

Athol Fugard (b. 1932)

Dimetos

Some politician whose name I can't recover notoriously claimed that he did not go to the theatre to think. It seems that the current crop of London reviewers share this view of theatre. Not only do they seem unable or unwilling to think about the play they are reviewing; they openly resent being required to do so.

The only enthusiastic review of the 2009 Donmar production of *Dimetos* I have come across was by Charles Spencer,¹ who found it 'poetic and elusive', which is a way of excusing himself from thinking about the meaning of the play beyond the perception that *Dimetos* 'desperately tries to come up with inventions that will stop time and the intolerable pain of mortality', which, though it does not take us far, is a big advance on anything the other reviewers came up with.

Michael Coveney described the play² as an allegory, but also 'a mythic makeover of Greek and Shakespearean themes'. An allegory cannot be mythic. An allegory is an arbitrary code. You have to be told, or work out, that a = z, b = x, etc. The symbolism of myth is archetypal, which means that it is wired into the human psyche, with meanings or resonances which are common to all ages and cultures, which is why myths survive for millennia and allegories have a very brief currency. Coveney made no mention of what these themes are in *Dimetos*, and clearly found the use of any such themes 'infuriating', thus writing off the whole body of myth, Greek drama and Shakespeare as having any themes relevant to or comprehensible in contemporary drama.

Benedict Nightingale³ referred to the play's 'solemn and portentous mythmaking', with no attempt to describe the result beyond the word 'obscure'. He described Fugard's declared aim 'to use inner specifics to define the condition of modern man' as 'grandiose', which term would therefore have to be applied to most of the world's great drama, including almost the whole of Shakespeare.

Michael Billington also conflated allegory and myth,⁴ describing *Dimetos* as an allegory, but also as 'one of those chronically windy plays which aim for the upper storey of myth without first achieving the ground floor of realism'. He demanded 'topographical roots' and 'social connections'.

It seems these critics shared the opinion of *Dimetos* expressed by a political activist at the time of its first production in 1975 as 'totally without political commitment and therefore valueless in terms of the urgent and violent realities of

¹ *Telegraph*, 26 March 2009.

² *Independent*, 31 March 2009.

³ *The Times*, 26 March 2009.

⁴ *The Guardian*, 26 March 2009.

our time'. Politically committed plays, such as the many anti-apartheid plays written by Fugard, are clearly more immediately influential, often making a major contribution to reform, but, by definition, they are concerned with the current and local symptoms of the 'realities of our time'. We also surely need plays seeking the causes of these realities in the 'condition of modern man', which often seems remarkably similar to the condition of man in Shakespeare's time, or in ancient Greece.

The title of the play warns us in advance that it is going to be mythic. All Fugard himself knew of the Dimetos myth was a brief reference he had found in one of Camus' notebooks:

Dimetos had a guilty love for his niece, who hanged herself. One day, the little waves carried onto the fine sand of the beach the body of a marvellously beautiful young woman. Seeing her, Dimetos fell on his knees stricken with love. But he was forced to watch the decay of this magnificent body, and went mad. This was his niece's revenge, and the symbol of a condition we must try to define.

Fugard obviously would not expect his audience to know this little-known myth, but would assume that his own parallel story would raise the same questions in the minds of his audience.

He begins the play not by launching a story-line — once upon a time ..., or by introducing us to his characters and their situation, but with a purely symbolic scene. A horse has fallen down a deep well. A man (we do not yet know that he is Dimetos) has rigged up a system of ropes and pulleys which he is confident will enable the girl he has lowered into the well to attach the ropes to the horse in such a way (with complicated knots) that both the horse and herself can be raised to the surface. The apparatus works. This scene surely suggests that technology can be used successfully to aid nature. The horse is far more powerful than the man, but is in desperate need of help from the human intellect, which knows, as the animal does not, the laws which govern falling and raising. The man's knowledge enables him to devise and manipulate the machinery, but it seems he needs the female body, lithe and slender, as intermediary, to descend into the dark world of the animal, and relate to it instinctively: 'She works by touch, making comforting noises all the time'.

In the second scene it emerges that without the skill of the (male) engineer, Dimetos, the farmers and bystanders would not have been able to rescue the horse.

The girl, his niece Lydia, is ecstatic, not in response to Dimetos' achievement, but in response to the splendid horse as it gallops away. She relives its moment of liberation. Dimetos, on the other hand, is blind to the vitality of the horse: 'all I saw galloping away was an obviously stupid animal that we had hauled out of a deep hole'.

