Syncrisis: the figure of contestation

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In a famous scene in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Molière's Monsieur Jourdain learns to his delight that there is a technical term to describe the style in which he has spoken unwittingly throughout his life: that he has always spoken in *prose*. 'Really?', he says in excitement to his tutor; 'You mean I've been speaking prose for over forty years without knowing it?' And he goes off at once to announce this important fact to his wife. 'Do you know what I'm speaking right now? *Prose*.' Many Renaissance terms of rhetoric might be thought to offer a similar satisfaction, furnishing us with formal terms – amphibologia, tautologia, insultatio, barbarismus – to describe styles of speech we had already effortlessly mastered without their aid. Syncrisis may look at first sight like a term of this kind. Unfamiliar nowadays not just to the general public but to many scholars as well, absent from almost every modern dictionary, syncrisis is the name of an exercise that once served throughout Europe as a central element in the school curriculum, in the training of orators, and in the formation of principles of literary and moral discrimination. Yet despite its curious erasure from modern consciousness, syncrisis is still widely practised today by writers who would no doubt be as startled as M. Jourdain to discover there is a formal term to describe what they do, when they assess side-by-side the achievements of (let us say) Mozart and Haydn, or of Matisse and Picasso, or of Auden and Eliot, or of Churchill and Thatcher, or of George Michael and Boy George, or of Chelsea and Manchester United, or of Dell and Apple, or Pepsi and Coke.

For syncrisis is a word which simply denotes a bringing-together for comparative analysis (Greek *syn* = 'together' plus *krisis* = 'decision, judgement') of objects, events, institutions, of artists, writers, warriors, footballers, politicians, elephants, charioteers – the categories are almost without limit – in order to arrive at a final adjudication of their relative merits, and to persuade the reader or listener that one of these elephants or writers or warriors is superior to the other.¹ Syncrisis was widely practised in

classical times, the exercise being commended especially in the writings of Quintilian and Cicero and the Greek scholar of mysterious identity known simply as 'Longinus', who in his treatise on the Sublime, written in the first or second century AD, formally compares and contrasts Plato with Demosthenes, Demosthenes with Cicero, *The Iliad* with *The Odyssey*, and so on. For Quintilian, the practice was an essential part of a student's moral education, 'the comparison of the respective merits of two characters' being closely allied to 'the praise of famous men and the denunciation of the wicked', and the ability to distinguish between virtue and vice. For all of these writers, syncrisis serves as an exercise in comparison and discrimination, but also (critically) in persuasion, and in this respect may be seen as fundamental to the art of rhetoric.²

Syncrisis was equally familiar throughout the Renaissance, when the writings of Cicero and Quintilian and the classical school exercises played a major role in rhetorical training.³ The exercise served, as ever, to formalise the manner in which critical judgements were offered, and to sharpen natural habits of comparative assessment. It offered a binary view of the world, a choice of moral pathways, an imperative to distinguish between two persons or objects or categories of a seemingly similar nature. Shakespeare's Hamlet, fresh from his studies at Wittenberg, vigorously applies the strategies of this art in conversation with his mother, as he contrasts the qualities of Gertrude's first husband with those of her second:

Look here upon this picture, and on this,
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
See what a grace was seated on this brow,
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars to threaten and command . . .
This was your husband. Look you now what follows.
Here is your husband, like a mildew'd ear
Blasting his wholesome brother.⁴

Shakespeare is likely to have encountered this style of argumentation in rhetorical instruction at his grammar school in Stratford upon Avon.⁵ At St Paul's School, London, the young John Milton was obliged to perform oratorical exercises derived from Quintilian and Cicero 'in which one likens one thing with another, showing one of the things to be either equal or superior to the other'; exercises that allowed the student flexibly to argue for or against the proposition that night was superior to day, wisdom to ignorance, or work to pleasure, and the mature poet to compose such satisfyingly antithetical works as *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*.⁶ Many years later,

