With an increased focus on efficiency, time, and scheduled and hierarchized exercise, Foucault says, "... the striving of the whole community towards salvation became the collective, permanent competition of individuals being classified in relation to one another" (161-62). Competition replaced cooperation, and communities deteriorated into hierarchized colonies of individuals. This, in fact, is "the primary objective of carceral action" (Foucault 239), and we might add, of disciplinary practice and economic reasoning broadly: "coercive individualization, ... the termination of any relation that is not supervised by authority or arranged according to hierarchy" (Foucault 239).

Heidegger calls the arranging that is sanctioned by the technological and industrial mode of thinking “enframing” (325). In “The Question Concerning Technology,” he claims that the essence of technology is a reductive enframing that conceals the full presence of being that human beings would otherwise bring to light. He observes that the technological view permits us to treat others as “standing reserve” or raw material—literal “human resources”—that can be used to meet the goals of efficiency and economy (322-23).

The technological view, which is epitomized in the modern prison industrial complex, leaves us with the question: how can we reconstruct ethical communities grounded in human values such as cooperation and generosity instead of in economic values of exchange and usefulness, especially given that any transgression of the power structure has already been incorporated into its machinery? Heidegger’s answer gestures towards the aptness of consulting a prison theater program in addressing this question. He argues that we should regard human beings in the way we regard art, according to their revelation of being in its fullness, or truth, and not in terms of mastery and manipulation.² We find a different but complementary frame for prison Shakespeare in the work of Bell and de Certeau. They find sources of subversive and therefore rehabilitative power in less lofty pursuits—indeed, in the ritualized practices of everyday life. To grasp this claim and its relevance to our understanding of Shakespeare Behind Bars, let us now take a closer look at Bell and de Certeau’s appropriations of Foucault’s analysis of power. They both emphasize how granting practice and everyday activities ascendancy over more theoretical concerns affords us practical solutions to the problem

of constituting community from among the isolated individuals that a technological view of human life has constructed.

Ritualized Practice

When Catherine Bell addresses Foucault in her book, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, she reminds us that for Foucault, the possibility of power is co-originary with the possibility of resistance, for power can only be exercised over *free* subjects (Bell 200-01). Bell emphasizes that the term “power” in this context is shorthand for the constant struggle between power and resistance (Bell 203). Power in this sense contains its own opposite, resistance. Heidegger emphasizes a similar idea expressed poetically; he quotes Hölderlin, “But where danger is, grows / The saving power also” (333). Bell seeks to uncover the texture of that potential for resistance or salvation and begin to understand how ritualization can work as a redemptive political technology of power (202). The value of Bell’s work for our purposes is that her discussion of ritualization provides a way to understand the rehabilitative power of the ritualized practices involved in the everyday operations of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program.

It is easy to recognize echoes of Foucault in Bell’s work, as she parallels his repeated claims that the discursive culture surrounding a phenomenon comes to dominate and subordinate the particularity of that phenomenon, reconstructing reality in the image of the dominant discourse. To counteract the implicit hegemony of the theorist, Bell opts to understand ritual not as a theoretical construct but in the context of practice. As a result, her investigation emphasizes *ritualization* instead of *rituals*. Ritualization, she says, “is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting

some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane,’ and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors” (74).

The notion of ritualization is grounded in an expansive understanding of practice as “a nonsynthetic and irreducible term for human activity,” not explicitly opposed to theory.³ In addition, practice is “able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world,” a feature Bell terms “redemptive hegemony”⁴ (81), which she explains thus: “People reproduce relationships of power and domination, but not in a direct, automatic, or mechanistic way; rather, they reproduce them through their particular construal of those relations, a construal that affords the actor the sense of a sphere of action, however minimal” (84). Through the redemptive hegemony of practice, the actor recreates the social order in a way that gives her some measure of agency in it, even in the absence of sanctioned power. Redemptive hegemony, then, is “a strategic and practical orientation for action” (85) that doesn’t reflect reality but creates it, according to the actor’s assumptions about and understanding of her place in the social order and her purpose in acting (Bell 83-85). Bell adapts Foucault’s version of the way the dominant power structure is reproduced in and by the individual, for she recognizes the inevitable mutations that occur when a subject appropriates and propagates power relations in the course of her own activities. In those mutations lies the possibility for a subtle resistance. The idea of redemptive hegemony in ritualized activity describes a productive mode of action for the inmates who participate in *Shakespeare Behind Bars*. Their ritualized process for appropriating and performing a canonical cultural script like

Shakespeare's *Much Ado* empowers them to redeem the power structure and resist the reductiveness of technological enframing.

Because practice is inherently strategic and situational, Bell proposes that ritualization, too, is a strategy that people deploy "as a practical way of dealing with some specific circumstances. Ritual is never simply or solely a matter of routine, habit, or 'the dead weight of tradition'" (Bell 92). Ritualization is one method for redeeming the existing hierarchy by privileging and granting transcendent meaning to a practice or set of practices intended to respond to a specific situation. The situation that ritualized practices respond to is a physical environment, socially constructed yet constituted by space and time. Bell writes, "Ritualization is embedded within the dynamics of the body defined within a symbolically structured environment. An important corollary to this is the fact that ritualization is a particularly 'mute' form of activity. It is designed to do what it does without bringing what it is doing across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking" (93). Ritualization works on its spatial and temporal environment to reorganize power relationships strategically, but without the dominant discourse recognizing its subversive activity. According to Bell, ritualization sees itself as a natural way to respond to problematic circumstances, not as means of redefining the power structure (109-10).

As a result of this muteness, ambiguity is one feature of ritualized activity that is especially pertinent for the inmate actors who make use of ritualized practices to respond to their circumstances within the closed system of the prison. Because it is empty of discursive signification, ritualization and the symbolic bodily movements through which

it operates invite a multiplicity of interpretations. This is one of its strengths, Bell claims, for it makes ritualization an effective strategy for unifying groups of people with diverse beliefs.⁵ Bell writes, "... evidence suggests that symbols and symbolic action not only fail to communicate clear and shared understandings, but the obvious ambiguity or overdetermination of much religious symbolism may even be integral to its efficacy" (184). This ambiguity is in part responsible for ritualization's ability to redeem the social hierarchy for the individual. Since they are unable to communicate the dominant discourse directly, ritualized practices empower the individual to manipulate for his own purposes the power relations that constitute our reality.

In sum, Bell's notion of ritualization opens avenues for the individual to claim for herself a measure of agency in the habitual movements of her body and in her modes of interacting with others in a community. In the context of the prison, this kind of agency is suffocated beneath mechanized routines that isolate individuals and reduce them to the raw materials of the prison machine. In contrast, the work of ritualization is restorative. Bell's own assessment of what ritualized activity does is worth quoting at length:

The ultimate purpose of ritualization is neither the immediate goals avowed by the community or the officiant nor the more abstract functions of social solidarity and conflict resolution: it is nothing other than the production of ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex microrelations of power.

Such practical knowledge is not an inflexible set of assumptions, beliefs, or body postures; rather, it is the ability to deploy, play, and manipulate basic schemes in ways that appropriate and condition experience effectively. It is a mastery that experiences itself as relatively empowered, not as conditioned or molded. (221)

Ritualized practices restore meaning to a subject's daily activities and human interactions, and they empower her to act according to her own sense of value, twisting free from the oppression of the dominant discourse that Foucault and Heidegger diagnose.

Ritualization gives people tactics for negotiating the situation of power within which they are constituted as individuals. As such, its value for prison inmates striving to constitute meaningful communal relations that the system suppresses is inestimable. To move beyond Bell's thesis, however, it is important to note that ritualization also gives people experience as *ethical* agents, finding ways to respond from a position of limitation to a situation that is ultimately out of their control yet nevertheless demands action. To consider this and other ethical implications of this sort of take on Foucault's conception of power, agency, and resistance, let us round out this theoretical framework by consulting Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, another illuminating Foucauldian treatment of the subversive potential of everyday practices.

Everyday Tactical Resistance

Michel de Certeau offers a different yet compatible approach to thinking about Shakespeare Behind Bars as educative for us in reimagining ethical community building in the face of the technological view. Like Bell, de Certeau also bucks the totalizing

aspect of Foucault's analysis of power for the sake of exposing a means of agency and resistance available to the weak and oppressed. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau brings a Foucauldian framework to bear on the quotidian minutiae common to all human beings in a consumer culture like ours. Where Bell relies on an expanded notion of practice to undo the hegemony of "theory," de Certeau establishes a distinction between what he calls strategies and tactics. Strategies are the conceptual schema by which experience is ordered, organized, or planned. A strategy has its proper place, and it can be separated from the environment on which it operates. A tactic, on the other hand, has no proper place but depends on its environment, its circumstances, and operates temporally more than spatially. Tactics are the everyday practices that intercede into the strategic order of things and constitute concrete, lived experience (de Certeau xix, 35-38). It is in everyday tactical maneuvers, de Certeau says, that individuals find the opportunity to create a meaningful existence and overturn the dominant schema that would understand human behavior as just another form of economic exchange.

