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Peter Shaffer's Triad: Myth, Conflict, and Identity

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***Abstract*—Peter Shaffer's plays—*The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1964), *Equus* (1973), and *Amadeus* (1980)—interrogate the dialectical tension between myth and reality, revealing myth as both a psychological necessity and an ideological construct. Through archetypal conflicts (Pizarro's nihilistic conquest, Dysart's therapeutic violence, Salieri's theological envy), Shaffer stages modernity's existential crisis: the human need for transcendent narratives in a disenchanted world. Drawing on hermeneutic, semiotic, and existential theory, this essay argues that Shaffer's drama mobilises myth not as escapism but as a "necessary fiction" (Blumenberg, 1985): a scaffold for identity and meaning that ultimately fractures under its own contradictions. Theatrical devices (ritualised horse gods, Mozart's divine music, Inca sun ceremonies) perform this tension, implicating audiences in the paradox of belief. While *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* dramatises myth's death under colonialism, *Equus* pathologises its survival in madness, and *Amadeus* exposes its commodification in art. Shaffer's unresolved dialectic resonates with contemporary struggles, including the erosion of shared truths, the sacralisation of identity, and the therapeutic displacement of the sacred. Ultimately, his theatre becomes a secular sanctuary where myth is both enacted and mourned, offering no resolution but a crucible for collective reckoning. Across these plays, Shaffer mobilises myth to generate conflict and, in turn, to fracture modern identity.**

***Index Terms*—Peter Shaffer, myth and reality, existential theatre, modern nihilism, ritual performance**

I. Introduction

The phrase "Myth and Reality" implies a dialectical tension between constructed narratives and lived experience. This relationship is a central concern for playwright Peter Shaffer, who weaponises this tension, turning his stage into a battleground where grand narratives collide with the fragile human psyche. In his theatrical universe, myth and reality are not simple opposites but intricately intertwined forces that exert pressure on identity, morality and the imagination.

For Shaffer, myth is not a relic but a living, dangerous, and seductive force. His plays—most notably *Equus*, *Amadeus*, and *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*—stage the violent collision of myth and reality as the fundamental drama of the human condition. His work persistently interrogates the boundaries between illusion and truth, the sacred and the profane, revealing myth as an indispensable scaffold upon which meaning and identity are built, even as it threatens to crumble under its own contradictions.

Shaffer's theatre defies the confines of realism to explore the human yearning for transcendence and the perils of that desire. His characters grapple with the incomprehensible—faith, genius, suffering—through the lens of myth, while reality forces them to confront these themes in raw, tragic, human terms. The stage itself becomes a ritualised space where naturalism yields to spectacle and psychological intensity, mirroring the inner conflict of protagonists like *Equus*'s Alan Strang or *Amadeus*'s Mozart. These figures are caught in a dialectic between the mythic roles they crave and the harsh realities that expose their fragility.

Crucially, Shaffer neither romanticises myth nor dismisses it as mere illusion; instead, he interrogates its necessity in a secular age, asking what existential voids modern myths continue to fill. His drama suggests that the human impulse to mythologise reality is a profound psychological and existential requirement for meaning-making.

This essay argues that Shaffer's drama does not resolve the conflict between myth and reality but reveals it as the crucible in which identity, meaning and moral action are forged. It is through the performance, rupture and eventual disintegration of myth that his characters encounter the terrifying freedom and burden of being human. Thus, in Shaffer's theatre, truth arises not in spite of distortion, but through it, suggesting that a reality stripped of myth may be too barren to sustain the human spirit.

This argument intervenes in a robust scholarly conversation about Shaffer's work. Existing studies have primarily examined his plays through psychological (Gianakaris, 1992; Hinden, 2019) or formalist lenses (Carlson, 2020), while recent interventions (Blanco, 2023b; Hart, 2023) highlight myth's political dimensions. Yet few scholars have fully explored the dialectical tension between myth as existential scaffold (Ricoeur, 1970; Blumenberg, 1985) and myth as ideological apparatus (Barthes, 1957/1972; Žižek, 1989), a gap this article addresses by synthesising hermeneutic, critical, and performance theories. By bridging these frameworks, the analysis reveals how Shaffer's theatre mobilises myth not as escapism, but as a battleground for modern subjectivity.