Coleridge followed a similar educational programme at Christ's Hospital under the tuition of the Reverend James Boyer, who, as Coleridge recalls in the opening chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, 'early moulded my taste to the preference of Demosthenes to Cicero, of Homer and Theocritus to Virgil, and again of Virgil to Ovid'. Boyer required his students to read Shakespeare and Milton 'as lessons' while studying the Greek tragic poets, thus encouraging a comparative assessment of the great English and classical authors.⁷

John Dryden evidently underwent a similar rhetorical training at Westminster School under the legendary Dr Busby, for his literary judgements are characteristically expressed through contrast and comparison. Dryden habitually groups the writers he discusses in pairs in order to demonstrate the differences between them and to arrive at a final verdict on their merits. In his Preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), for example, Dryden compares the achievements of Homer and Virgil, concluding his analysis in this way:

But to return: our two great poets, being so different in their tempers, one choleric and sanguine, the other phlegmatic and melancholic; that which makes them excel in their several ways is that each of them has followed his own natural inclination, as well in forming the design as in the execution of it. The very heroes shew their authors: Achilles is hot, impatient, revengeful,

impiger, iracundus, inexorabilis, acer, etc.

Aeneas patient, considerate, careful of his people, and merciful to his enemies; ever submissive to the will of heaven,

quo fata trahunt retrahuntque, sequamur.

I could please myself with enlarging on this subject, but am forced to defer it to a fitter time. From all I have said, I will only draw this inference, that the action of Homer, being more full of vigour than that of Virgil, according to the temper of the writer, is of consequence more pleasing to the reader. One warms you by degrees; the other sets you on fire all at once, and never intermits his heat. 'Tis the same difference which Longinus makes betwixt the effects of eloquence in Demosthenes and Tully; one persuades, the other commands.⁸

In that final nod to Longinus, Dryden acknowledges the rhetorical model he has chosen to follow, and moves at once to a comparison of another pair of writers, Ovid and Chaucer. In his *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693) Dryden compares and contrasts in a similar way the achievements of Horace and Juvenal, finding Horace the more urbane and good-mannered of the two satirists, but Juvenal the more vigorous and spirited.

so that, granting Horace to be the more general philosopher, we cannot deny that Juvenal was the greater poet, I mean in satire. His thoughts are sharper; his indignation against vice is more vehement; his spirit has more of the commonwealth genius; he treats tyranny, and all the vices attending it, as they deserve, with the utmost rigour; and consequently, a noble soul is better pleased with a zealous vindicator of Roman liberty than with a temporizing poet, a well-mannered Court slave, and a man who is often afraid of laughing in the right place; who is ever decent, because he is naturally servile.⁹

In the passages just quoted, Dryden appears to move in a curious, not to say reckless, manner between literary criticism and biographical speculation. About the historical 'Homer', virtually nothing is known, but this does not prevent him from confidently declaring Homer's temper was choleric and sanguine, while that of Virgil was phlegmatic and melancholic. He imagines the characters of the two authors to resemble those of the principal characters they create: 'The very heroes show their authors: Achilles is hot, impatient, revengeful . . . Aeneas patient, considerate, careful of his people, and merciful to his enemies; ever submissive to the will of heaven.' In this curiously circular manner of reading from the text to the life, from literary to psychological appraisal, Dryden is typical of his age. Alexander Pope, pursuing a similar contrast in the Preface to his translation of *The Iliad* some years later, argues in similar fashion: 'When we behold their Battels, methinks the two Poets resemble the Heroes they celebrate: *Homer*, boundless and irresistible as *Achilles*, bears all before him, and shines more and more as the Tumult increases; *Virgil* calmly daring like *Aeneas*, appears undisturb'd in the midst of the Action . . .'¹⁰ The comparisons which Pope and Dryden offer here are not merely aesthetic, but relate also to human temperament and conduct.¹¹

