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Shakespeare and the City:  
The Negotiation of Urban Spaces  
in Shakespeare's Plays

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# SHAKESPEARE AT THE FRINGE: PLAYING THE METROPOLIS

BY

YVONNE ZIPS

What would London be without Shakespeare? And what would Shakespeare be without London? The notion that this connection is worth pursuing is supported by the fact that the contemporary English novelist and critic Peter Ackroyd published *Shakespeare: The Biography* within four years of his *London: The Biography*. In his introduction to *London*, Ackroyd refers to a figure taken from a Roman bronze in which the city had “been envisaged in the form of a young man with his arms outstretched in a gesture of liberation” (Ackroyd, *London* 1). The image of the city as a human body does not only illustrate the concept of the city in early modern times, but also emblematises “the energy and exultation of a city continually expanding in great waves of progress and of confidence” (*London* 1). Even if we can only speculate about why Shakespeare abandoned his family in Stratford-upon-Avon and came to London, he sought his fortune in the early modern metropolis. As Peter Ackroyd notes, it was at Shakespeare’s time “commonly reported of players that some ‘have gone to London *very meanly* and have come in time to be exceeding wealthy” (Ackroyd, *Shakespeare* 104). But not only the chances of success made people come to London, it was the (ambivalent) energy of the city itself which attracted foreigners:

A traveller entering the city for the first time could not help but be profoundly moved or disturbed by the experience. It assaulted all of the senses with its stridency and vigour. It was a vortex of energy. It was voracious. The traveller was surrounded by street-traders or by merchants beseeching him to buy; he was hustled and jostled. It was a city of continuous noise – of argument, of conflict, of street-selling, of salutations [...] and more often than not it smelled terribly of dung and offal and human labour. (*Shakespeare* 105)

What could be a better inspiration and matrix for the young and ambitious actor and playwright William Shakespeare than this expanding, vital, ambivalent and self-conscious city? On several feast days the city turned into a “piece of moving scenery” (*Shakespeare* 109), when members of the various guilds, knights and merchants wore their appropriate costumes and were accompanied by ensigns and bannerettes. There were not only stages and platforms upon which tableaux were performed, the city itself changed into a stage upon which London performed itself as a spectacle. As a result, the boundaries between players and spectators were blurred and the city became “a piece of intense theatricality in which life and art were lit by the same pure, bright flame” (*Shakespeare* 109).

### The City as Theatre of Social Action

In the 1930s the American historian and philosopher Lewis Mumford defined the city as a “theatre of social action” because “[t]he city fosters art and is art; the city creates the theater and is the theater” (Makeham 150). In his article “Performing the City” Paul Makeham develops Mumford’s definition further and argues that the city “is as imaginary and ephemeral as performance, because it is a performance – of individual and collective values, desires, memories and aspirations” as it is “animated through the collective actions of individuals, exchanging signs and meanings, in dialogue and conflict with one another, seeing and being seen, telling stories, enacting the core rituals of performance” (157). In our time driven by an “event-culture” (Klein 14), the performance aspect of the city may seem nothing new. In early modern London, however, experiencing the city fundamentally changed the perception of theatre: city dwellers were used to a certain theatricality of life in the city. Therefore Shakespeare could (dramatically) play with city space on a meta-theatrical level. In the following I would like to compare conceptions of urban performativity in Shakespeare’s plays with Michel de Certeau’s opposing perspectives on the city. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau tries to reveal the hidden structures of urban life through a semiotic and poetic analysis of everyday practices of modern life. In his chapter “Walking the City” he analyses the relationship of New York and its inhabitants distinguishing two different perspectives on the city: “The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below’, below the threshold at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city [...]” (93). According to Certeau’s quotation, early modern Londoners can be considered as “walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’, they write without being able to read it” (93). Opposed to this perspective is a spatially different one:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. One’s body is no longer clasped by the streets [...] when one goes up there, he leaves behind mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators [...]. [T]his transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. (92)

The totalizing gaze of the “voyeur” turns the experience of the city into a homogeneous whole, an anonymous urban space, where its inhabitants become inseparable from its architecture, leaving little or even no space for individuality. Translating these perspectives back to city dwellers in early modern London, I would like to argue that the perspective of the “voyeur” corresponds with the meta-theatrical level of being a self-reflective spectator of Shakespeare’s plays, whereas the “walking” perspective corresponds with the personal experience of being an urban player acting out urban self-fashioning within the city space.