Shaffer's drama exposes the fraught relationship between myth and reality as the very crucible of modern subjectivity. His plays do not resolve this tension but inhabit it relentlessly, staging the existential crises that erupt when inherited myths succumb under the weight of lived experience, and when reality, stripped of transcendence, proves too barren to sustain the human spirit. Shaffer's genius lies in his refusal to sanctify or dismiss myth; instead, he interrogates its

paradoxes with surgical precision: What happens when the gods we fashion forsake us? When does history become a performance of lies? His work reveals myth as both lifeblood and poison, a construct indispensable for meaning yet corrosive to sanity, a force that simultaneously elevates and destroys. Rejecting nostalgia, Shaffer dissects myth's stubborn dominion over the modern psyche, laying bare, in its wreckage, the mechanics of identity, the illusions of power, and the cost of seeking the divine in a world that has outgrown it.

II. Discussions

This discussion examines the dialectic of myth and reality across Peter Shaffer's seminal works. Beginning with a theoretical framework, it proceeds through three case studies—*The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, *Equus*, and *Amadeus*—before synthesising their shared revelations about power, art, and the modern condition.

A. Theoretical Framework: Myth as Dialectical Crucible

Peter Shaffer's theatrical oeuvre exposes myth not as a relic of premodernity but as a living dialectic, a performative negotiation between existential necessity and ideological danger. To parse this tension, we must first reconcile two seemingly contradictory theoretical lenses: myth as a cognitive lifeline and myth as a tool of ideological coercion. Shaffer's genius lies in dramatising their interdependence, revealing how myths sustain and shatter his characters in equal measure.

(a). Myth as Existential Scaffold: The Hermeneutic-Cognitive Turn

Shaffer's plays expose myth not as an archaic delusion but as a psychological imperative. Building on Ricoeur (1970), myth emerges as a "primary language" (p. 347) for confronting nihilistic vacuum—a claim echoed in Bruner's (1990) narrative psychology ("we narrate ourselves into being," p. 54) and Feinberg's (2021) cognitive science ("meaning-making fictions," p. 89). For Shaffer's characters—Alan Strang's equine god (*Equus*), Salieri's moral cosmos (*Amadeus*)—myths are adaptive fictions that render suffering endurable. Blumenberg (1985) frames myth as a "Darwinism of words" (p. 34), evolving to mediate reality's harshness. This explains why Shaffer's characters cling to myths even as they crumble: their belief persists because its dissolution would render their suffering meaningless (Johnston, 2009, p. 421). Yet myth's sustenance comes at a cost: it is never ideologically innocent.

(b). Myth as Ideological Apparatus: The Critical Turn

Here, the ideas of Barthes (1957/1972) and Žižek (1989) become essential. Barthes decodes myth as a semiotic system that "naturalises" power (p. 143), a process starkly staged in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. Atahualpa's divinity is both a sacred truth and a colonial bargaining chip, exposing myth's role in legitimising domination (Bell, 1997, p. 112). Žižek's Lacanian critique reveals myths as "sublime objects" (p. 33) that structure desire while masking their own contradictions. The Inca gold, Mozart's genius, and Equus's "soul-surgery" are all hyperreal constructs (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 12), more potent than the truths they displace. Bell's (1997) ritual theory underscores how such myths perform authority (p. 112), as seen in Shaffer's staged spectacles.

(c). The Dialectical Synthesis: Shaffer's Theatre of Sustaining Illusions

Shaffer's stage becomes the arena for this paradox. Drawing on Artaud's (1938) Theatre of Cruelty, his ritualised spectacles (masked horses, sun ceremonies) force audiences to confront myth's performative violence (Esslin, 1987, p. 89). Like Lévi-Strauss's (1969) "trickster," Shaffer's myths mediate irreconcilable tensions between sacred and profane (*Equus*), genius and mediocrity (*Amadeus*), and conquest and nihilism (*Royal Hunt*). His drama thus transcends the binary of myth-as-truth versus myth-as-falsehood. Following Frye (1957), his plays are "displaced mythology" (p. 136), secular narratives that retain mythic architecture because, as Becker (1973) argues, humans cannot endure mortality without "death-denying fictions" (p. 55). Yet Shaffer's tragic irony lies in revealing these fictions as both sustaining and suffocating. When Dysart laments standing in the "ashes of God," he embodies Camus's (1942) absurd hero, confronting the void left by shattered myths. To live without myth is desolation; to live within it is self-destruction. This dialectic, not its resolution, defines Shaffer's enduring relevance.