For syncretism was an exercise practised in relation not merely to literary texts but also to the lives of the famous. When Plutarch wrote his lives of illustrious men in the first century AD, he grouped most of his subjects in pairs in order to compare and assess their respective qualities.¹² It was through the example in particular of Plutarch that English Renaissance writers discovered the excitements of comparative biography; of studying lives *in parallel*. 'Parallel' is actually a somewhat inaccurate term to describe these exercises, in which it was as necessary to note divergences of career and character as to record similarities. Sir Henry Wotton, modelling his biographical procedures explicitly on those of Plutarch, examined paired figures from the classical past, such as Pompey and Caesar, and also from nearer times and places, looking 'by way of Parallel' at the two royal favourites, the Earl of Essex and the Duke of Buckingham, noting 'their

diversities' as well as 'their Conformities' in 'Fortunes and Fames', '*Person and Mind*', '*Actions and Ends*'.¹³

Parallel biography rested on the same large theory of historical repetition that underpinned the comparative work of Plutarch: the belief that certain kinds of events and people tended to recur from one historical era to another, and that corresponding typologies of conduct and character might therefore be constructed. Renaissance writers often chose to narrate the lives of famous characters from the ancient world or from the Old Testament – of Caesar, Alexander, Cleopatra, David, Absalom, Achitophel – in such a manner as to imply the existence of some present-day equivalent shadowed or paralleled in the earlier life. In certain contexts the syncrisis might be offered teasingly, hintingly, through ambiguity and innuendo, in clear awareness of the penalties accompanying more overt statement. In Ben Jonson's Roman tragedy *Sejanus* the historian Cremutius Cordus is accused of disparaging the Emperor Tiberius in precisely this manner, 'By oblique glance of his licentious pen' (3.414), having written admiringly about Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar, thus appearing to suggest that Tiberius might merit a fate identical to that of Caesar. Cordus's offence – for which his writings are burnt, and he himself is condemned to death – is to have planted this hint through the covert exercise of syncrisis:

To have a Brutus brought in paralell,
A parricide, an enemie of his countrie,
Rank'd, and preferr'd to any real worth
That *Rome* now holds.¹⁴

Cordus's situation as presented in the published text of the play may be intended in part to reflect that of Jonson himself, who had been brought before the Privy Council on apparent suspicion of having practised a similar form of historical parallelism in the original version of the play, when it was first performed. It may also reflect on the situation of the historian John Hayward, whose account of *The Life and Raigne of King Henrie VIII*, dedicated suspiciously to the Earl of Essex and daringly reporting a successful coup against an earlier English monarch, had triggered the ban on the printing of English histories on 1 June 1599 and led to Hayward's own confinement in the Tower of London. In each of these cases, syncrisis proved to be a politically hazardous exercise.¹⁵

Syncrisis of a more overt and less inflammatory kind was also commonly practised within the period. Samuel Daniel, in dedicating his *Tragedie of Cleopatra* to Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, praises his patroness's personal accomplishments (which are as great, it is implied, as those of

Cleopatra herself), and the achievements of English writers in relation to those of modern Italy, which, for all its collective talents, 'cannot shew a *Sidney*':

Let them produce the best of all they may
 Since Rome left bearing, who bare more than men
 And we shall parallel them every way
 In all the glorious actions of the men.¹⁶

'Elizaes blessed peace' in Daniel's vision will rival that of Augustus; to write about Cleopatra is to be reminded of one's happiness in living in the present age. Shakespeare, a close reader both of Plutarch's *Lives* and of Daniel's tragedy, turns the comparison another way in his own tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Here is Charmian speaking of her now-dead mistress at the end of this play:

Now boast thee, Death, in thy possession lies
 A lass unparalleled. Downy windows, close;
 And golden Phoebus never be beheld
 Of eyes again so royal.¹⁷

A lass unparalleled: the adjective is carefully chosen. Shakespeare's achievement is to persuade us of the uniqueness of Cleopatra's character – its sharp particularity, its literally unmatched nature – while subtly reminding us that she is in fact not wholly unparalleled in history and mythology. The play discreetly reminds us of resemblances between the fate of Antony and Cleopatra and that of Aeneas and Dido, and of Mars and Venus, of Bacchus and Venus, of Hercules and Omphale. Cleopatra's story at times runs close to that of Eve, and of Delilah.¹⁸