I would like to argue that Shakespeare creatively explored the knowledge of his “Wandersmänner” audience with respect to urban performativity and that his plays, to speak with Makeham, “enable[d] citizens to invent – through memory, imagination and desires – new ideas about themselves and their relationship with the urban landscape” (Makeham 157). While these ‘walkers’ in the ‘real’ city wrote stories they

were not able to read, their experiences were made “readable” and visible during the dramatic performance.

### The Situationists International

Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It* in particular allow for such a shift of perspective and they also introduce, *avant la lettre*, ideals and practices of the Situationist International (SI), a movement that intended (and tried to establish) an open-minded society critical of the ruling power structures.

Unfold a street map of London, place a glass, rim down, anywhere on the map, and draw round its edge. Pick the map, go out into the city, and walk the circle, keeping as close as you can to the curve. Record the experience as you go, in whatever medium you favour: film, photograph, manuscript, tape. Catch the textual run-off the streets; the graffiti, the branded litter, the snatches of conversation. Cut for sign. Log the data-stream. Be alert to the happenstance of metaphors, watch for visual rhymes, coincidences, analogies, family resemblances, the changing of the street. Complete the circle, and the record ends. Walking makes for content; footage for footage. (MacFarlane 9)

This is part of the beginner’s guide to psychogeography, a term that was introduced by the Lettrist Group, one of several loosely bound avant-garde groupings in the 1960s. Combining psychology and geography, psychogeography became a method of transforming urban life for aesthetic as well as political purposes. Developing and radicalising this concept, the Situationists International revolted against the “spectacle of capital, party politics and imperialism” (Sadler 43):

The Situationist came up with the headiest mix of the main ingredients of sixties activism, protest, art, counter-culture, and fun: the ‘liberation of desire’; the energetic involvement of everyone; sustained attacks on ‘bourgeois society’; aiming at its overthrowal. Bourgeois society was excoriated for its consumerism and the passivity of the masses; it was the ‘society of the spectacle’, with art merely a part of consumerism. (Marwick 33)

What the Situationists aimed for was a radical change of society. In their “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action” the SI proclaims: “First of all, we think the world must be changed. We want the most liberating change of the society and life in which we find ourselves confined” (Knabb 25). This ‘most liberating change’ was meant to be performed by acting on the individual attitude and therefore altering society in general. Closely connected with this change was the negotiation of urban space. In “Formulary for a New Urbanism” the SI states: “We are bored in the city, there is no longer any Temple of the Sun. [...] You’ll never see the hacienda. It doesn’t exist. *The hacienda must be built*” (Knabb 1). Modern industrial society was seen as dominated by the “spectacle” as “Selbstportrait der Macht in der Epoche ihrer totalitären Verwaltung der Existenzbedingungen” (Wiegink 84), which became the declared enemy of the SI, because it alienated its subjects from the world and turned them into passive spectators of their own lives (85). For a change of everyday behaviour the ‘hacienda’ had to be completely rebuilt: “[T]ransforming the everyday

requires certain conditions. A break with the everyday by means of festival – violent or peaceful – cannot endure. In order to change life, society, space, architecture, even the city must change” (Lefèbvre 11). To act against the passivity of the “society of spectacle” the SI tried to develop different ‘means of action’ to bring its lulled victims back to life: “Our central idea is the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality” (Knabb 38). One way to experiment with a “a new mode of behavior” was the *dérive* which tried to provoke a playful and constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects: “In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there” (Knabb 62).