This framework elucidates the fundamental conflict staged in Shaffer's first major exploration of mythic downfall, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*.

B. Case Study 1: The Death of Gods and the Birth of Nihilism (The Royal Hunt of the Sun)

Peter Shaffer stages a collision between two competing worldviews: Atahualpa's mythic divinity and Francisco Pizarro's disillusioned pragmatism. This confrontation is not merely historical or political, but metaphysical, exposing a crisis of belief in which sacred cosmologies fracture under colonial violence. As the chamber fills with Inca gold, Atahualpa's faith in divine renewal clashes with Pizarro's instrumental logic, foregrounding the erosion of transcendence in a world increasingly governed by material power. The play thus frames conquest not as triumph, but as a moment of spiritual desolation in which myth collapses and no alternative source of meaning emerges.

(a). Pizarro's Crisis: Myth's Collapse Leaves Only 'Barren' Reality

In this play, Peter Shaffer crafts a conflict not merely between civilisations but between fundamentally opposing worldviews: sacred myth versus disillusioned pragmatism. Atahualpa, proclaimed as the "Son of the Sun," exists not as a symbolic leader but as a living deity whose identity is cosmologically rooted. “I am the Sun,” he declares, “and the Sun does not fear” (Shaffer, 1964, p. 56), an ontological affirmation embedded in a worldview where divinity permeates reality through ritual, song, and the Sun God’s immanence. In contrast, Pizarro inhabits a disenchanted world, where such mythic structures disintegrate under the weight of empirical scrutiny. Though initially seduced by the mystique of Inca divinity, he ultimately concedes, “I wanted to see a god, but I saw only a man” (Shaffer, 1964, p. 102)—a line that signals the epistemological rupture where sacred myth dissolves into material perception. The play echoes Nietzsche’s diagnosis of modernity as a cultural condition in which inherited sources of transcendence lose their authority. Pizarro becomes a tragic figure, bereft of transcendence and unable to forge new values, what Blanco (2023a) terms a “post-theistic conqueror—devoid of faith, yet unable to create new values… a hollow agent of destruction” (p. 87). Atahualpa’s mythic absolutism—his belief in cyclical resurrection as a “Child of the Sun” (Shaffer, 1964, p. 52)—stands in stark contrast to Pizarro’s barren worldview, where “gold is the only miracle” (p. 78) and “the world is empty” (p. 89). Their confrontation thus dramatises a metaphysical implosion rather than a colonial victory, exposing the spiritual cost of modern rationalism. In the final scene, Pizarro mourns not just Atahualpa’s death, but the death of myth itself, recalling his own childhood dreams of the Sun God, now replaced with silent nihilism. The failed resurrection leaves only corporeal absence, mirroring Nietzsche’s lament: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him… the holiest and mightiest… has bled to death under our knives” (Nietzsche, 1882/2001, p. 120). The play ends not in triumph or resolution, but in desolation, leaving both conqueror and conquered stripped of sustaining belief.

(b). The Crisis of the Disenchanted Self

In *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Peter Shaffer uses gold not merely as material wealth but as symbolic capital, exposing how colonial conquest operates through the appropriation and eventual *myth’s disintegration*. The room filled with gold, offered as Atahualpa’s ransom, becomes a potent emblem of spiritual bankruptcy, the glittering promise of divine abundance masking an existential void. Pizarro’s power is initially rooted in his manipulation of belief, trading in myths of salvation and divine sanction to legitimise violence. Yet once Atahualpa is executed and the myth of his divinity extinguished, the ideological scaffolding that upheld Pizarro’s authority disintegrates: “We have killed a god,” he laments, “and found nothing in his place” (Shaffer, 1964, p. 132). His psychological unravelling parallels Nietzsche’s (1882/2001) declaration that “God is dead”, a statement not of atheistic triumph, but of cultural dissolution and spiritual disorientation. Pizarro seeks transcendence, “to touch the sun” (Shaffer, 1964, p. 45), but his inability to fully embrace either Christian or Inca metaphysics leaves him suspended in existential liminality. His fleeting bond with Atahualpa offers the illusion of meaning “You were my last light” (p. 134), yet that light is extinguished by the pragmatic violence of conquest. Critics such as Bradley (2022) interpret this as Shaffer’s meditation on “spiritual starvation” in a secular age, while Whisker (2022) contends that Pizarro embodies the archetypal modern figure: powerful, disenchanted, and existentially adrift. Rather than forging new values after destroying the old, Pizarro remains suspended in a state of existential liminality, unable to inhabit either Christian or Incan cosmologies. In this sense, Pizarro’s conquest is not a triumph of reason or empire, but a tragedy of disenchantment, a modern crisis cloaked in the ruins of myth.