It has been suggested furthermore that Shakespeare in his depiction of Cleopatra may have been thinking quite precisely about Elizabeth I, drawing numerous parallels between the characters and circumstances of the two queens.¹⁹ Elizabeth, like Cleopatra, was subject to fits of rage and liable to treat her counsellors and maids of honour in much the same style that Shakespeare's Cleopatra treats messengers from Rome. On one occasion Elizabeth had flung a slipper at Walsingham which hit him in the face, while on another she broke the finger of one of her maids of honour, whom she was accustomed to striking freely. Both Cleopatra and Elizabeth affected illness and other shams to get their way; both were adept at languages; both liked revelry and amusement and lavish dress; both were witty. Both rode splendidly in their royal barges; both enjoyed

participating personally in warfare; both ruled small kingdoms with the help of their navies; both staked their thrones on a decisive battle, Elizabeth's navy successfully routing the Spanish Armada, Cleopatra failing disastrously at the Battle of Actium.

Shakespeare's syncrisis might not have been well received had the play been performed or published during Elizabeth's lifetime. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a natural sequel to *Julius Caesar*, which had been performed at the Globe in 1599. One explanation that has been advanced for Shakespeare's delay in completing the later play, which was probably written and performed in 1606/7, is political caution: the Queen who was so quick to detect historical parallels on other occasions ('I am Richard II, know ye not that?') might well have been displeased at the manner, however subtle, in which the implied comparisons between herself and the Egyptian monarch had been developed.²⁰ During Elizabeth's lifetime Fulke Greville had suppressed his own play on Antony and Cleopatra out of fear that it would be read as an account of the relationship between Essex and Elizabeth; while Francis Bacon, addressing James VI and I in *The Advancement of Learning* years after the death of Elizabeth, chose still to speak of her warily as 'a princess that, if Plutarch were now alive to write lives by parallels, would trouble him, I think, to find a parallel amongst women'.²¹ Yet James, troubled by popular nostalgia for Elizabeth during the early years of his reign, would scarcely have been offended by an implicit comparison of his predecessor with Cleopatra. *Antony and Cleopatra*, it has been suggested, might indeed have been performed originally at court in James's presence, and intended as a deliberate compliment to him, playing on certain parallels that James himself had attempted to encourage between his own reign and that of Octavius Caesar, later to become known as the Emperor Augustus.²²

The figure of syncrisis may thus be employed in either a subversive or a panegyric mode, or indeed with complete neutrality, as the two subjects for comparison are weighed equably against each other. But as the title of this chapter suggests, the style which syncrisis seems naturally to encourage is that of contestation. It is a figure that looks always for a comparator, choosing always to rank one subject directly or indirectly against another. It thrives on competition and enmity, on conflict and battle. The Latin verb *committere* which is frequently used in relation to these exercises means to commit or bring together for the purposes of formal comparison. The same word is used for the bringing together of armies or gladiators or fighting cocks to engage in battle. Here is how Juvenal in his misogynistic sixth Satire describes a female critic employing the art of syncrisis:

Illa tamen gravior, quae cum discumbere coepit,
 laudat Vergilium, periturae ignoscit Elissae,
 committit vates et comparat, inde Maronem
 atque alia parte in trutina suspendit Homerum.
 cedunt grammatici, vincuntur rhetores, omnis
 turba tacet, nec causicus nec praecox loquatur,
 altera nec mulier; verborum tanta cadit vis,
 tot partier pelves ac tintinnabula dicas
 pulsari.

(434-42)

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[But most intolerable of all is the woman who as soon as she sits down to dinner commends Virgil, pardons the dying Dido, and pits the poets against each other [committit vates et comparat], putting Virgil in the one scale and Homer in the other. The grammarians make way before her; the rhetoricians give in; the whole crowd is silenced; no lawyer, no auctioneer will get a word in, no, nor any other woman; so torrential is her speech that you would think all the pots and bells were being clashed together.]

