The Delta

Volume 3 | Issue 1 Article 9

Spring 2008

The Broken Jug as an Experiment with Thomas Hobbes' Political Theory

Mark Kasperczyk '10
Illinois Wesleyan University

The Broken Jug as an Experiment with Thomas Hobbes' Political Theory

Mark Kasperczyk

Illinois Wesleyan University recently put on a production of The Broken Jug by John Banville. An amusing, if raunchy, interpretation of the play, it provides a very dark picture of humanity and society. Set in the middle of the nineteenth century in a town called Ballybog (in rural Ireland), it tells of the corrupt Judge Adam who breaks a valuable jug while attempting to make sexual advances on Eve Reck, one of the townspeople. When the case of the broken jug is brought to court, he attempts to blame Robert Temple, another townsperson. After all, the girl he advanced on is the only person who sees him during the entire incident, and she hesitates to blame Judge Adam because it would make others suspect him of the more heinous events that occurred that night; thus, he almost manages to escape.

As the discussion will show, the groundwork provided by Thomas Hobbes in his political theory has interesting implications for the situation in Ballybog; therefore, some explanation of his theory is necessary. In Leviathan, Hobbes establishes that the state of nature, which he understands to be any state without a common power or sovereign, is a state of war in which there is "continual fear and danger of violent death" and people's lives are "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 107). He elaborates on three main types of quarrel within any anarchic state: "first, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory" (106). To escape this situation, he explains, we form a commonwealth, which he defines as "one person, of whose acts a great multitude, by mutual covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all as he shall think expedient for their peace and common defense"

(143). Thus, one person is made a sovereign by the mutual agreement between all others to offer part of their natural rights (namely, the right to self-government) so that all may live peacefully, without quarrel.

What makes a discussion of Hobbes in the context of The Broken Jug most interesting is his views on treatment of the sovereign. For he states that the "subjects to a monarch cannot without his leave cast off monarchy and return to the confusion of a disunited multitude" (144) because the subjects remain obligated to obey the sovereign "as long and no longer than the power lasts by which he is able to protect them" (179). He even says that the subjects should treat the sovereign as a power "as great as possibly men can be imagined to make it" (169). One of Hobbes' more stunning conclusions is that "nothing the sovereign representative can do to a subject, on what pretense soever, can properly be callec injustice or injury" because the subjects agreed to make him the authority (173). All these precautions when dealing with the sovereign originate from Hobbes' fear of anarchy, for one of his major assumptions is that any form of government is better than being in a state of nature.

If Judge Adam is taken to be the sovereign and all other characters except Ball and Sir Walter are his subjects, Hobbes' ideas of a political state become an interesting model from which to consider the corruption prevalent in the play. As shall be shown, The Broken Jug, both as written and as performed, functions as an argument against Hobbes' conception of a commonwealth as incontrovertibly better than anarchy, and the production of The Broken Jug, in particular, forces us to notice the problems with our own government and society and then instructs us to correct it.

The town of Ballybog is, more or less, an anarchic state, foı all three types of quarrel appear, and everyone appears to be concerned with only themselves. First off, competition is present in both the written play and the production: At one point in the play, Maggie, the maid, brings in some black pudding and says to Judge Adam "if your tenants got a sniff / Of this there'd be a riot in the town" (Banville 22); and in the production, Judge Adam tosses a wheel of cheese to some starving townspeople, to entertain himself with their fighting. Hunger, then, is a major source of competition and catalyzes fighting, even if it happens mostly apart from the main action.