The horse is an archetype. It appears very frequently in myths and folktales, and in dreams, always with much the same associations and charge. It stands for the life of the body, its passions and instincts, and for the animal component in man, including the instincts which rational, civilized man attempts to repress. Jung writes:

Legend attributes properties to the horse which psychologically belong to the unconscious of man: there are clairvoyant and clairaudient horses, path-finding horses who show the way when the wanderer is lost, horses with mantic powers . . . Horses also see ghosts. All these things are typical manifestations of the unconscious. We can therefore see why the horse, as a symbol of the animal component in man, has numerous connections with the devil. . . The sexual nature of the devil is imparted to the horse as well, so that this symbol is found in contexts where the sexual interpretation is the only one that fits. [*Symbols of Transformation* 277]

Consequently, given the dualistic puritanism of much western thought, the horse is frequently misused. Dimetos' contempt for the horse echoes that of the bible: 'Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding: whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle' [Psalms 32:9]. That attitude echoes that of Socrates, as recorded by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates conceives of the soul as a charioteer (will or intellect) driving a team of horses, one white and compliant (spirit), the other black and 'hardly controllable' (passion or instinct). Things soon reach the point where the black horse, long frustrated and reined in, 'takes the bit between his teeth and pulls shamelessly':

The driver . . . falls back like a racing charioteer at the barrier, and with a still more violent backward pull, jerks the bit from between the teeth of the lustful horse, drenches his abusive tongue and jaws with blood, and forcing his legs and haunches against the ground reduces him to torment. [*Phaedrus* 63]

Lawrence's Connie Chatterley thinks Socrates is stupid for not realizing that the black horse could not be broken by cruelty, but would ultimately overturn the chariot and throw the rider, which is exactly what happens in Lawrence's horse

story *St. Mawr*, and at the end of Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Shakespeare's Adonis, in *Venus and Adonis* reveals his psychological and sexual imbalance in his mistreatment of his horse. In the figure of the centaur, with the head and hands of a man, but the body of a horse, the Greeks acknowledged that man, for wholeness, for true wisdom, needs to be in harmony with the animal component of himself. Lydia finds that harmony for the first time in her life as she lies almost naked across the heaving body of the horse: 'Two bodies separate and yet mysteriously at one with each other', as Dimetos reluctantly puts it.

Dimetos is not interested in horses, or stories, only in facts and calculations. It transpires that he had done it not so much for the sake of a fellow-creature in distress, as to impress Lydia. Nor does he acknowledge that the well must have been badly constructed to allow a horse to fall down it. Technology might have been better used to create a safe well in the first place.

The arrival of Danilo in the third scene reveals that Dimetos had left the city, in which he was the leading engineer, five years earlier. In that time a lack of rain has caused increasing problems. Only Dimetos has the 'vision' to save the city. But it seems that what the city wants from him, and what only he can provide is increasingly high-tech fixes, not any insight into why the climate has changed. He admires a workman who handles a tool 'as if he had personally declared war on matter. ... He produced stone faster than we could use it'. The earth is a bottomless store of material intended for man's use and profit. He imagines science beginning with a blow 'when something on two legs picked up a stone and used it for the first time —smashed a bone to get at the marrow'. He sees himself as the latest hero in 'a campaign that started with that first blow'. He prides himself on 'the tools and machines I've used or put into other men's hands ... extensions of those hands, giving them new powers in their defiance of a universe that resists us'. His battle cry is 'Help men Defy!'

It does not need a scholar's knowledge of mythology to recognize Dimetos as a Prometheus figure. According to Ovid 'Prometheus / Upended man into the vertical' [*Tales from Ovid* 8], thus setting man above the beasts, freeing his hands and widening his outlook. Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to men:

And fire has proved
For men a teacher in every art, their grand resource.

[Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*]

Prometheus taught man to become toolmaker, engineer and technician; to become independent of the natural world (except as a bottomless source of materials) and the gods. But the gods had their reasons for withholding fire from man. They knew that man did not have the moral sense or humility not to use fire

to make increasingly deadly weapons, and to destroy the tree of life on which he was himself a leaf. Men make holes in the world, which may be wells, or mines, or craters. At worst they 'strike wounds in the divine environment' [Kerenyi, *Prometheus*, 53].