De Certeau emphasizes the inherent resistance in everyday tasks by illustrating the tactical nature of such practices as reading and walking in a city. As readers, we make our own inroads into a text by "slip[ping] into the author's place" and "mak[ing] the text habitable" for ourselves, "like a rented apartment" (xxi). As pedestrians in a city, we wander, choosing our route and making shortcuts. As in Bell's definition of practice, subjects have no choice but to introduce mutations into the power structure when they enact it in their own experience. This is how tactics operate within the same space that has been strategically organized by relations of power to subvert the dominant structure,

and it helps us to see what modes of resistance might be available even to prison inmates.

De Certeau recognizes that there are ethical implications to this kind of resistance to the dominant culture. He calls it a “moral resistance,” involving “an economy of the ‘*gift*’ (generosities for which one expects a return), an esthetics of ‘*tricks*’ (artists’ operations) and an ethics of *tenacity* (countless ways of refusing to accord the established order the status of a law, a meaning, or a fatality)” (de Certeau 26). Tactical ways of operating work to restore a kind of morality that has been replaced by the triumph of economic exchange and scientific knowledge as the dominant values. De Certeau argues that tactics can effect “a return of the ethical... within the scientific institution” (28) by reinvigorating interpersonal values that contradict the dominant discourse of efficiency and usefulness.

The synthetic picture of the possibility of resistance that we get from Bell and de Certeau holds significant potential for rebuilding ethical community within the prison and without. Like Bell’s ritualized activities, behaviors that operate tactically to subvert the power structure reinstate a *human* element that is essentially an ethical one: ambiguity. Ritualization and tactics both capitalize on ambiguity in order to operate in the face of the dominant ideology. Rituals create social ambiguity that cannot be parsed discursively and thus cannot be subsumed by the logic of efficiency and exchange. In the meantime, tactics exploit the ambiguity inherent in the dominant discourse to operate interstitially within it. On both accounts, ambiguity and the demand for interpretation in practice are the conditions of the possibility of resistance and agency within a closed

system. As the ultimate model of a closed system constituted by power relations, the prison is an ideal setting for evaluating the efficacy of ritualization and everyday tactics of resistance as means of developing ethical community.

The Possibility of Resistance in Prison Theater

We have established the prison inmate as exemplifying a shared predicament arising from Foucauldian techniques of power, and we have explored some of the theoretical responses to that predicament. But it is not yet clear why our search for community should be conducted by investigating a prison *theater* group. Here, an early proponent of ritual studies, Victor Turner, sheds some light. Turner studies ritual as a form of social drama, comparing his findings about the structure of tribal rites of passage to theater and acting. For Turner, theater (or entertainment more broadly) is the modern analogue to those tribal rituals, and it can accomplish some of the same goals in terms of community building. His analysis is helpful as we move from this Foucauldian lens and its treatment of ritual, power, and community, to examining the phenomenon of prison theater and the observations I conducted while visiting Shakespeare Behind Bars.

Following Arnold van Gennep, Turner identifies three stages in the structure of a paradigmatic ritual, the tribal rite of passage: separation in space and time from the rest of the society, a transitional phase of social ambiguity and inversion of the social structure, which Turner calls the *liminal*, and a final return to society (in *Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, 24).⁶ The liminal phase of a rite of passage is characterized by an element of playfulness and temporary chaos that serves to reinforce the power structure because it takes place only in that sanctioned, separate zone (41).⁷

Since the Industrial Revolution, however, disciplined, efficient work has become the overwhelmingly dominant social value, and the serious play of the liminal space of rituals has devolved into mere entertainment, Turner claims (30-32). Drained of its seriousness, entertainment also loses the power to invert the social system in the service of the normal social order. In other words, the liminality of ritual play becomes merely *liminoid*, and the free play we find in mere entertainment *subverts* the hierarchy of power instead of *inverting* it.

Steeped in Foucault as we are, we might recognize in this liminoid space of subversion the possibility of resisting the dominant ideology. As a quasi-ritual, theater opens the possibility of reinstating ethical communal relations among individuals.⁸ When actors engage with one another artistically and surrender themselves to the moment, Turner thinks, they give rise to the possibility of restoring lost “confrontations of human identities” in community and overcoming industrial alienation (Turner 46, 58).⁹

The momentariness of this confrontation in theater recalls the temporality of de Certeau’s tactics and the situationality of Bell’s ritualization. We have a consensus here that being engaged with others in the moment of action opens a space for building ethical communal relations, even within the panoptic prison of modern life. Both as actors on stage and as moral agents in a system that tries to separate rather than unify, the inmates who participate in *Shakespeare Behind Bars* strive to achieve this kind of engagement with the present circumstances, their fellow actors, and the cultural script they’re interpreting. We shall see how their practices and ritualized greetings work to

open those momentary connections into meaningful relationships that structure their ethical community.

If we accept Turner's notion of theater as ritual, then the implications of Bell and de Certeau's work come immediately into focus in our examination of theater as a source of resistance for inmates. Theater involves bringing a text to life, translating a written script into bodily movements. Just as practice undermines theory by operating under the radar of discursivity, theater involves a practical enactment that capitalizes on ambiguity and exercises interpretive power that the dominant power structure—on one level, the canonical text, and on another, the prison machine—cannot control. Producing a play is a tactical exercise. As such, it also models ethical action: taking stock of the possibilities a particular script or situation legitimizes, consulting the written, codified expectations within which an actor must operate, and then making interpretive choices that respond to the other in real time.

Watching prisoners make choices about enacting a cultural script like Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* reveals how theater, ritualization, and everyday practices all overlap and constitute a means of resistance to the dominant ideology that would fracture communities with its individualizing partitioning. In the next chapter, I will examine multiple layers of the prison theater phenomenon through this lens. First, let me set the scene with a brief account of my experience watching the play at Luther Lockett. This glimpse reveals the issues at stake in an inmate production of *Much Ado*. Then I will review some of the scholarship on the play itself to bring into focus certain interpretive quandaries in the text. Since a primary debate that *Much Ado* exposes is the

efficacy of ritual and imaginative storytelling in effecting personal ethical transformations, and these are issues of particular relevance to the troupe of actor inmates at Luther Lockett, I purpose to address these critical questions not textually but practically. Next, I will explore two integral ritualized practices in the SBB repertoire, their commitment to telling the truth in their acting and the tactile ways they greet each other at every meeting. I take the structure and practices of the Shakespeare Behind Bars community to reveal how ritualized activity and theatrical performance can indeed develop our ethical sensibilities and rehabilitate communities that have been violated. Finally, I will address one particular scene from the SBB production of *Much Ado* (the funeral ritual that Claudio performs at the monument), at the level of the playtext, the staged production, the actor making choices on stage, and the effect it had on its audience. By providing a practical demonstration, this scene cements the proposed relationship among ritual, theater, and ethical transformation.

CHAPTER III

“THE PLAY IS NOT THE THING”

Setting the Scene

For most theater-goers (including Charles I, who famously retitled his copy of the play “Benedik and Betrice”), the real allure of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing* lies in the witty banter and combative love that Beatrice and Benedick share throughout the play. Even though the storyline involving Claudio and Hero is what moves the plot along, those characters and their generic love story don’t seem central to an audience’s experience of the play. Beatrice and Benedick are, in short, where it’s at.

From the opening scene, the production of *Much Ado* I saw at Luther Luckett Correctional Complex was no exception. The sassy Beatrice and her self-aggrandizing Benedick were captivating. In this case, the couple was especially notable for the fact that Beatrice was played by a man in drag. In fact, all of the roles were played by men—men incarcerated for violent crimes. The show took place in the prison chapel with all the lights up, towering fences and razor wire clearly visible just out the windows. The men wore minimalist costumes, never shedding their routine prison khaki, the sleeves and pant legs of which were constantly visible to the audience.¹⁰ Nevertheless, this leading couple helped transport us. One of the most common responses from visitors to Shakespeare Behind Bars’ public performances is the marveling, “I forgot we were in a prison!” We forget that Beatrice and Benedick are played by men that society tells us we should scorn. We even forget that Beatrice is being played by a man. We are drawn into

the play by these delightful characters, whom Fox and Victor have brought to life in a powerful, truthful performance.

But a play like *Much Ado* doesn't allow us to forget forever that we're sitting in a prison. This is a play that borders on tragedy. "Sigh no more, ladies... / Men were deceivers ever" (2.3.64-65) is comedy's only slightly softer version of Hamlet's "Get thee to a nunnery. ... We are arrant knaves, all. Believe none of us" (3.1.122, 128-29),¹¹ and Claudio's shaming of Hero for suspected unfaithfulness would mirror Othello's murder of Desdemona were it not for the magic of comedy.¹² This is a comedy with some violence and close calls. In the SBB production, it is the scene at the wedding, when Claudio publicly renounces Hero, that shocks us back into the consciousness of where we are and who those men are on stage. Grant, our Claudio,¹³ enters with fists clenched. His face is cold, edging into rage with every word he speaks. He swallows the anger until the lines, "Sweet prince, you learn me noble thankfulness.— / There, Leonato, take her back again." (4.1.30-31). On "there," Grant shoves Hodges, playing Hero and looking surprisingly sweet in his wedding garb, across the stage into Danny's not-quite-ready arms. I think, "that's no way to treat a woman," yet at the same time, I remember, he is not a woman, and these are not lovers. These are men convicted of violent crimes. And no matter how many times I see the scene, no matter how well I get to know Grant, Danny, and Hodges and to understand their loyalty to and support of each other, my heart catches. We are in a prison, and this could turn into a real fight.