Diffidence also appears repeatedly within the play and production. For Hobbes, diffidence means a state of distrust between all people as a result of the lack of laws and the constant fighting or possibility of fighting and competition in the state of nature. In the first scene of the play, Judge Adam alleges he cut up his head by falling, and Lynch, his clerk, replies by asking, "A real fall?" (11). This is an immediate display of distrust between the two characters; furthermore, it causes the viewers or readers to doubt the trustworthiness of Judge Adam, the sovereign of Ballybog. Another example present in both the play and the production is the practice of rundale, for it is an excellent representative of the struggle for dominance over all others that Hobbes claims is caused by diffidence. After Toby Reck, Martha's deceased husband, bought Willie Temple's land, he "Threw out the sitting tenants, every one, / Broke up the fields and leased them out in parcels / No bigger than a bloody postage stamp" (59). Toby Reck thus earned his own wealth by subduing others, for he not only displaced Willie Temple but also made the plots too small to be useful. Evidence of diffidence in the production also comes from the characters' blocking, for throughout most of the play the characters space themselves evenly out so that no two characters (excluding Robert and his father Willie Temple, and to a lesser extent Eve and her mother Martha Reck, who trust each other and therefore remain together) position themselves near each other. An example of this is in the beginning of the play when Judge Adam

72

first comes in and Lynch sees his wounds: While Judge Adam pleads Lynch to not make him appear suspicious to Sir Walter, who is coming to inspect the courtroom later that day, he stands right next to Lynch, holding her and attempting to be friendly; yet during the rest of the conversation both Judge Adam and Lynch attempt to stay apart from each other on stage. That is, they naturally distrust each other, but when necessity is involved, they are willing to pretend to trust each other. This indicates that diffidence is also present.

Glory, specifically reputation, is the third cause of fighting. According to Hobbes, everyone desires a good reputation, and when someone's reputation is slandered, the person attempts to "extort a greater value from his contemners by damage and from others by the example" (Hobbes 106). This is exactly what Martha Reck attempts, for when her jug breaks and Eve comments that it was just pottery, Martha responds, "Do you know what was in that jug, my girl? / Only your reputation, that was all" (35). Martha has an obvious need for compensation, for she immediately blames Robert Temple and tries to make him the example by which she can regain her (and her daughter's) respect and reputation. Robert Temple's response to this accusation is to blame the Cobbler Byrne, a beggar who often comes to the Recks for food. The ordeal becomes a struggle to throw the blame at others and thereby avoid or repair damage to the various characters' reputations. The process of repairing her reputation is a major motivation of Martha's character, which we see from the last line of the written play: "Here, wait now, what about my broken jug . . . ?" (84). It follows that, since Martha's obsession with reputation in large part pushes the plot along and eventually allows Sir Walter to dispose of Judge Adam, reputation is not just present within the play, but also a large part of character motivation (at least for Martha) and o plot development.

Thus, according to Hobbes' theory, Ballybog exists as an anarchic state because of the presence of the three types of quarrel. But according to his same theory, Ballybog is also a commonwealth because of the presence of a sovereign, Judge Adam. It is quite clear that within the town of Ballybog Judge Adam acts as the sovereign, for when Eve begins to name Judge Adam as the culprit responsible for breaking the jug, Sir Walter intervenes with this:

> Be quiet, now, this is a court of law;
> I cannot allow anarchy to rule.
> The man's a rogue, but also he's a *judge*;
> It is the *bench* that we must recognize, and not the man. (80, Banville's emphasis)

This agrees very well with Hobbes' view that it is unjust to accuse the sovereign of misdeeds.

The production has two other powerful images of Judge Adam as a sovereign. The first is that of Judge Adam as a conductor: Near the end, Judge Adam, standing on a chair with his back to the audience, announces the court's sentence and condemns Robert Temple as the fiend who broke Martha Reck's jug, while all the other characters, gathered around the judge in a half-circle, listen and react to the sentence. The image is incredibly similar to that of an orchestra conductor, for Judge Adam even uses his gavel as a conducting wand. The other image—though more of an action—comes during the song that the characters sing while changing the stage from bedroom to courtroom: The first verse of the song is, "Lads and lasses, to your places, up the middle and down again." During the song, Judge Adam, Ball, and Sir Walter dance while all the other characters change the set. That is, Judge Adam's subjects are the only characters who are working, for Sir Walter and Ball reside outside of Ballybog and thus cannot be treated as Judge Adam's subordinates. The first verse is therefore ironically inappropriate, for it creates an imperative for acting as one should and creates a contrast between the hard work of the subjects and the light-hearted jigs of Judge Adam, Ball, and Sir Walter.