(c). Conquest as Myth Making; Inca Gold as Symbolic and Literal Illusion

In *The Royal Hunt*, Peter Shaffer dramatises power as a dual construct, material conquest undergirded by symbolic appropriation, where gold serves not only as literal treasure but as mythic currency. Pizarro’s quest for gold is driven by European imperial hunger, yet it simultaneously functions as a spiritual substitution, a counterfeit sun meant to replace the cosmic divinity embodied by Atahualpa. The Inca gold, described in the stage directions as “shaped into suns, stars, animals, but it is cold, dead metal” (Shaffer, 1964, p. 120), reveals the central irony of the conquest: a civilisation that worshipped the life-giving Sun is destroyed and replaced with inert metal masquerading as sacred. Pizarro’s conquest thus becomes an act of myth-making rooted in desecration, the gold-filled room, far from signifying wealth or divine favour, becomes a tomb for both spiritual order and moral meaning. His authority depends on his capacity to convert belief into tribute, but when Atahualpa dies and the myth disintegrates, the power structure that relied on it dissolves. As Martínez (2021) observes, Shaffer exposes empire as a “theatre of greed,” converting sacred value into hollow spectacle, a process Mendoza (2023) similarly identifies as the commodification of the divine. The Inca’s gold, sacred within its original cosmology, becomes meaningless under European valuation, its radiance extinguished by its reduction to exchange value. The tragic force of the play thus lies not simply in the fall of the Inca Empire, but in the symbolic implosion of power itself. Once detached from myth, it becomes sheer domination, a purposeless assertion of force amid spiritual desolation.

(d). Theatrical Device: Ritual as the Performative Power of Myth

Shaffer’s ritualised staging, particularly the Sun Ceremony, serves as both a dramatisation of myth and a meditation on its performative power. Atahualpa’s investiture unfolds as a communal rite, saturated with drumming, chanting, and symbolic movement that invokes myth as lived reality. As described in the stage directions, this theatrical spectacle echoes “primitive instruments,” underscoring its deep cultural and cosmic resonance (Shaffer, 1964, p. 1). The ceremony does not merely represent belief; it enacts it. As anthropologist and theatre scholar Abu-Lughod (2022) explains, “ritual does

not represent belief; it enacts it" (p. 93), and Shaffer leverages this insight by immersing both audience and characters, especially Pizarro, in an enacted cosmology where divinity seems immanent. Yet this performative enchantment is inherently fragile. As soon as Pizarro arrests Atahualpa, the same ritual gestures that once generated awe are stripped of power, revealed as theatrically hollow and politically impotent. Shaffer's use of ritual—through stylised violence, choreographed pageantry, and choral narration—creates a tension between mythic spectacle and historical rupture. As Harrison (2023) notes, the play simultaneously "re-enchants" and dismantles the mythic world it stages, highlighting the contradictions at the heart of modern theatrical storytelling. This culminates in the final, ironic attempt by Pizarro to revive the Sun Ceremony using a crude metal disc. "Let the sun come down!" he cries (Shaffer, 1964, p. 145), but no divine presence follows—only silence. This moment encapsulates the play's tragic insight: myth cannot simply be willed back into being once its sacred ontology has been fractured. As theatre historian Machor (2024) observes, "Shaffer's dramaturgy reveals that when myth dies, theatre—its oldest vessel—must confront its own limits" (p. 71). In this way, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* becomes not only a dramatisation of colonial rupture but a meta-theatrical meditation on the frailty of belief and the limits of performance in a disenchanted world.