Shelley celebrated Prometheus as the great liberator of man from guilt and pain:

Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance, and death, and mutability. [*Prometheus Unbound*]

But Blake, taking Newton to be the Promethean figure of his age, prayed 'May God us keep / From Single Vision and Newton's sleep'.⁵ By single vision he meant (among other things) vision which denies the balance of contraries by insisting on the primacy of fact and reason, reason uninformed by other human faculties and therefore a form of blindness, reducing everything to the mechanical and material. This seemed to Blake to have happened to the very soul of England with the so-called 'enlightenment' of the eighteenth century and the rise of mechanistic science. As John Beer puts it:

Each man became centre of his own mechanically organized little universe, disregarding his imagination as a meaningless accessory except in moments when he wished to relax from the serious clockwork of life.

[*Blake's Visionary Universe*, 39]

Blake's watercolour depicts Newton, a naked man, sitting at the bottom of the sea, with all the wonders of a coral reef behind him, reducing nature to what can be calculated with a pair of compasses on a sheet of paper.

Though Dimetos claims to be in command of the laws that hold the universe together, he cannot cope with his own feelings, cannot hold his own psyche together. He has lost the ability to care for others to the extent that 'If I'd been myself this morning I might well have left that horse and those squabbling idiots to their predicament'. He is not himself because he is obsessed with Lydia. His lack of self-knowledge leads him to hide from himself the true sexual nature of that obsession: 'I love her as if she were my own child'. He becomes a voyeur, hiding in a lemon tree to watch her in the arms of Danilo, as Actaeon hides to spy on the naked Diana, and Pentheus hides to spy on the devotees of Dionysos in *The Bacchae*.

⁵ Fugard used this quotation as an epigraph to the published text of *Dimetos* in 1977.

We are reminded of Prospero, who, claiming to be doing everything in care of Miranda, spies on her with Ferdinand, and poisons her mind with the almost hysterical extremity of his hatred of Venus and his determination to exclude her from his island:

If thou dost break her virgin-knot before
 All sanctimonious ceremonies may
 With full and holy rite be minister'd,
 No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall
 To make this contract grow; but barren hate,
 Sour-ey'd disdain and discord shall bestrew
 The union of your bed with weeds so loathly
 That you shall hate it both.

[IV i 15-22]

Like Dimetos, Prospero seeks to control the natural world, but lacks the self-knowledge to control his own feelings until the very end, when he has to admit his kinship with Caliban: ‘This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine’.

Danilo’s lack of control frightens Lydia, but does not seem to me to be the reason for her suicide. She has lost her faith in Dimetos as the man who makes happy endings. He has revealed his fallibility with the scent of lemons on his hands. Things have happened which make her perfect day seem a naïve illusion. She asks the ultimate question: ‘Why is nothing forever?’ It was Shelley’s naïve illusion that chance, death and mutability could be ruled like slaves. Dimetos is as pitifully helpless as the horse where they are concerned. But there is one way his ropes and knots can be used to stop time, by stopping life, leaving Sophia (which means wisdom) to clean up the mess.

In act two Dimetos, like Canute, has to admit his helplessness when confronted by such elementals as the sea. ‘The sea is a clever but mad craftsman’, since its products are perfect yet useless. His hands, which cannot hold the sand, become ‘lunatic hour-glasses’. The only use he can find for them is to throw stones at the sea. A dead sea-creature brings an ever-increasing stink of mortality.

As Dimetos descends into madness, he tries to use his stones and shells as counters in his calculations, his increasingly desperate and doomed attempts to find a machine or a theorem to stop time. His hands take on a life of their own as they shuffle the stones and shells, or, in the Donmar production, frantically chalk equations on the wall. At last he admits defeat. It is an ego-death. His female victim becomes his helper in the process of rebirth. The hubristic engineer is reborn as a storyteller, a man who dreamt he was a horse. He has fallen out of the world into a cold hole, and is helpless. She comes out of nowhere and rescues him. She wants nothing more than to ride away into the world on his back. But he is

turning into a man, and his fear prevents him. He is driven by his hands to make a world for her, to reshape the earth. She does not come. He realizes that his hands have been slaves to his desire to control and possess, to hold on to everything forever. Now he sees that his only salvation is to let go.

In Wolfram's *Parzival* Parzival, the grail knight, has been searching for years for the grail castle, trying to map its location and drive his horse in that direction. He is weary and no nearer finding the grail. At the moment when he admits defeat, a strange ugly female, Cundrie, tells him to stop trying to find the castle by force of will, determination, and the exercise of his knightly skills and virtues. She tells him to let go of the reins and let them lie on his horse's neck; to let go of his sword and shield, and let his hands hang by his sides. He does so, and his horse takes him straight to the grail castle.

Dimetos has to learn a new skill, the skill of giving; then the last skill of all, the skill of the beggar he had berated in the city for the uselessness of his hands: 'Hold them out, and wait ...'.