The fear passes quickly. These are practiced actors, and no one is in danger. Better, these men truly care for one another as family (a sentiment many of them laid

claim to). What they do on stage wouldn't work if they didn't. I'm watching father-daughter relationships, courtships, and "bro"mance on stage that is honest and emotional. These men trust each other and are honest with each other. That's their primary rule, after all—honesty above all else. For many of them, this environment is the safest they ever know. In the SBB circle, they are home. This scene will not explode like it might. But the illusion has broken, and we, the audience, are conscious once more: Prison. Convicts. Violence is very much a reality of this world, of our world.

With these truths in mind, though, the dispute among Claudio, Hero, and Leonato comes to the fore for new reasons. For these actors in this place, this is the storyline that resonates. Most of them know what it's like to face accusations, like Hero, and to worry about their reputations, like the Prince and Claudio. The scheming of the villains Don John, Borachio, and Conrade likewise strikes a unique chord with this cast. And most importantly, they feel the yearning for redemption that the accused, the accusers, and the real villains (whoever we decide they are) all feel in the play. More than the "merry war" (1.1.60) audiences have come to prefer, the focal point in this production is the main plotline of deceit, wrongful accusation, and the rituals of redemption that must follow.

Claudio and the Efficacy of Ritual in *Much Ado*

The theme of forgiveness and reconciliation after a perceived wrong is central to the development of ethical community, especially in the context of the prison setting. Of course, in *Much Ado*, Claudio wrongs Hero and her family, and he is reconciled to them through ritual penance at the family monument. The actors in the SBB production have also committed wrongs against their communities and are in need of reconciliation. The

ritual aspects in *Much Ado* parallel the ritual of putting on a play for the inmates in Shakespeare Behind Bars. Our particular line of inquiry draws our attention to three particular critical debates in *Much Ado* literature, surrounding the social hierarchy and sources of power in Messina, the enigmatic character of Claudio, who might be read as either victim or villain, and the function of rites and rituals in pursuit of reconciliation. Rather than weighing in on these debates in the text, the SBB production allows us to think of ritual as an effective practice in bringing about the restoration of community in the real world. The community of inmates in SBB and their production of *Much Ado* demonstrate that ritual performances can effect the transformation in question for Claudio and restore ethical communities that have been violated.

For those who write about the social scene in Messina, the salient question seems to be: does the drama end in transformation or return? Some argue that the power structure is inverted or transformed, with feminine and domestic values triumphing as the couples march toward marriage.¹⁴ Many who take a Foucauldian lens, on the other hand, read the genre-appropriate ending as a reinstatement of the dominant social hierarchy.¹⁵ These latter critics find little to emulate as far as revising the social order is concerned.

These social critiques of *Much Ado*'s Messina and the hierarchies and sources of power in place there are relevant to our current investigation into the formation of ethical communities in resistance to the dominant economy of exchange in our society. Turner, for one, has a stake in whether the ritual action in the play restores the social structure or subverts it. When *Much Ado* is performed by prison inmates, issues of power and social

hierarchy are unavoidable. But the locus of the *ethical* questions that resound in *Much Ado* is much narrower than Messina; it is Claudio. Plus, the Shakespeare Behind Bars focus on character development and the director's unwillingness to impose a single, subjugating vision on the production (preferring to leave the important choices for his actors to work out) result in a performance that is truly character-driven. Therefore, the remaining two critical questions, concerning Claudio and his redemption ritual, constitute the focal point of our discussion.

Claudio in particular emerges as an interpretive nexus for us because his process of reconciling with Leonato and Hero and doubts about his sincerity are what open *Much Ado* to questions about how rituals function in a community. Although he is not often central to an audience's experience of the play, the way Claudio's character is interpreted on stage holds significant implications for a critical understanding of the efficacy of ritual, the main issue at stake in our project. Our interpretation of Claudio and our understanding of whether ritual practice is successful in bringing about the necessary reform are two sides of the same coin.

As Richard Levin has put it, "When *Much Ado* is reckoned a disturbing play, Claudio is generally the reason" (71). Indeed, analyzing Claudio seems to have engendered the widest range of interpretations in the scholarship. Is he morally culpable, or merely gullible? If guilty, what is he guilty of? Is he psychologically realistic and consistent as a character? Are his speeches and actions consistent with the romantic comedy genre, or is he a poorly written protagonist? Does he in fact undergo a

transformation and become worthy of Hero? Does he even need to? There is little consensus on how we are to understand Claudio.

Andrew Lang suggests that Claudio's character is much less problematic in production than it is on paper, for then an actor and a director make choices and design scenes so as to make his development more coherent. Watching *Much Ado* in performance raises the question of how an audience should respond to Claudio, though, and that tangle is just as conflicted. For example, while Karen Newman believes that Claudio's adherence to the conventions of the courtly lover preserves him in the audience's opinion and enables him to redeem himself in the final wedding, Lang argues that Claudio fails to fulfill the archetype of the courtly lover.¹⁶

Claudio's plan to reconcile with Leonato after he viciously denies Hero and then makes light of her death presents a challenge to the audience's moral judgment, as well. Much hinges on 5.3, the scene at the tomb. The question facing directors, actors, readers, and audiences is whether the tomb scene presents, in the words of A. R. Humphreys in his introduction to the Arden edition, "a superficial formal rite" or "a fundamental turning-point" in the drama and for Claudio (58). Textually, the scene is surprisingly brief, and the language used is stilted and formal. As Levin points out, the fact that we watch the procession march in and file out rather than beginning *in media res* to imply extended mourning indicates the superficiality of Claudio's grief and penance. Likewise, John Wain has argued that Claudio's failure to speak any of his own words at the tomb, simply reciting the scripted epitaph, drains him of his humanity and deprives us, the audience, of the hope that here is a reformed young man. With extensive research into

the quarto and folio versions of the text, Michael Friedman supports Wain's claims, showing how editors and directors have changed the script throughout history in an attempt to restore some of Claudio's humanity.¹⁷ Since Friedman writes about *Much Ado* as a comedy of forgiveness (following Robert Hunter), he says that Claudio's failure to express proper repentance needn't be excused or revised: perhaps Shakespeare is demonstrating the complications involved in forgiveness and how short it sometimes falls of what we consider just. Yet critics like Hunter and R. Hassel will insist that Claudio has reformed indeed, reading the stilted language of the tomb scene as proof of the newness of his faith in Hero and evidence of how drastic his transformation, that his typical fluency has abandoned him. The question of whether Claudio undergoes a transformation that re-qualifies him for the happy ending of a romantic comedy must be worked out in performance.

It isn't just Claudio's character under examination in this line of questioning, though; it is also the efficacy of rituals, in this case, the ritual of mourning that Claudio and the Prince undertake at Leonato's request. Comparing the plot of *Much Ado* to the structure of the romances, Thomas Ross finds the ritual of atonement at the tomb to be incomplete, Claudio's guilt unresolved. Ross sees no evidence of the personal transformation requisite for restoration, and so the ritual movements are empty. On the contrary, Morris Henry Partee, who emphasizes the comic structure of the play, finds the mourning rite to be an effective rehabilitation. Partee claims that the vapid Claudio takes on an inner life for the first time at the renunciation scene at the church. By "dispos[ing] / For henceforth of poor Claudio" (5.1.308-09) at Leonato's instructions for penance,

however, Claudio opens himself up to take on a new character and live restored. On this reading, the transformation has already taken place by the time Claudio reads his epitaph. The question of whether Claudio undergoes a transformation, either on his own or through the movements of the funeral rite, is central to an audience's judgment of his character.

Because these critical questions and perspectives open a space for interrogating rituals' ability to restore relationships within ethical communities, it is important to keep them in mind as we proceed to examine the SBB program's practices and approach to acting Shakespeare and the Luther Luckett production of *Much Ado*. Some scholars believe that the ritual scene proves Claudio vapid and empty. Others say that ritual is what enables Claudio to rejoin the family he wronged. Contrary to these text-based analyses, the SBB model of how theatrical and ritual acting can affect performers affords us *practical* answers to the interpretive quandaries in the scholarship surrounding the play. The SBB production will show us how both sides of the debate might be true in practice, for it suggests that the emptiness of ritual (its ambiguity and need for interpretation) is what makes it effective in developing ethical communities. Looking at the inmate actors and their ritualized meaning-making practices both on stage and off gives us a new way to read Claudio and his ritual scene and a deeper understanding of how ritualized practices can serve to rehabilitate communal values.

Stage Actors and Ethical Actors at Luther Luckett

The Shakespeare Behind Bars production raises the stakes on the question of Claudio's fitness to be the hero of a love story, for audiences are simultaneously

confronted with their prejudices regarding Grant's fitness to be the star of a Shakespeare play. Matt Wallace told me in an interview that if a person is going to react negatively towards hearing about the SBB program, their reaction is likely to be along the lines of desert—that convicts do not deserve to participate in an opportunity like this. With respect to the inmate actors and to Claudio, the question of whether they deserve future happiness after their wrongs looms large. Rather than addressing this question directly, I suggest that we investigate both the ritual within the play and the play itself as a ritual performance. By taking this line of inquiry, we shift the focus from a theoretical or textual question to a practical one: how do our practices shape and express our ethical sensibilities? By reflecting on theater and ritual as practice, we can discover a path to realizing the ethical transformation—in essence, the redemption—that is at stake for Claudio and Grant.