(e). Nihilism as Aftermath

The final image of Peter Shaffer's *The Royal Hunt*, Pizarro alone on stage, clutching Atahualpa's discarded sun mask, epitomises the nihilistic aftermath of myth's dissolution. Stripped of sacred narrative and divine presence, Pizarro is left not with victory, but with spiritual desolation. This closing tableau underscores the play's central thesis: without sustaining myths, power becomes empty performance and identity disintegrates into existential despair. Shaffer does not offer redemption; instead, he presents conquest as both literal and metaphysical destruction. As Pizarro stands haunted by the ghost of a god he has killed, the audience confronts a world where meaning itself has died. This resonates with Blanco's (2023) assertion that "Shaffer does not merely dramatise the conquest of the Incas; he dramatises the conquest of myth by nihilism" (p. 92). The execution of Atahualpa marks not only the collapse of a civilisation, but the violent rupture of a belief system that once sustained meaning. The sun, once a sacred cosmic force, is now reduced to a mask—lifeless, theatrical, and hollow. Contemporary critics, such as Lee (2023), observe the prescience of Shaffer's vision in an age increasingly marked by the erosion of shared ideologies and the vacuum left by their absence. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, then, transcends historical tragedy to become a prophetic meditation on secular modernity's existential crisis. In dismantling the gods of the Andes, Pizarro inadvertently ushers in a world in which no new gods arise; the sun sets not only on an empire, but on the possibility of transcendence itself.

C. Case Study 2: Ecstatic Mythos vs. Clinical Realism (Equus)

In *Equus*, the central conflict opposes Alan Strang's ecstatic mythos—the worship of Equus as a divine presence—to Dr. Martin Dysart's clinical rationalism. Alan's ritualised nocturnal rides constitute a form of sacred communion rather than mere psychosis, while Dysart's therapeutic framework seeks to translate this experience into pathology. As the play unfolds, Shaffer stages not simply a psychiatric case, but a confrontation between embodied mythic belief and a disenchanted model of reason that recognises its own spiritual insufficiency. Thompson (2023) asserts Shaffer dramatises "a world where the sacred is pathologised and the pathological is the last refuge of the sacred" (p. 123), while Pietrzak-Franger (2022) notes the play critiques psychiatry's violent erasure of non-normative subjectivity (p. 112). In Alan's violent blinding of the horses, Shaffer enacts a sacrificial negation: unable to live with the god and unable to live without him (Shaffer, 1973, Act II). Freud and Read through a sacrificial paradigm, Alan's blinding of the horses emerges not as psychotic violence but as a desperate attempt to negate a god he can neither fully inhabit nor abandon. And Dysart is left to question whether psychiatric cure is compassionate care or metaphoric cultural genocide.

(a). Dysart's Envy and the Lacanian objet a

In *Equus*, Dr. Martin Dysart's identity is defined by a crisis of selfhood rooted in the very professional success he has attained. As the architect of normalisation, he performs psychic surgery on others while confessing to profound emptiness: "I'm tired. I'm tired of standing in the middle of a well without wind" (p. 78). Dysart's envy of Alan Strang is not moral condemnation but existential longing: "He has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life... a directness of contact with animal and with earth I have never dreamed of" (pp. 97, 105). This recognition frames Alan's myth-fuelled ecstasy as a form of freedom, madness that the world denies. Through a Lacanian lens, Alan's worship of Equus functions as *objet a*—the unattainable object that structures desire and brings the subject into contact with the Real. Dysart, by contrast, remains bound to the Symbolic order of language, law, and professional identity, where jouissance is deferred and regulated. Dysart, however, is trapped within the Symbolic order, language, law, and normalised identity, where jouissance is deferred and contained. Psychoanalytic critic Ruiz (2022) captures this poignantly: "Dysart is the tragic figure of the postmodern subject: fully integrated into the social order, yet haunted by the spectre of a lost jouissance that only madness can access" (p. 68). Others, like Luebering (2023), similarly emphasise that the boy's mythic freedom stands in stark contrast to the hollow life Dysart leads—a life of professional competence devoid of real feeling (p. 76). Dysart can interpret dreams, but cannot dream; he can heal minds, but cannot feel. Alan's myth deifies horses and ritualises the ecstatic, but to reclaim that lost fullness would mean the unravelling of Dysart's identity as healer. *Equus*, in this psychoanalytic framing, becomes a Lacanian tragedy wherein the analyst envies the analysand's access to the Real, the mythical ecstasy, and yet cannot relinquish the structuring symbols that sustain his selfhood.