Juvenal's female critic is a stirrer, a trouble-maker, a proposer of invidious comparisons. In an epigram (7.24) addressed to a critic who had attempted in a similar style to *commit* his verses against those of Juvenal, Martial angrily denies the possibility of enmity existing between the two poets, seeking to quieten the competitive spirit which this exercise has set in train.

The competition which syncretism proposes is often not merely personal, but national, too. Quintilian's and Plutarch's comparisons are largely designed to measure the relative achievements of Greece and Rome: Homer and Virgil serve as cultural champions of these nations, and Alexander and Caesar as exemplars of their military prowess. By the Renaissance, English writers begin with equal care to measure native talent against that of the classical world. The analyses of poetical form and rhetorical figures set out in George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) are inspired by the simple comparative question: 'why should not Poesie be a vulgar Art with us aswel as with the Greeks and Latines, our language admitting no fewer rules and nice diversities than theirs?'²³ In *Palladis Tamia* (1598) Francis Meres attempts an elaborate syncretism of English and classical literary achievement: 'A COMPARATIVE DISCOURSE OF OUR ENGLISH POETS WITH THE GREEKE, LATINE, AND ITALIAN POETS'.

As Greece had three poets of great antiquity, Orpheus, Linus, and Musaeus, and Italy other three auncient poets, Livius Andronicus, Ennius, and Plautus: so hath England three auncient poets, Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate.

As Homer is reputed the Prince of Greek poets, and Petrarch of Italian poets: so Chaucer is accounted the God of English poets.

As Homer was the first that adorned the Greek tongue with true quantity: so *Piers Plouman* was the first that observed the true quantitie of our verse without the curiositie of rime.

And so on, through a long and increasingly attenuated list of cultural comparisons: 'As Euripedes is the most sententious among the Greek Poets: so is Warner among our English Poets'; 'As Hesiod writ learnedly of husbandry in Greeke: so hath Tusser very wittily and experimentally written of it in English'; 'As Anacreon died by the pot: so George Peele by the pox.'²⁴

By the late seventeenth century these comparative exercises moved into a more belligerent mode, as the great debate concerning the relative achievements of the Ancients and the Moderns got under way. In France Charles Perrault published his *Parallele des anciens et des modernes* (1688), an energetically chauvinistic onslaught on the much-vaunted achievements of the ancients, attacking Homer in particular for the puerile and barbarous nature of his work. Against Homer and the ancients Perrault ranges the great modern writers of France – Boileau, Racine, Corneille – whose achievements, Perrault ringingly declares, surpass those of the classical world. This is open and declared warfare. Certain editions of Perrault's work actually included battle-maps showing the major writers of ancient and modern times drawn up in military formation on either side of the River Helicon, awaiting the decisive combat. The so-called quarrel of the ancients and moderns, a huge exercise in cross-cultural syncrisis, raged on for many years, engaging the controversial energies of such writers as Fontenelle in France and William Wotton and Sir William Temple in England, and forming the background to Jonathan Swift's satirical work, *The Battle of the Books*.²⁵

The army of the Moderns, as Swift depicts it, is considerable in its numbers but uncertain in its choice of leaders:

The difference was greatest among the horse, where every private trooper pretended to the chief command, from Tasso and Milton to Dryden and Withers . . . The army of the Ancients was much fewer in number; Homer led the horse, and Pindar the light-horse; Euclid was chief engineer; Plato and Aristotle commanded the bowmen; Herodotus and Livy the foot; Hippocrates the dragoons. The allies, led by Vossius and Temple, brought up the rear.²⁶

Yet for many in England the choice of leaders among the Moderns was beyond dispute: it was none other than William Shakespeare. In his great poem 'To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us' standing at the head of the 1623 First

Folio – a powerful feat of literary syncretism, methodically *committing* and comparing Shakespeare against his modern and ancient rivals – Ben Jonson had made the matter clear.