Although the SI joined the Rousseauian tradition of disliking theatre as a place of illusion and was critical of theatrical means to achieve a change of society, their theoretical approach can be described with a contemporary conception of performance: “The key to this newer, and at the same time older form of spectacle is total participation, the breaking down of the arbitrary barrier between stage and audience. All the actors now become spectators, and all the spectators actors. No one any longer *represents* anyone other than himself” (Barish 290). The answer to the ‘society of spectacle’ was the “urban festival” which was “re-establishing the ‘right to the city’” (Jay 420) and which was regarded as an “expression of a collective creativity” (Wiegink 92) instead of a society that only stands outside and watches.

Along with these changing ideals of society/social space goes the change of spatial practices. As spatial structures produce/enable certain kinds of action, they reproduce/reinforce spatial structures. To describe this phenomenon, the German sociologist Martina Löw differentiates between an ‘absolutistic’ and a ‘relativistic’ concept of space: the ‘absolutistic’ concept of space construes space as independent from action and the bodies that move within it (“Behältnisraum”); from the perspective of the ‘relativistic’ theory, space is dependent on bodies and their action: as bodies are in permanent action, space is in permanent change, too (Löw 24-35).

### **Shakespeare’s Plays: “Every story is a travel story, a spatial practice”**

In the following I would like to discuss Shakespeare’s negotiation of urban space as a playful sense of subversion, transfiguring a spirit of political radicalism and as a way to transform urban environment along the lines of the ‘situationistic’ practices. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It* there are two opposing concepts of space of which one is to be characterised in Löw’s terms as ‘relativistic’ and the other as ‘absolutistic’. At the beginning of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* we are at Theseus’ court, which represents the space of law – a male space, in which men dominate women. Hermia’s father Egeus accuses Lysander to have “bewitched the bosom” (*MND* 1.1.27) of his daughter Hermia and “filched” her heart, so that she – instead of showing “obedience” –, shames him with her “stubborn harshness” (*MND* 1.1.37-38). Theseus, asked to reconstitute the fatherly power over his filial “property” reminds Hermia that according to the “ancient privilege of Athens” (*MND* 1.1.41) the

price to pay for sticking to her heart is “either die the death, or to abjure for ever the society of men” (*MND* 1.1.64-65). Theseus clearly embodies Athens’ law in the public space but the parallel of Theseus and Lysander wooing evokes a private sphere as well: Theseus’s wooing with “swords”, winning female love doing “injuries” (*MND* 1.1.16-17) is contrasted to the concept of “true love” which Lysander represents (*MND* 1.1.134). To keep existing norms, opposing concepts have to be negotiated and, ultimately, one has to be discarded so that legal power is sustained and the practices acting within that space are confirmed. According to Löw’s terms one could define this space as a closed space, a “Behältnisraum” which is signified by “Athens’ gate” (*MND* 1.1.213); within these gates Athenian law rules, which, Theseus explains, “by no means we may extenuate” (*MND* 1.1.120). Since a change of social practices within this urban space seems impossible, the only chance to live their love (and make a change) is to move away from that space which only gives Hermia the choice between “death or [...] a vow of single life” (*MND* 1.1.121) and to seek refuge at Lysander’s “widow aunt, a dowager” (*MND* 1.1.157) who lives “[s]even leagues” away from the “sharp Athenian law” (*MND* 1.1.162). The spatial distance to the court already implicates a different social practice acting upon that space; furthermore the connotation of these spaces is metaphorically contrasted: Prior to Hermia beholding Lysander, Athens used to be a “paradise” for her, but now it “hath turned a heaven unto a hell” (*MND* 1.1.207). Spatial practices also contrast the two women protagonists: while Hermia fights for the right to ‘write’ her own love-story, Helena, – unhappily in love with Demetrius, – longs to go back to Athens (*MND* 3.2.3), where law regulates ‘love’ and turns it into a socially accepted and reliable practice.