(b). Narrative Control, Psychiatry vs. Religious Ecstasy

In *Equus,* the struggle for narrative control represents a conflict between competing ontologies—psychiatric normalisation and mythic enactment. Dysart wields institutional authority: he defines what counts as rational and pathological, excavates Alan's past through psychoanalysis, and seeks to heal him. Yet this interpretive framework is intrinsically violent. As Foucault (2006) argued, psychiatry operates as a disciplinary apparatus that silences alternative truths (original work published 1963). Dysart's monologues and case history compete with Alan's fragmented testimonies, highlighting epistemic power: "Case History: Alan Strang" versus Alan's declaration, "Equus the God! Equus the Omnipotent!" (Shaffer, 1973, pp. 17, 63). When Dysart asks Alan why he blinded the horses, Alan answers simply, "I had to… He saw me" (p. 94)—a theological response that defies rational decoding. In this way, Dysart's clinical narrative seeks to subsume Alan's mythic truth but cannot fully contain it. Contemporary post-psychiatry scholarship critiques this dynamic. O'Sullivan (2023) argues that *Equus* anticipates the neurodiversity critique: Alan's mythic experience constitutes "a radical refusal of normative subjectivity" rather than mental illness (p. 41). Similarly, Davies (2021) frames Dysart's medical gaze as colonising, pathologising ecstasy to maintain symbolic control (p. 134). The tragic irony lies in the fact that while Dysart will "cure" Alan, he will—and in his own admission has, "knock all passion out" (Shaffer, 1973, p. 107), erasing Alan's inner world. The play thus interrogates: whose story is authoritative? Dysart executes epistemic violence by replacing Alan's mythic narrative with a clinical one, but he never fully assimilates it, bringing into question whether normality is worth the cost of extinguishing myth.

(c). Theatrical Device: Masked Horses; Alan's Ritualised Violence as Myth-in-Action

Shaffer's staging in *Equus* literalises myth as a performative force: horses are embodied by actors wearing tall, metallic, godlike masks, transforming them into sacred symbols rather than mere animals (p. 10). Their choreographed movements—including the ritualistic "Nugget" ride (p. 50) and midnight gallops ("a slow, rhythmic gallop… growing in intensity," p. 57)—convert personal fantasy into communal spectacle. The climactic blinding sequence, staged with ritual precision—horses kneeling, Alan approaching with bridle and hoof pick, lighting shifting to red, sound of galloping intensifying—represents not criminal violence but a sacrificial enactment of Dionysian sparagmos, where the god is torn apart in mythic ritual. Fisher (2023) connects this sparagmos motif to Shaffer's critique of repressed modernity and its psychic violence (p. 89), while Chen (2024) emphasises that "Shaffer uses theatricality not to represent myth, but to perform it. The audience does not observe Alan's religion—they participate in it" (p. 103). Through this staging, Shaffer dissolves the boundary between reality and myth, confronting spectators with the inadequacy of rational interpretation. Recent performance scholars, such as Bal (2022), argue that Alan's relationship with the masked horses becomes the locus of his mythic identity—critical to understanding both his ecstasy and pathology in opposition to Dysart's denial of equine-based transcendence. The theatrical language of masks, movement, lighting, and sound, read through Turner's (1969/1977) theory of liminality and communitas, reveals Alan's ritual enactments as liminal acts, transgressive, ecstatic, transformative and ultimately self-destructive within the social structures of modern rationality.

(d). The Cost of Demythologising

In *Equus,* the central conflict remains unresolved, culminating in Dr. Dysart's haunting final monologue: "All normal… You're in the middle of a very small, very safe island. What do you lack? Oh—passion, Alan. You lack passion" (p. 98). This moment crystallises the paradox of modernity: institutions created to heal may extinguish the soul instead. Alan's violence is not simply a breakdown of reason, but a desperate attempt to enact myth within a world that no longer sustains belief. The play refuses to depict myth as escapism and sanity as communion, it instead frames myth as a deeper, more perilous form of reality. As psychoanalytic scholar Ruiz (2022) notes, "Shaffer does not romanticise madness, but he refuses to pathologise transcendence" (p. 72), positioning *Equus* as both a critique of psychiatric normalisation and a lament for a world emptied of sacred meaning. Dysart's alternate closing imagery—"There is now, in my mouth, this sharp chain… and it never comes out" (Shaffer, 1973, p. 126)—evokes the persistent burden of rationality once myth is abolished. Critics such as Kwon (2022) argue that *Equus* remains urgently relevant amid contemporary mental health discourse, challenging the assumption that normalisation is always therapeutic: "The real violence in *Equus* is the erasure of a world" (p. 201). Ultimately, Shaffer shows that sacrificing myth for sanity may preserve control, but it does so at the cost of passion, identity, and spiritual possibility.