Furthermore, Judge Adam has the ability to protect his subjects; therefore, he can justly remain sovereign of Ballybog, according to Hobbes' theory. Judge Adam clearly has the ability to end his subjects' starvation, for he feeds Sir Walter a large portion of food in both the play and the production; he also, as already mentioned, throws a wheel of cheese to some starving townspeople, thus demonstrating that he could probably feed them if he used the food stores responsibly. Indeed, at one point, Lynch says outright to Ball, "He's starving them" (27). The situation, then, is not that Judge Adam lacks the power to protect his subjects; rather, he is choosing not to for his own purposes.

Thus Judge Adam is the sovereign of Ballybog, and the town exists in a state of anarchy; this conflicts with Hobbes' assumption that a commonwealth is always better than anarchy, for Ballybog is a commonwealth that is effectively an anarchy, maybe even worse than one because to form the commonwealth, the townspeople had to forfeit their right to self-governance. Therefore, both the written and performed versions of The Broken Jug demonstrate that if the sovereign of a commonwealth is corrupt or selfish, the subjects could easily return to living within an anarchic state; with regard to the viewer or reader, this makes the play a cautionary tale about the dangers of freely transferring one's right of self-government to a single person (or assembly of people, which Hobbes also mentions) for the promise of protection.

The production, in addition to presenting the ideas in the play to the audience, forces the viewers to confront the problems with their own government. It does this through its continuous breaking of the fourth wall. For example, the front center of the stage is almost completely reserved for interactions with the audience: It is where Lynch gives the social and historical background of the story in the beginning of the production; where

Martha explains to the audience the extreme historical and ancestral importance of her jug; where Bridget Temple sits to finally make Judge Adam the accused for breaking the jug. All three times, the characters speak facing the audience, and sometimes directly to the audience (in Lynch's case). This involves the viewer in the characters' struggles to escape the anguish caused by Judge Adam's corruption and the consequent degeneration of Ballybog into an anarchic state, and makes the audience pity or sympathize with the characters on stage.

One of the powerful implications of this connection between the audience and the characters on stage is that we also become Judge Adam's subjects and therefore possible victims to his corruption. This is made manifest when Judge Adam, after being accused of the breaking of the jug outright, climbs into the audience and frightens one or two members and anyone nearby by yelling at them and then running away, out of the theatre. Thus, the audience transitions from sympathizing with the suffering townspeople to actually being one of the victims. This causes the audience members to realize that the effectively anarchic state created by the corrupt government of Ballybog could easily become their problem as well.

Indeed, the play pushes this further by asserting that the United States is currently in an analogous situation. This becomes apparent upon consideration of the many allusions to modern times. For example, in the first moments of the production when Lynch is explaining the time period of the play, she quizzes the audience on the year in which the play is set; the answer is 1846, and the audience is thus assured that this happened a long time ago. But by deliberately coughing the word "Katrina" upon mentioning the corrupt government of Ireland, Lynch also brings to mind the embarrassing response of the American government to the effects of Hurricane Katrina—which can be read as a choice not to respond appropriately, despite the ability to do so, much like

Judge Adam's failure to respond appropriately to Ballybog's starvation. Together, these moments suggest that although this incident in Ballybog happened 150 years ago in a small town in Ireland, the situation is similar to the one we are facing, even if Ballybog's is far more severe. Of course, the most compelling evidence for the production as incitement to political action comes from director Sven Miller's notes in the program: "We believe this fear driven portrait of human behavior and interaction is a funny and outrageous mirror of some of the prevalent conditions of socia behavior and contract today." That is, Miller sees the fear caused by the state of nature as analogous to many current political problems in the U.S. and presumably elsewhere. By showing the audience that their current government is leading them toward degeneration of their commonwealth, possibly into a anarchic state, the production hopes to convince the audience to prevent such a miserable state from forming by participating in governmental decisions, whether through voting or political activism or any other appropriate action the audience could take.

Works Cited

Banville, John. The Broken Jug. Loughcrew, Ireland: Gallery, 1994.

Hobbes, Thomas. Leviathan. Ed. Herbert W. Schneider. New York: Macmillan, 1958.