The green world in contrast can be considered as a ‘relativistic space’ as it is a playing field for different social practices. It is not only the two lovers who escape to the woods, the craftsmen also meet “in the palace wood, a mile without the town” (*MND* 1.2.80) to rehearse their play for the Duke’s wedding. The space “at the Duke’s oak” (*MND* 1.2.87) is a multifunctional and ambiguous space, where the “green plot” serves as stage and a “hawthorn brake” as “tiring-house” (*MND* 3.1.3-5). For Bottom and his company it opens up the possibility to change their social roles (without being ridiculed like at the court) and for the lovers the wood is the space where they have the opportunity to fight for their love and verify their concepts of love beyond “Athens’ law”. For Demetrius the wood seems an “ill counsel of a desert place” (*MND* 2.1.218) – an empty and desolate space because Hermia is not at his side; for Helena in contrast “doth this wood [not] lack worlds of company” because Demetrius is all her world: “[...] how can it be said I am alone when all the world is here to look on me?,” she asks (*MND* 2.1.225-226). Unlike the space of the law, the green world allows for an exploration of varying social roles and multiple emotional states. “What have the woods to do with Athens in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*?,” asks Laurel Moffatt (Moffatt 182). In her article she answers this question very convincingly referring to Michel Foucault’s conception of “heterotopia.” She defines the woods as “an antithesis of sorts to Athens,” functioning as a heterotopic space which in Foucault’s words is “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites that [...] can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Moffatt 182). At the end of the play love and order are restored not only on the dramatic level, but the

play installs a “restitution of order that extends beyond the woods to Athens and results in a various *discordia concors*” (Moffat 185) that also affects the audience (Moffat 183).

Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* is (topologically) similarly structured: Orlando considers the house of his brother Oliver as “no place [...] but a butchery” (*AYL* 2.3.27) and the court of Duke Frederick is described as a place of hate and rage which expresses itself in banishment (*AYL* 1.1.79-83). The Forest of Arden, in contrast, is marked as a place where “they live like the old Robin Hood of England” (*AYL* 1.1.102), and “fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world” (*AYL* 1.1.95). This place is characterised as a “desert city” (*AYL* 2.1.24), where “all things” are thought to be “savage” (*AYL* 2.7.107), leaving more space for individuality than the court with its strict regulations of the court:

DUKE SENIOR.           Hath not old custom made this life more sweet  
                                   Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods  
                                   More free from peril than the envious court?  
                                   Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,  
                                   The seasons’s difference, as the icy fang  
                                   And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind –  
                                   Which when it bites and blows upon my body  
                                   Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say  
                                   ‘This is no flattery – these are counsellors  
                                   That feelingly persuade me what I am.’  
                                   Sweet are the uses of adversity  
                                   Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
                                   Wears yet a precious jewel in his head,  
                                   And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
                                   Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
                                   Sermons in stones, and good in everything. (*AYL* 2.1.2-17)

Even if A. Stuart Daley argues convincingly against a “constant antithesis between Court and Country,” founding his argumentation on the “thematic unity [of] a work of art” so that the “antithesis between Court and Country has no relevance” (301), I would like to join in the “critical consensus” that the court and the forest are juxtaposed (300). Similar to the wood in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the Forest of Arden is contrasted with the court. Celia, who decides to join the banishment of her beloved cousin, explains: “Now go we in content, / To liberty, and not to banishment” (*AYL* 1.3.127-128). And as the forest speaks a different language (‘tongues in trees’, ‘books in the brooks’), it offers different concepts of living. Insofar, the Forest of Arden is a ‘relativistic’ space, a space in which all social conflicts are resolved in the end: “Let us do those ends / That here were well begun and well begot!” (*AYL* 5.4.154-155). As in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* all lovers negotiate the ‘courtly’ problems successfully within the ‘relativistic space’ and the imminent tragedy is thus turned into a comedy. The four lovers have overcome all obstacles and can finally live their love openly while Duke Frederick is “converted / Both from his enterprise and from the world”, decides to stay in the wood and to leave behind the “pompous court” (*AYL* 5.4.166), bequeathing “the crown to his banished brother, / And all their lands restored

to them again [...]” (*AYL* 5.4.147). Apparently, the wood has had a significant effect and impact on the courtly society.