While Claudio is read more often than not as a shallow or generic character, the SBB commitment to relating honestly to a character and filling out a role by drawing on one's own truth gives him real flesh and fullness. The men filled me in on how this works when I visited. Their director, Matt Wallace, chooses which play they will study next as soon as the production cycle has finished in mid-May. Over the summer, the men read the play and begin to think through which character speaks to them. As they say, most often the character chooses them rather than the other way around. Thus begins the work of establishing a sincere emotional connection with the person they understand that character to be. From the leading roles to the smallest parts, the men take their task seriously and attempt to construct a whole persona from the scripted words. Fox told me

that as he understands it, Shakespeare didn't write any filler characters. Each one has a unique story and psychological life that an actor must understand (or at least imagine) in order to portray a realistic character on stage. Above putting on a good show, these men prioritize personal growth through self-reflection and through the challenge of respectfully listening and truthfully responding to others. Their self-proclaimed aim is to become better men than they have been, and meeting that goal starts with their commitment to taking their characters seriously and performing with sincerity.

This approach is how the SBB actors are able to claim that they aren't acting at all. Their method is to relate honestly from their own experiences to a fictional but true-to-life human being, not just a caricature. They strive to understand another's actions and motivations, using tools of self-examination and reflection as a resource for reaching out empathetically toward another. As Lou explained it to me on the first day I visited, they're trying to discover the story of the character, a process much more like getting to know another human being than it is like inventing a persona. The ways the SBB men interact with each other and the ways they interact with other characters on stage mutually reinforce their goal of relating to others with honesty and emotional depth.

The troupe's approach to acting helps them get in touch with the humanity in others. This is evidenced in particular in the challenge the men face when playing women's roles. In the renunciation scene at the church, for example, Hodges, playing Hero, was having trouble figuring out how to stand, what to do with his hands, and how to react to Claudio's accusations when his character wasn't given the kind of lines he wished she had.¹⁸ Matt's direction to Hodges was, "Forget that you're supposed to be a

woman. You're a human being who didn't do it." He encouraged Hodges to connect with that familiar feeling and do his best to use what resources Hero did have available, such as movement and touch, to convince those present (actors and audience) of her innocence. Carol Stewart gave him the additional advice that he should imagine not what a woman would do or how a woman would stand but how *Hero* would act, move, and stand. I watched as his movements on stage grew less stilted and looked less pre-packaged as he strove to embody Hero's humanity, not just impersonate her gender.¹⁹

Another aspect of learning to embody something genuine about humanity and not just act out an archetype, the men in SBB work on expressing honest emotional depth. Wallace described for me some of the exercises they do together early on in the process, such as mirroring others' emotions and practicing inhabiting emotions that may be unfamiliar to them. Wallace told me that for many of them, every emotion they try to express looks like anger. Anger is their default response to situations that may be upsetting in a variety of ways, and the men have to practice responding with emotions that are either taboo in the prison setting, like grief, love, or remorse, or that they have never had cause to experience in their lives previously, like the complex combination of disappointment, shame, and heartbreak Leonato experiences when he sees his daughter renounced for infidelity.²⁰

Their director pushes them to take a line or a moment deeper into themselves rather than letting it rest on the surface of their emotional capacity. SBB founder Curt Tofteland called this locating where the line took up residence in their bodies, a concept that resonates with inmates like Hal Cobb, who wrote about just that in his prize-winning

essay, “My Pursuit of Character.”²¹ The men attempt to *feel* the depth of the written word and the emotions of their characters, not just act them out. In the process, the men are also taught to get in touch with their own repressed emotions.

Regular SBB rehearsals aim to help the men tap into experiences in their past that they can draw on as resources for emotions they must inhabit on stage. They undertake the task of self-reflection together as a group by making time at the beginning of every rehearsal to share around the circle what they’ve been going through and what needs to be handled. For example, when over the course of this production cycle two of the men lost close family members, they turned to the SBB circle for support. Wallace told me, the space of their rehearsals is often the only place these men feel safe to express themselves, the only place they aren’t constantly being watched and judged.

The men help each other through tough times like these, and they help each other recover after mistakes and missteps. As I have mentioned, the men who participate in SBB must keep a clean record with the corrections officers. When someone gets written up for an infraction, as inevitably occurs,²² the SBB policy of honesty above all means that the violator must admit his errors to the group and work out a way to move forward. Morales, for example, had been written up for a semi-serious infraction, and when he brought the story to the SBB circle, he lied about his involvement in the incident. The truth came out when the CO had to drop the charge against him on a technicality, but the men of SBB were not satisfied. Even though the penalty had been officially waived, the men held Morales accountable to learning from the experience and changing his

behavior. As one of the Journeymen reported, participating in this theater program is “a motivation to do what’s right.”

The main purpose of Shakespeare Behind Bars, it seems, is not to put on a play but to practice self-reflection, deepen their emotional capacities, grow in self-understanding, and learn the value of honesty in connecting with other people. Thus far, the process seems to be rather inward looking. In order for this practice to carry significant moral weight, though, it must involve and accommodate the other, as well. How do these skills transfer to ethical life? The key lies in theater itself. While, as Rhodes reminded me, “the play is not the thing,” it is nevertheless an essential component in the development of ethical community in this prison setting. Rhodes went on to explain, “Shakespeare understood humanity, and any condition of the human experience helps us [the inmate actors] understand where we went wrong, why we’re here, and helps us prepare to go back on the street.” “We believe art has the power to change you from the inside,” he concluded. True, self-reflection and personal growth alone are not enough. But these form the foundation for relating not only to a fictional character as a full-bodied human being but also to the other actors physically present in rehearsal and on stage. I contend that with such a foundation, the practice of theater is practice for ethical life.

Living in an ethical community means recognizing and respecting others’ humanity, their inherent dignity, and striving to respond to the needs of others and of a situation on the grounds of that shared humanity. It means rejecting the dominant social model, namely the exchange of goods and services and the treatment of others as literal

human resources (like Heidegger's "standing reserve"), not human beings. Many aspects of theater, especially the incarnation of theater in the Shakespeare Behind Bars program, serve the ends of ethical life thus imagined. Performing a script requires actors to make choices, and acting with others on stage requires them to consider others and take responsibility for the consequences of the choices they make. They must always be intentional about what motivates their actions, and they must be ready to respond to what others give them. These are some of the basic principles of acting, as I (and as the men in SBB) understand it. Let us now examine these principles in practice, for SBB demonstrates how their ritualization in everyday practice holds great ethical value for the actors who perform them.

First, putting a play on its feet (a favorite phrase of director Matt Wallace's) requires actors to be careful readers of a text and then to make appropriate choices based on the possibilities the text opens up. Not only do the actors have to commit themselves to certain actions and then take responsibility for the choices they're making, but they also have to operate within a scripted set of possibilities. Much like a culture's moral code, the script sanctions certain possibilities while restricting others. When in 5.1 Victor, playing Benedick, challenges Grant as Claudio, for example, he may bully and batter him with his words and even his weapon, but he may not harm or kill him. That isn't in the script. To turn an inanimate text into a scene taking place in time and space, those in charge must make innumerable choices about how things *should* go. In the case of Shakespeare Behind Bars, Wallace's hands-off directing style leaves the inmate actors themselves free to choose how they interpret each line, scene, and character, just as we

must each govern our own behavior in social life. In both stage acting and ethical action, we must use our judgment and decide how to enact the accepted script. The ritualized practice of this skill in rehearsal helps the inmate actors develop skills and sensitivities that are essential to ethical life.

Of course, also akin to ethical life, individual actors interpreting the script must communicate with others around them to build a coherent scene and storyline. “It’s a give and take,” Casey explained after one of their performances.²³ When discussing how he memorized all of his lines, André shared the insight that you can’t learn just your own lines. You have to learn your cues, too, and be aware of what everyone around you is up to. Indeed, our choices do not take effect in isolation but in situation. This fact brings actors to consider the effects of their actions on others as they deliberate and also to prepare themselves to respond to others’ actions and offerings in the aftermath of their actions. To consider the same scene again, if Victor chooses to nudge Grant out of his way when he enters the stage instead of just walking past and ignoring him, he should be prepared for Grant to respond in kind, escalating the scene rather quickly to a physical challenge the script may not support. (This happened in rehearsal.) Their later jests in the same scene are too incongruous with the opening of the scene if Benedick enters with too much disdain for Claudio. By analogy, the men playing the scene learn to anticipate how others might respond to their advances and plan their actions more carefully. They learn to navigate the accepted script—the ethical script that free members of society must obey—without straying beyond its sanctioned boundaries, constraining their freedom to choose within the bounds of what is allowable.

Second, directors like Wallace and Stewart often remind their actors to think about their motivations when moving on stage.²⁴ An actor should not simply wander but rather, even as Hamlet suggests, “Suit the action to the word” (3.2.16). As Carol Stewart put it, “Make a decision and *move*. Don’t just amble.” An actor’s motivation must grow out of the scene at hand, and he has to commit to the choices he makes, or his movements will seem aimless or unwarranted.