For, if I thought my judgement were of yeeres,
 I should commit thee surely with thy peerer,
 And tell, how farre thou didst our *Lily* out-shine,
 Or sporting *Kid*, or *Marlowes* mighty line.
 And though thou hadst small *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*,
 From thence to honour thee, I would not seeke
 For names; but call forth thund'ring *Aeschilus*,
Euripides, and *Sophocles* to us,
Paccuvius, *Accius*, him of *Cordova* dead,
 To life againe, to heare thy Buskin tread,
 And shake a Stage: Or, when thy Sockes were on,
 Leave thee alone, for the comparison
 Of all, that insolent Greece, or haughtie Rome
 Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.
 Triumph, my *Britaine*, thou hast one to shewe,
 To whom all Scenes of *Europe* homage owe.

(27-42)

No one until this time had spoken of Shakespeare in such magisterial terms, placing him confidently above his English peers and 'all, that insolent Greece, or haughtie Rome' had hitherto achieved.²⁷ Jonson's poem helped to shape and articulate the verdict that, by the late eighteenth century, would be regarded as axiomatic: that Shakespeare was a writer whose creative powers defied and transcended routine comparison, and who was indeed, as Jonson put it, 'not of an age, but for all time!' (43). By a curiously ironical twist, however, the Romantic consensus regarding the nature of Shakespeare's genius was arrived at through a further process of syncretic evaluation, by which Shakespeare's qualities were defined through a series of sustained contrasts with those of the very writer who had pronounced his uniqueness: Ben Jonson. Shakespeare (in this conspectus) was wild, artless, and untutored, the poet of fancy and imagination, where Jonson was laboured, learned and pedantic, the poet of correct yet chilly judgement. The one was a true original, whose writings embraced the world of nature, the other a bare imitator, whose writings merely mirrored the world of books. Shakespeare's formal irregularities spoke of English freedoms, while Jonson's more organized art signalled his subservience to foreign models. The personal character of Shakespeare, as deduced from a selective reading of his work, emerged as generous, gentle, and amiable, while Jonson's,

through the application of similar tests, appeared as envious, saturnine, morose.²⁸

Few examples better illustrate the rhetorical power of syncrisis and its critical limitations than this routine contrast of these two supreme English writers of the early-modern period. The elevation of Shakespeare led inevitably, by the repeated application of these literary commonplaces, to the denigration of Jonson and the progressive dismissal of his work. In such an exercise there could be only one winner. While one contestant had been crowned, the other lay on his back, unconscious in the ring. It was Jonson's fate to be perceived as the man-who-was-not-Shakespeare; as the writer whose supposed qualities served merely to define, through negatives, the qualities that England's national genius was assumed to possess.

By the early eighteenth century at least one judicious critic was inclined to regard this favoured contrast, and the larger rhetorical exercise which it exemplified, with a wary eye. In his Preface to *The Works of Shakespeare* Alexander Pope attributed the familiar opposition of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson to 'the zeal of the Partizans' on either side. 'It is ever the nature of Parties to be in extremes; and nothing is so probable, as that because *Ben Johnson* had much the most learning, it was said on the one hand that *Shakespear* had none at all; and because *Shakespear* had much the most wit and fancy, it was retorted on the other that *Johnson* wanted both.'²⁹ 'Nothing is more absurd or endless, than the common method of comparing eminent writers by an opposition of particular passages in them, and forming a judgement from thence of their merit upon the whole', Pope wrote elsewhere, focusing now on another all too-familiar contrast:

We ought to have a certain knowledge of the principal character and distinguishing excellence of each: It is in *that* we are to consider him, and in proportion to his degree in *that* we are to admire him . . .

No Author or Man ever excell'd all the World in more than one Faculty, and as *Homer* has done this in Invention, *Virgil* has in Judgment. Not that we are to think *Homer* wanted Judgment, because *Virgil* had it in a more eminent degree; or that *Virgil* wanted Invention, because *Homer* possest a larger share of it: Each of these great Authors had more of both than perhaps any Man besides, and are only said to have less in Comparison with one another.³⁰

No stranger himself to the quarrels and contests of authors, Pope was aware of the critical simplifications they might provoke, and the perils that lay in the art of comparison.

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