### Conclusion

Returning to the Situationists International and their intention to change power structures by changing everyday social practices in space, let me once more point to the parallels between Shakespeare’s spatial dramatic structures and the geographical intervention, the *détournement* and *dérive*, as envisaged by the SI. Both Shakespeare and the SI instigated taking a critical perspective on recurrent structures of society and public space by revealing social power structures in ‘absolutistic’ spaces. Shakespeare opposes an ‘absolutistic’ space (the court/male space of the law) and a ‘relativistic’ space (the ‘green world’). Although the two comedies end with a generic happy ending, Shakespeare prompts his audiences to contemplate the two opposing spaces with their specific recurring power structures – comparable to the Situationists’ performative acts of *dérive* or psychogeography: “O Rosalind, these trees shall be my books, / And in their barks my thoughts I’ll character / That every eye which in this forest looks / Shall see thy virtue witness’d everywhere” (*AYL* 3.2.5-8). Orlando transforms the space by inscribing it just like Rosalind who argues: “Why should this a desert be? / For it is unpeopled? No: / Tongues I’ll hang on every tree” (*AYL* 3.3.100-102). Orlando and Rosalind are ‘situationists,’ they negotiate space by transgressing spatial borders and create new spaces within the social/urban space.

Step by step and by “continuous drifting” (Knabb 7) the residents in the forest are changing their everyday behaviour, like e.g. dressing in disguise as Rosalind exchanges her petticoat for “doublet and hose” (*AYL* 2.4.5-6). Taking a man’s perspective, Rosalind enacts a different social role. It is the non-urban spaces that make these “games” possible and give them some kind of socially revolutionary air:

Revolution was conceived as the first freely constructed game, a collective transformation of reality in which history is seized by all its participants. Play, pleasure and participation were to be the hallmarks of a new form of social organisation appropriate to a world in which the imperatives of survival no longer legitimise relations of domination, alienation, or separation between the individual and the world. (Plant 71)

In keeping with generic conventions, Shakespeare’s happy comedies, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It*, subvert these revolutionary changed situations. They restore order in the end by translating these situations back into the ‘absolutistic’ urban space. And it is in particular Shakespeare’s meta-theatrical use of the ‘play in the play’ which demasks not only theatrical space as such, but blurs the boundaries between theatrical and ‘real’ space, as the Duke Senior answers Orlando, who is searching for food for Adam: “Thou see’st we are not alone unhappy: / This wide and universal theatre / presents more woeful pageants than the scene / Wherein we play in” (*AYL* 2.7.136-139) and Jaques concludes “All the world’s a stage / And all the Men and women merely players [...]” (*AYL* 2.7.139-140).

Compared to vibrant early modern London Shakespeare’s comedies draw on two different spaces – one that is somehow evacuated from the city space and where transformations take place and the space of the city/court where the restored order is

reintegrated. The lover's delusions can be compared to the SI's concept of *détour* and *drive*, as they are meant to question and disrupt the order of the regulating city space and to achieve social changes by individual actions. The audience is actor and spectator at the same time dancing and 'dreaming' the plays' transformations like in a 'situationistic' "urban festival" and reintegrating them into the city space as the Duke Senior states: "We will begin these rites / As we do trust they'll end, in true delights" (*AYL* 5.4.181-182).

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### **Zusammenfassung**

In den 1960ern fand sich eine Gruppe internationaler Avantgarde-Intellektueller zusammen, die sich "Situationisten" nannte und die die Stadt als den Ort des Widerstandes deklarierte. Auch William Shakespeares Komödien setzen sich intensiv und subversiv mit räumlichen Praktiken auseinander und diskutieren soziale Macht-Strategien im urbanen Raum. Was haben Shakespeares Dramen *A Midsummer Night's Dream* und *As You Like It* mit den Situationistischen Praktiken gemeinsam? Aus meiner Perspektive nimmt Shakespeare viele der Methoden des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts, die versuchen, sich den urbanen Raum als Ort des Protestes und der Gemeinschaft wieder anzueignen, vorweg.