One result of this demand for actors is that the men who participate in Shakespeare Behind Bars also spend time paying attention to what motivates their actions and how their choices are either intentional and committed or meandering and incidental. Wallace told me that one day at rehearsal, long-time SBB veteran Rhodes realized, “I didn't have to get in the car that night. Had I not gotten in the car, had I not made that one choice, it wouldn't have gotten to this. I wouldn't have ended up taking a life.” Interrogating their own motivations for acting on stage allows these men to reflect on the motivations—and, perhaps, the unmotivated actions—that landed them in prison. Even for those of us whose choices have not led to incarceration, examining our motivations and intentionally committing to our actions rather than ambling through our daily decisions encourages ethical reflection and deliberation.

Third and finally, in order for a theater performance to really transport the audience, the actors must be mentally present in the world of the play, acting as if for the first time within the parameters of that situation.²⁵ Stage actors must listen to and respond to one another in the moment in order to turn repeated motions endlessly rehearsed into meaningful interactions on stage. When theater is merely a tired repetition

of what has been rehearsed, it fades from a transformative ritual to a mechanistic routine. But genuine human interactions result from engaging in the ritualized meaning-making practices we're examining.

In rehearsals, the men cultivate their ability to engage with each other in this way when they practice giving and receiving impulses with a warm-up game they call "Zip Zap Zop." Standing in a circle, one man will say "zip" and clap his hands toward another who must receive the impulse, say "zap," and pass the clap, so to speak, to another person in the circle. The men make eye contact, use physical movement (the clapping), and speak to one another as if passing a conversation around the group. The goal is to stay alert to the impulses that others are throwing your way and to respond appropriately. (If you say "zap" when it's your turn to say "zop," you're out.) This game is a common theater warm-up exercise, but the SBB men also use it as a reference when they're working on a scene that lacks dynamic communication. Wallace tells me they will say about a scene, "There's just not enough zip-zap-zop here." What they mean is that the men participating are reciting their lines as if in a vacuum; they aren't giving and receiving as in a real conversational exchange. When the men were at their best, I noticed that Wallace often gave them the feedback: you're doing a good job of listening to each other.

In this way, good theater looks like good ethical behavior, for the centrality of responsiveness to responsibility cannot be overstated.²⁶ Being a responsible ethical actor means being receptive to the needs and impulses of others, receiving them with respect and grace, and responding appropriately. Actors' training in this respect is tantamount to

ethical training. Performing a script means tactically negotiating terrain populated by others whose agency we must account for and respect while creatively enacting our own roles. By these lights, ethics can be conceived not as a set of rules to follow but as a set of roles we assume and tactically perform.

The men in SBB must practice listening to one another (receiving both words and deeds) and responding from the full depth of their emotional capacities and on the grounds of their shared human dignity, according to the possibilities that a given script both opens and restricts. They practice making committed and well-motivated choices that respond to the situation in its present singularity while obeying the strictures of the cultural moment, however that is constructed. This is what good acting looks like, and this is what being a good member of an ethical community looks like, too. All of these ritualized practices that make up the structure of their program enable the men in Shakespeare Behind Bars to experience ethical growth as they learn and practice the art of theater.

Ritualized Greetings, Rehabilitating Touch

So far, we have seen how the structure of the SBB program encourages ethical development and builds an exemplary community of ethical actors. But the gap between the design of the program and its practical application leaves room for adaptation and interpretation just as the gap between the script and the performance does. There is a powerful ambiguity in this transition from theory to practice that likewise holds great potential for creative and ethical action among the members of the community. We see this happening in the unscripted habits and practices of the men of SBB. To recall de

Certeau's terminology, the Shakespeare Behind Bars approach to Shakespeare and to acting is strategic, i.e. planned, as a mechanism that will help rehabilitate by stimulating and supporting individual inmates' ethical sensibilities in the ways I have discussed. It is a structural element of the group, something developed by founder Curt Tofteland and learned by every new member who joins the troupe. But participants in the SBB program have their own tactical maneuvers, as well, ways of operating within the established system (be it the prison system broadly or the system of SBB that the facilitators uphold) that appropriate it and establish new power relations that redesign the reality in which they live.

As Bell emphasizes, when these tactical ways of operating become ritualized, their practice takes on a rehabilitative function, reviving meaningfulness from out of the routines and power plays that make up prison life. I want to focus on one such ritualized practice for the men of SBB—the way they greet each other at the beginning of every rehearsal. What I witnessed when I visited was that as the men all arrived from their various posts around the complex, individual group members made an uncoordinated but consistent effort to greet each person who entered the room with a word and a touch. Rather than waving or calling out to each other, the men crossed the room to speak a greeting and reach out a hand. Fist bumps, handshakes, elbow squeezes, and half-hugs bounced around the room, communal gestures that had become automatic yet not meaningless. These greetings are a ritualized practice that establish and strengthen the bonds of their community, especially through the nondiscursive ambiguity of a touch. The men make contact through their hands as they make eye contact and assure each

other through these touches, “I’m glad you here. We’re here together. I trust you, and you are safe.”

I know that eye contact from visitors is important for these men. Jerry Alter, the Classification and Treatment Officer at Luther Lockett who works with Shakespeare Behind Bars, told me in an interview that most visitors from the free world, as they say, keep their heads down upon entering the prison, refusing to make eye contact. One of the inmate actors told me that he loves the public performances each year because these are their chance to show their humanity to the world. They spend the year working to emulate the full-bodied humanity of a character that exists only on the page, and as a reward, they also earn the chance for visitors to look them in the eye without shame or fear and recognize *their* humanity.

I also noticed during my time there that the men make an effort to make eye contact with each other during their rehearsals when they are connecting with the text. It was most noticeable on the jokes in the script. Those who were watching from the audience, not participating in the scene, would look around the room to share a laugh with the others who were watching. Meeting eyes means sharing a moment together and acknowledging the sameness of two people’s experience; it is the opposite of exile and isolation. The effect was even greater one afternoon when the men and I had the privilege of seeing Kentucky Shakespeare’s 90-minute *Hamlet* performed right there in the prison chapel.²⁷ Having performed *Hamlet* themselves some years back, the Shakespeare Behind Bars actors often looked or pointed across the room to others in the audience as a way of recalling an experience or sharing in a particular line. Eye contact

is obviously important to the way they construct an atmosphere of shared humanity, community, and responsiveness.

I experienced the significance and comfort of these points of contact—both eye contact and physical touches—myself when I visited. The men were both eager and respectfully cautious when they approached me to welcome me into their community. For a woman, touches from unknown men can be dubious, but this mode of communication they practiced with each other as well clearly conveyed respect and grace. They made consistent, steady eye contact, and I felt that they regarded me as a dignified human being, not as a female specimen. Especially since they were holding rehearsals in the prison chapel, I was overwhelmed with the sense that I had walked not into a prison setting but into a church service, where the pastor had just asked that the members of the congregation greet each other with peace and good will.

This scene, which was duplicated during every rehearsal I attended, was particularly striking given the strict taboo against touching in the prison, as Matt Wallace confirmed for me in an interview. Inmates are not supposed to touch each other out on the yard or in their dorms, and the only touches they can reliably count on in their everyday routines are disciplinary corrections, restraints, and searches. It was clear to me that the agency they felt through their hands as they reached out to each other (choosing to touch instead of just being touched) and the great emphasis they placed (demonstrated through great effort) on greeting each other with a touch were significant aspects of the power of their practice to develop empathy and respect and to unify their community.

The centrality of touch to this ritual community is even more striking considering that the one feature all of these men have in common is violent crime. Violence itself is a mode of touching, a way of being with others that violates their belongingness in a space and, in a Heideggerian idiom, reduces their bodily presence to the presence of matter, not of being. More to the point, violence is the mode of touching that has resulted in all of the men at Luther Lockett being exiled with prison sentences. In these daily greetings, the inmate actors are practicing alternate modes of touching, experiencing respect for bodily integrity while also affirming their mutual presence in a space. A gentle touch recognizes and respects that we are both present here in the same space. A handshake and a face-to-face greeting with steady eye contact can assuage the threat of violence. These can be understood as symbolic gestures of oneness and of twoness, of respect for another in his otherness, in the space that he takes up, and of recognition of the other's belongingness in this space that we also occupy.

Touch is taboo in prison because it opens the possibility of violence and of exploitation, but as Hölderlin has shown and Heidegger emphasized, where there is harm, there grows salvation, as well. The Foucauldian power relations that structure this environment are also what give rise to the redemptive power of simple everyday practices, like a clap on the shoulder and greeting someone face to face, to reinvigorate and rehumanize our relations with others.

In an ethical register, touch serves as a simple reminder that we are not isolated in the world. Our actions take place in space that we must share with physical others, as actors in the same play, so to speak; our choices take shape within a context of meaning

constructed by our being with others. Our existence is necessarily communal in this sense, and it is up to us to determine what modes of touching are appropriate and responsible.

Now, greeting one another with a touch of the hand is a practice—unlike truth telling or empathy—that the men in *Shakespeare Behind Bars* are not allowed to take with them out of the chapel and onto the yard. Despite the communal bonds these men might form within the boundaries of their rehearsal space, their everyday lives must still be governed by the oppressive power relations that structure prison life. They must return to the world that values reputation above honesty and where touch means danger. Eventually, they will be released into a world where violence is viewed as a legitimate mode of interaction, or rather transaction, with others, a world structured by technological enframing that inhibits the full expression of their humanity. Like the high school glee club comprising misfits and anomalies, many of the men in SBB come together for rehearsals yet walk in different circles, never speaking to each other out on the yard. The time they spend together practicing empathy, responsiveness, generosity, and honesty is, after all, liminal—a suspension from the norm that must be followed by a return.

I would like to suggest, however, that the transformation they experience has the potential to be real and lasting, not just a temporary function of their suspension from the grind of prison life while they perform. Let us reexamine some of the details of Turner's conception of ritual, for I contend that the ritualization of SBB's community practices draws the lessons we learn from liminality out into the everyday.

Many scholars have come to associate the very structure of ritual—separation, mediation, and return—with the structure of Shakespearean comedies. Denton Snider, for instance, identified this structure in the comedies in 1887, long before Turner did the same in ritual studies. A century later, Susan Baker writes about the effect of rituals within Shakespeare’s comedies, and she takes care to emphasize how the plays themselves are as transformative for audiences as the rituals performed within them are for the characters.²⁸ Baker relies on Turner’s “characterization of liminality as a ritually circumscribed time and place in which a society’s customary categories for perceiving and ordering experience are temporarily suspended” (12). Her argument addresses the characters who participate in the rituals and the play-going audience who experience the play as a suspension of the normal ordering of their experience. In the audience’s case, Baker argues that the language and conventions of a Shakespearean comedy interrupt (temporarily suspend) their habitual modes of categorizing and understanding experience. The production’s pulling the audience into its own liminal space is even more apparent for the public audience who enters the prison to watch the SBB production. This is indeed a marginal space that disrupts the social order and our usual functioning in the world we know.

But I would like to add to Baker’s analysis what the SBB experience discloses to us about the actors, as well: that the performance of fictive rituals in a drama has transformative repercussions in the “real world” we return to when the ritual performance comes to a close. Harold Goddard’s analysis of the work of imaginative deception in *Much Ado* is illuminating on this point. He identifies the friar’s fictive

storytelling following Hero's renunciation as the mechanism that makes possible the restoration that comes about at the end of the play. Read in this way, the play itself is a testament to the power of imaginative storytelling (and we might interpolate here, rituals and theater as well) to perform the restoration of an ethical community. *Much Ado* models how creative play works to transform and redeem the experience of the inmates who participate in Shakespeare Behind Bars.

Ritualizing the Ritual Scene

At this point, having examined the theoretical and practical apparatus that support the SBB community, we are prepared to return to some of the critical issues surrounding the play itself to decipher the practical answers the SBB production may afford us. These particular ritualized practices and the effects they have on our real world ritual actors (the inmates and audiences who participate) are echoed in the main ritual scene in *Much Ado*—Claudio's penance at the monument. For this cast, before an audience of visitors from the free world, the ritual that Claudio performs symbolizes the sum of their own efforts to find redemption through the ritualized practices that strengthen their ethical sensitivities in the context of a supportive and responsive community. Luther Luckett's Claudio does undergo the transformation in question in the critical literature and achieves the social rehabilitation these actors seek.

As we proceed to examine the monument scene in the SBB production, let us pay attention to what the actors do with the scene not just as a sample performance that weighs in on critical debates but because this company's principles and practices reveal ritual performance as a vehicle for ethical transformation of the sort at stake in the

critical debates. Rather than helping critics read the playtext in a new way, the SBB production shows how imaginative rituals and creative play in theater both model the possibility of ethical agency and community (even in a social structure dominated by economy and technologies of power) and help ritual actors achieve it.

The mechanics of the scene were simple. Grant, Lawrence, and Mitchell (Claudio, the Prince, and Balthazar, respectively) entered from behind the audience and settled in the center of the stage. There was no elaborate scenery or processional, just these three men and our imaginations to fill in the setting. Grant held a short scroll, and Mitchell carried his guitar. As Claudio, Grant read the epitaph slowly, haltingly, and then Mitchell played and sang the scripted ballad to a solemn tune he had written himself. Midway through the song, we see Claudio, moved by the music, walk distractedly towards the monument where he falls to his knees, clasps his hands, and bows his head. To approach the monument, Grant walked partway up the center aisle, so most of the scene took place with this one man kneeling, crying, and praying in the middle of the audience. After one of the performances, one woman in the audience commented how powerful it was to see Grant kneeling beside her chair, grieving and penitent, and to remember that he had also done wrongs that he was unable to undo.

Grant said he took on the role of Claudio because of the similarities he saw between Claudio's life and his own. "I've been locked up a long time," he said. "There are certain things I haven't dealt with that Claudio didn't deal with either, so I had to work through it." For Grant, the only adult life he has known has been behind bars. Claudio is emerging from the military life for the first time and attempting, with very

little success, to settle into domestic life. I imagine that Grant saw in Claudio the difficulty he will one day face when he reenters the social sphere outside the prison, and he took it upon himself to learn what he could about reintegration through Claudio.

For both Grant and Claudio, the monument scene was pivotal. Grant said that this scene was his own personal challenge. “It’s about finding my forgiveness within myself,” he said. Most of these men agreed that they will not receive the forgiveness they desire. Instead, they told me, they have to find it within themselves and give it to each other. According to Rhodes, this image of forgiveness is foundational to their community cohesion. “We’re always having to forgive each other,” he said. Rhodes associates forgiveness with seeing each other’s humanity. For him, being human and needing forgiveness are practically synonymous. Thus, as they practice recognizing and respecting each other’s humanity by making eye contact, listening, and responding with honesty, the men in SBB also practice everyday acts of forgiveness, choosing trust and generosity over the anger and economic quid pro quo attitude they know can lead to violence.

While receiving forgiveness from each other grounds their community in trust instead of revenge, it does not obviate the need to make amends with those they have harmed, a task many of these men believe is unattainable. Rather than work towards forgiveness or reconciliation, many of them, like Fox, strive to redeem themselves instead. He said he does believe that he can restore some kind of balance through kindness, earning his own redemption through personal growth and ethical behavior, even without being able to reconcile with those he has wronged.

This is one of the reasons why Claudio's situation is so significant for this troupe of actors. Scholars have criticized the play for the absence of approbation from Hero after Claudio's penance. There is no scene in which Claudio, Hero, and Leonato all reconcile openly; the final wedding is still a show of deception and manipulation as Claudio commits himself to Leonato's "niece." In place of reconciliation or forgiveness, Claudio undertakes the ritual activity of mourning at Hero's tomb to secure his redemption. He has to do it himself, for as he performs his transformation, she who might offer forgiveness is so remote as to be dead. Our inmate actors relate to this set of circumstances. Watching these actors perform this scene reminds us that Claudio believes Hero to be dead when he sets out to atone with her family. It reminds us that there are wrongs that cannot be fixed, and that there nevertheless needs to be something we can do about it, some way to redeem ourselves.

The way these actors presented the scene was fairly standard, but its significance permeated the chapel setting. It wasn't just the performance of a fictional ritual for Grant and the others. It was a ritualized performance with repercussions for their understanding and rehabilitation of their place in the social structure. When Grant said that he had to work through what he and Claudio hadn't dealt with, he wasn't just learning the same lessons that Claudio learned; he was performing for himself the ethical transformation that audiences hope Claudio undergoes. The ritualized performances in SBB are meaning-making operations, and Grant was able to make the monument scene meaningful for himself by taking Claudio's chance at redemption to heart and performing the ritual penance on his own behalf.

One interaction I had with Grant showed me just how sincerely he embraced Claudio's redemption ritual. At intermission on my last night at the prison, I was chatting with Hodges and Grant. Grant had just told me that Matt, the director, had a playbook for me that all the inmates had signed before the show. I was visibly excited to have it and expressed my joy and thanks. Hodges jokingly told me not to be too happy with Grant; I was about to get very mad at him, when the second act started with the renunciation scene. "That's true," I said. "I hate you a little bit every night," I told Grant. "I always win you back, though, right?" he asked with a hopeful smile. Yes, I told him. The scene by the tomb always pulled me back to being on Claudio's side. Shakespeare *Behind Bars* shows us what it would take for Claudio's ritual performance to be effective, and because Grant has internalized the ritualized practices that make SBB an ethical community—because he listens and responds to his comrades on stage and digs deep to express a full range of human emotion, we experience his Claudio as sincere, as having undergone the reformation required of him.

That night, though, Grant won me back a couple scenes earlier, when he begged Leonato to take his revenge. That night it was clear to me that this was a man who was desperate to redeem himself for his wrongs. More like Borachio than the flat Claudio of the text, this Claudio "desire[s] nothing but the reward of a villain" (5.1.253-254) when he pleads at Leonato's feet, "Choose your revenge yourself. / Impose me to what penance your invention / Can lay upon my sin." (5.1.284-286). It is as painful to Claudio as it is to Leonato that he "cannot bid you bid my daughter live" (5.1.292). The impossibility of fully restoring what we've destroyed in haste, in error, or in a moment

of blindness or weakness Danny and Grant both know better than ever a Leonato or Claudio knew it. Their own Heroes cannot be resurrected so easily.

Yet what these men do have available to them, if not the possibility of forgiveness or the script to a ritual that will grant them happy endings, is the power to transform their own character. They hold interpretive power over the script, and they capitalize on the ambiguity of the character and the scene to make these meaningful for themselves. Within the world of the play, the questionably effective ritual that critics have called too brief or too stilted to be of use really works because of its ambiguity. Claudio, Hero, and Leonato—audiences, too—can each read into that funeral rite whatever they need to satisfy their concerns. In the real world, too, the textual variance and lack of stage direction open the ritual scene up for interpretation by actors and directors²⁹—again owing its effectiveness to its ambiguity. What detractors dismiss as the “emptiness” of this ritual performance is in fact its wealth of possibility. Actors like Grant can instill in the scene whatever meaning they need it to have in order to work through the issues that studying Claudio brings to the surface. For Grant, performing this scene gave him the chance to experience within himself the feeling of redemption, and the SBB approach to community and to theater helped him make the transformation needed to feel he deserved it.

Grant’s case is not unique in the SBB community. The program is designed to engage the ethical dimensions of the theater dynamic, and their own everyday practices reinforce ethical behavior in the community.

In this case, their practices also redirect critical attention away from questions of whether Claudio is sincerely transformed at the end of the drama or whether the ritual is effective. The way SBB handles the ritual scene helps us to think about theater itself as a ritualized meaning-making activity and about the ritualized actors performing before us as ethical agents whose tactics help them undergo transformations like Claudio's. As a result, it can serve as a model ritual of rehabilitation for more than just the inmates at Luther Luckett. Shakespeare Behind Bars presents a paradigm of ethical community building that rests on reinfusing everyday interactions with the transcendent meaning of ritual activities, thus bringing the power to redeem the hegemony (to recall Bell's terminology) back to the hands of the weak. Because we all operate tactically within a system of others' devising, these practices are available to us as a means of resistance to the dehumanizing industry and efficiency of our age and institutions.

Conclusion

Examining the Shakespeare Behind Bars program as we have in this chapter shows that there is value for all of us in the posture of acting. The SBB approach to theater highlights the isomorphism between an actor's honesty, empathy, and responsiveness on stage, on the one hand, and the responsible behavior of an ethical agent, on the other. The SBB program has been strategically designed (through its approach to theater) and tactically manipulated (through the development of everyday practices like tactile greetings) to rehabilitate its participants with respect to the ethical community from which they have been exiled. Beyond the rehabilitative aims claimed

by most prison programming, the structure of SBB gives rise to ethical transformation in participants and general ethical development in the community it creates.

The interplay of strategic and tactical elements of the SBB program also exemplifies the way a hegemonic power structure gives rise to its own undoing in subversive practices. It is the prison's prohibition on touch that makes ritualized tactile greetings effective in overcoming alienation and redeeming the social order. The strategic order of things creates the gaps and ambiguities from which tactical resistance grows. SBB's commitment to ethical life and community values demonstrates the truth in Hölderlin's verse: "But where danger is, grows / The saving power also."

In the final chapter, let us return more explicitly to the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter. For as we have seen, the prison setting supplies the ultimate closed system constituted by power relations in which to test the measures of resistance Bell and de Certeau propose to the dominant economic and technological mode. I have suggested that in *Much Ado's* ritual scene, the transformative power lies in its supposed emptiness or ambiguity and its vast interpretability. To conclude our investigation, then, let us reexamine the nature of that ambiguity both in theory and in practice.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION:

WHERE THE SAVING POWER GROWS

Much Ado provides an ambiguous model of reconciling through ritual practices with a family or community one has violated. But Bell and de Certeau give us a way of understanding the productive capacity of an ambiguity like this one. As we have discussed, Bell sees in ambiguity the key to the effectiveness of ritual to unify diverse groups, and de Certeau sees tactical operations as introducing ambiguity that the dominant social order cannot lay hold of. What is more, it is the ambiguity of literary and cultural scripts that makes interpretation and improvisation possible, elements of both stage acting and everyday acting that are essential to ethical life.

Simone de Beauvoir, for one, also points out the centrality of ambiguity to ethics (*The Ethics of Ambiguity*). Ethics is the practice of responding when it is unclear what the right thing to do is, even despite the rules, mores, and beliefs that purport to guide our actions. From an existentialist perspective like Beauvoir's, we see that every action requires a radical choosing on the part of the actor, a commitment grounded solely in one's internal motivation. For that action to be ethical, it must interpret the circumstances and the need of the moment and respond to the demands of the situation. Heidegger represents a similar existentialist perspective in "The Question Concerning Technology" when he suggests that our aim in interacting with others must transcend the technological techniques of enframing and mastery to respond to the fullness of being

they present. The existentialist model of ethical action is analogous to the model of stage acting that SBB uses, not conforming to a standard but acting creatively in ways that sustain human relationships and support others' acting and choosing freely as well.

The ethical work takes place in the transition from an authoritative text to a communal practice. Thinking back to de Certeau reminds us that it is the gap between theory and practice that also allows for the tactical work of resistance to the dominant social hierarchy. The plurality of meanings that tactical interpretive practices introduce is subtly subversive. Translating the written word into action restores the living element of language in an age dominated by what de Certeau calls a "scriptural economy." Bell also emphasizes the adaptability of words that are given life in practice:

The dynamic interaction of texts and rites, reading and chanting, the word fixed and the word preached are practices, not social developments of a fixed nature and significance. As practices, they continually play off each other to renegotiate tradition, authority, and the hegemonic order. (140)

Our ways of operating within and through a script that needs interpreting are what give the disenfranchised power to reorder the power relations that make up their reality, just as it is the unscripted impulses, gestures, and interpretive moments that give inmate actors the power to appropriate the canonical Shakespeare.

In the case of *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, ritualized greetings that subvert both the rules of proper conduct and the typical social hierarchy in the prison constitute a liminal element that reorders inmates' ways of understanding their world. With Bell, we see how this reorganization of the power structure serves to redeem it as meaningful and

amenable to the creative powers of the inmates who live within it. Through the ambiguity and productive interpretability of the gap between the script and the performance or between strategic design and practical application, we come to form ethical relations and communal structures that are responsive to individuals' needs and support human values like honesty and empathy. With Turner, we understand how the experience of suspension in the practice of the ritual is not precisely *liminal*, inverting the social structure in order to strengthen its return, but rather *liminoid*—as he explains our modern ritual analog, theater, must be—instead *subverting* the power structure and empowering the weak to make creative changes to their reality. As I have explained about the nature of stage acting and the necessity of interpretation and responsiveness there, I believe that the changes empowered group members can make to their social situation through ritualized practice also constitute an amelioration of their ethical situation, a development of their empathic capacities and their responsibility that reflects a lasting transformation.

One key question remains at the end of our analysis, though: why Shakespeare? If the goal of prison theater as I've described it is to subvert the dominant social order and make space for ethical community to grow among marginalized populations, why should we continue to study the one man who is perhaps most emblematic of a hegemonic European canon?

To begin with, one of the strengths of doing Shakespeare with inmates is this very demand for interpretation in the face of ambiguity or unclarity. Scripts that are centuries old and written in a nearly-foreign language require close study and creative

invention to be understood and to make understandable to an audience who only hears the words quickly spoken. The utter strangeness of Shakespeare's language to modern readers holds vast interpretive potential, and this capacity for adaptation and imagination aids the ethical aims of a group like SBB. Inmate actors must learn the difficult work of trying to understand something unlike what they're used to, and they must practice putting into action an ambiguous and perhaps conflicting script. The practical reasoning and judgment that go into the practice of this kind of acting is tantamount to ethical life; it is creative, not mechanistic.

The ambiguity and interpretability of Shakespeare's language and the ethical lessons implicit in working with scripts like these also hinge on the literal and figurative death of the author who composed them. The unbridgeable distance between the actors and the authorial voice, plus the lack of an authoritative voice in the form of a strict director, necessitate that the group undertake the creative work of understanding *as a group*. This program develops ethical sensitivity and builds ethical communal relations among its participants, and the freedom to creatively interpret the script as a community of practice is essential to meeting these aims.

But there is a more fundamental reason for choosing Shakespeare's texts to work through in the ritualized way that Shakespeare Behind Bars practices. Conventionally, ritual involves the reproduction of a canonized script. Its transformative power lies in its particular temporal and spatial enactment, as we have seen, but it is a quasi-sacred text at its center that gives rise to the redemptive hegemony we have been investigating. I say this not to suggest that Shakespeare's playtexts are sacred but to offer the following

understanding of the importance of ritual. Recall that tactical manipulations of the dominant discourse must arise from the gaps within the dominant discourse itself. To paraphrase Hölderlin once more from this angle, salvation grows only where there is danger. It is the ritual reproduction of a canonized text that opens a space for renegotiating the social order. It draws us back to the interpretive demand of our own communities' founding scripts, whatever they may be, and drives us to recall our ethical vocation. In Messina, although the bumbling Verges and Dogberry are the ones who uncover the crime, it is the ritual master, the priest, who must invent the script that leads to Claudio's redemption and the family's reconciliation. In the same way, what we see happening in Shakespeare Behind Bars is the playing out of an age-old ritual script, their reinvention of which empowers them to appropriate the power relations that constitute them as subjects and reinvigorate the communal and ethical values that our economy of usefulness and efficiency have subsumed.

NOTES

1. Shakespeare Behind Bars and the Journeymen program are two distinct groups, though they share rehearsal space, perform together at the end of the year, and are facilitated by the same people. Two members of Shakespeare Behind Bars also volunteer as mentors for the Journeymen. They try to keep the young men interested in developing the skills of an actor as tools for interacting with others upon their release from prison, but the Journeymen program is only four months, compared to the year-long SBB program, and there is no fixed expectation that participants will move from one program to the next.

2. Horkheimer and Adorno also turn to art in search of salvation from the dangers of how they understand Enlightenment rationality.

3. In her conception of practice, Bell attempts to collapse the thought-action distinction into a term that captures the situational and strategic nature of human activity. Following Bourdieu in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bell defines practice as strategic, economical, and manipulative (Bell 79).

4. In constructing this term, Bell borrows Kenelm Burridge's notion of the "redemptive process," involving the discharge of ethical obligations in relation to a community, and combines it with Antonio Gramsci's notion of "hegemony" as order or hierarchy (Bell 84).

5. Some ritual theorists go so far as to say that the ambiguity of ritual symbols is essential to the possibility of community. Bell names several in developing this line of thinking: David Jordan, James Fernandez, Daniel Overmyer, and James Watson (183-84).

6. Because tribal rites of passage are socially sanctioned disturbances of the social order, the inversion and return that Turner describes reinforce the normal social order (41), and so the community supports initiates participating in the ritual. In fact, Turner's description sounds remarkably similar to the way one might described prisoners of the state: given food and provisions by the society at large, yet stationed outside of the social structure, lacking both normal social obligations and the benefit of political rights (26-27). Prisoners and ritual initiates alike reside in a marginal space, suspended in time and physically distant from the normal operations of society. Modern day prisoners differ importantly from the ritual initiates of tribal societies as Turner understands them, though, for he takes the Industrial Revolution to be a key turning point in the way marginalized populations such as these interact with the dominant social structure.

7. We might think of the *carnival* as an analogue here.

8. Turner calls this ethical potential *communitas*, the momentary, "unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals" (45).

9. Turner associates ethical community building with the liminal and suspects that the liminoid is not structured to support *communitas*. However, he proposes the notion of "flow," a term he borrows from Csikszentmihaly and MacAloon, as a way to regain the possibility of *communitas* within the liminoid. A kind of seamless and organic

integration of theory and practice (as Turner describes it), flow draws the actor fully into the present moment and enables him to encounter others in their humanity, not as means to other ends.

10. Artistic director Matt Wallace says this is an intentional choice, not a requirement from the prison administration. He wants his audiences to have that visual reminder always before them. He wants visitors to see the men as impressive, transporting actors *and* as prison inmates.

11. I cite from the Folger edition of *Much Ado*, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, because that is what the SBB men used as their playbooks.

12. For this reason, *Much Ado* has often been considered to be one of Shakespeare's "problem plays" (Ross). In addition to the problem plays, it has been compared to a diverse range of his other plays, among them *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and the romances.

13. The terms of my study require the use of pseudonyms when reporting on what I observed and heard while visiting Luther Luckett. The names of the inmates involved with Shakespeare Behind Bars have been changed.

14. Several critics frame the play as a clash between two sets of social values: the masculine, military, and warring versus the feminine, domestic, and lawful (Bronfen, Everett, Krieger, Lyon). An open question is how this clash is resolved: Does one set of values win out and subjugate the other? Or is there a higher synthesis reached between the two? Is the dominant social order restored or is it reorganized? In Barbara Everett's assessment, *Much Ado* is a play about subverting the hierarchy, with feminine values winning out in the end. Elliot Krieger comes to a similar conclusion in "Social Relations and Social Order in *Much Ado about Nothing*" but in terms of military and domestic social codes. Krieger identifies Benedick's line, "How doth the lady?" (4.1.118) and Beatrice's line, "Kill Claudio" (4.1.303) as the critical moments of reversal, Benedick embracing the domestic to inquire about Hero and Beatrice donning a militaristic stance in spurring Benedick to challenge Claudio. In another iteration of the same theme, Katherine M. Lyon compares homosocial bonds in both *Much Ado* and *Othello*, arguing that what rescues *Much Ado* from tragedy is the subjugation of male friendships to the bonds of marriage. To conform to the conventions of comedy, the men must leave the world of war and settle into a social order dominated by feminine or domestic values.

15. For example, Marta Straznicky points out that the structure of the conflict in *Much Ado* only holds up in a society where men already have the power and women's honor is already a matter of doubt. Then, Claudio's harsh refusal of Hero can be read as a power play, a move to reassert his dominance over a woman who has gained some influence over him. Read in this way, the end of the play is for Claudio and Benedick a return to positions of power, not a reformation. They regain their social power by joining the sanctioned social order as married men. This, after all, is the power structure that Shakespearean comedy supports. Even if it is the domestic values that triumph over the military ways familiar to Benedick, Claudio, and the Prince, it is still the men who reassert their power and maintain the social hierarchy that privileges them. Harry Berger reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that Hero's behavior expresses the limits of her situation as a woman who is to be treated as a commodity in a Messina ruled by men

who must remain blameless.

Terence Hawkes also takes a Foucauldian approach when he investigates the theme of knowledge and perception in *Much Ado* in terms of spying and surveillance, but he finds potential in these practices for subverting dominant structures. To impose de Certeau's terminology on Hawkes's analysis, Hawkes finds spying to be a tactical exercise. He claims that the kind of spying and eavesdropping that takes place in the play disperses the epistemological power of a single account of an event, decentralizing the truth. A decentralized truth means a dispersal of power, and so Hawkes finds some resistance to the dominant social discourse in instances of watching and overhearing such as in the gulling scenes and in Claudio's apparent discovery of Hero's unfaithfulness.

16. Lang goes so far as to insist that audiences should rally with Beatrice in her cry to "Kill Claudio" (4.1.303). Gavin Edwards takes Lang's side of the debate with a self-reflective twist on the claim that the audience must reject Claudio. For Edwards, Claudio appears to be an actor who refuses to perform the script set for him. He literally refuses to play his part in the marriage rite in Act 4, and as an audience, we get the sense that he isn't following the script. He isn't acting according to the tradition of the courtly lover.

17. Originally, it is an unnamed lord who reads the inscription at Hero's tomb, yet modern editors and directors have practically unanimously given these lines to Claudio.

18. In fact, Hodges told me he thought Hero should at least get to slap Claudio in the end for everything he put her through. He followed this comment with a surprising show of feminist solidarity, thrusting his fist into the air and chanting, "Girl power!"

19. The men playing female characters tend to adopt a default, exaggerated, ostensibly feminine stance with their hands clasped in front of them in the style of choir singers. With practice, they break out of that pattern and grow into the well-rounded personalities of their particular characters. In the final performance, the attitude I saw often in rehearsal only surfaced in the wedding scenes, when the bridesmaids in Act 4 and the decoy brides in Act 5 needed to look uniform.

20. This was the first scene I saw in rehearsal, and Danny's sincerity in playing the role of Leonato brought tears to my eyes. When Matt asked me to share what I thought of the scene, I told them, this is the worst thing a father could say to his daughter, and Danny got it just right. He was no monster; he was a father, both disappointed and enraged at his daughter's supposed behavior. I learned later that Danny chose to play Leonato in order to learn just such emotions. He said he wanted to learn what it was like to be a father. This was something he regretted not ever having experienced for himself and a role he felt he needed to understand better as he worked toward forgiving those who had hurt him.

21. Cobb's essay has now been published, with an introduction by SBB founder Curt Tofetland, as an article titled "Prospero Behind Bars."

22. Carol Stewart reported to me that the men say it looks suspicious if their records are perfectly clean. One SBB member told her he breaks a minor rule every now and then—like taking a shortcut on his way to rehearsal instead of following the painted arrows that are supposed to govern all foot traffic on the yard—just so that he doesn't draw attention. Not to mention, these prisoners' lives are overregulated in the extreme,

often with arbitrary rules they could not anticipate and may break unintentionally by trying to go about their lives as normally as possible.

23. After each public performance, the inmate actors participated in a talkback session, during which they answered questions from the audience about the production, the program, and their experiences.

24. The first time I heard the comment, “Motivation, motivation!” it was coming from Victor, one of the SBB mentors to the Journeymen. He had internalized this lesson and was sharing it with the younger generation.

25. One might achieve this liveliness and freshness through gimmicks like rearranging the scenery or experimenting with different movements or intonations. In the early stages of rehearsals, for example, Wallace will have his actors practice their lines emphasizing all the vowel sounds or all the verbs, in hopes that an unfamiliar cadence will bring new meaning to the words.

26. Heidegger also touted the value of genuine listening as a boon to ethical life. In “The Question Concerning Technology,” he writes, “... man becomes truly free only insofar as he ... becomes one who listens, though not one who simply obeys” (330).

27. Wallace is the director of this company, and he brought his actors into the prison for a special performance.

28. Baker’s primary example is the rite of passage taking place in *As You Like It*, when everyone removes to the forest in a coming of age ritual that will result in their return to civilization transformed yet with the dominant social structure intact.

29. As Friedman has pointed out, this is the scene where editors and directors take the most license. Kenneth Branagh’s film version even shows Hero in disguise attending the funeral rite.

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