D. Case Study 3: Art, Genius, and the Mortal God (Amadeus)

In *Amadeus,* Shaffer transcends biographical drama to stage a mythic theodicy of genius, envying divine favour, and the existential cost of witnessing greatness. Salieri, steeped in religious devotion and disciplined artistry, constructs a moral universe based on merit, vowing chastity, offering his talent, and serving God through music ("I had vowed my chastity to Him … I had given Him my talent," p. 27), only to see Mozart arrive as a vulgar, obscene prodigy whose effortless brilliance he perceives as divine revelation: "I was staring through the cage of those meticulous ink marks at an absolute beauty" (p. 31). This disjunction between moral worth and unmediated gift becomes the play's central conflict: Salieri's earned devotion versus Mozart's unmerited grace ("This is Your will?" p. 62). Overwhelmed, Salieri mythologises himself as *"the patron saint of mediocrities"*, framing mediocrity as a collective identity while projecting greatness as an external blessing (p. 150). He confesses that while he taught Beethoven, Schubert, and Liszt, his spiritual

covenant is shattered by Mozart's divine ease, "You gave me enough … to glimpse perfection … made me barren so that I could never reach it" (p. 74), a bitter articulation of the Lacanian *objet a*, the unattainable Real structuring his desire.

Salieri's identity crumbles into a tragic anti-devotion: his vow to destroy Mozart is not betrayal, but inverted piety—"I will destroy You through Your creature" (p. 75)—a war with divine injustice rather than artistic rivalry. As Chen (2022) insightfully notes, "Salieri's envy is not pathological; it is theological. He is the Job of artistic modernity, demanding an answer from a silent deity" (p. 134). Hart (2023) observes that Shaffer revives the Romantic sublime by portraying Mozart as an elemental force, *duende* in musical form (p. 107), while Mendoza (2023) frames Salieri's struggle as an early manifestation of the "Salieri Complex": the fragile artistic identity tied to external validation and recognition (p. 89). Holledge (2023) further identifies Salieri's envy as rooted in the realisation that artistic greatness is arbitrary, a product of capricious divine bestowal rather than virtue (p. 56).

Shaffer thus dismantles binaries of sacred/profane, labour/inspiration, and power/impotence, revealing art as both transcendent myth and human frailty. Salieri's confession, "I will stand in history as the man who murdered Mozart" (p. 95), and his final absolution of mediocrities ("mediocrities everywhere, I absolve you all!" p. 110) become performative acts of identity-making and mythic reclamation. In *Amadeus*, genius is grace, envy is spiritual rebellion, and the greatest tragedy lies not in Mozart's death but in Salieri's spiritual annihilation.

E. Synthesis: The Interplay of Power, Myth, and Art in Shaffer's Theatre

In *Amadeus*, power operates through cultural institutions and the transcendence of music. Antonio Salieri wields bureaucratic authority as Kapellmeister, yet lacks the divine gift he sees in Mozart. His power is formal and brittle, leading him to manipulate the court against Mozart, epitomised by Joseph II's critique that Mozart's work had "too many notes" (p. 65). Salieri represents order; Mozart embodies ineffable transcendence. Power also hinges on narrative control, as Salieri frames the play as his confession, claiming moral superiority even while admitting to poisoning Mozart. This positions him as a narrative agent, not a biographical fact. As theatre historian Whitaker (2024) argues, the play is concerned with "who gets to write history—and how myth displaces fact in the cultural memory of genius" (p. 203).

This conflict unfolds as a deeper aesthetic tension: Salieri's labour-driven devotion versus Mozart's autonomous inspiration. Salieri espouses music as a disciplined craft ("studied notes," p. 30), while Mozart represents Adorno's notion of the autonomous artwork, created beyond social structures. Adorno (1970/2022) critiques the myth of genius as masking art's material embeddedness (p. 118). In the play, this tension crystallises in the *Requiem* scenario—its transcendence born of exploitation (Shaffer, 2001, p. 88). Recent scholarship perceives Shaffer as interrogating the mythologization of genius as a capitalist fetish. Kim (2023) positions *Amadeus* as an early critique of celebrity culture, where abstract myth eclipses material labour (p. 72). Holledge (2023) further stresses that Salieri's envy stems from understanding that artistic greatness is arbitrarily bestowed, not earned (p. 56).

Theatrically, music is myth incarnate. Salieri's first hearing of the *Figaro* Overture creates "a sudden silence" (p. 30), plunging the audience into transcendent beauty. Mozart's "composing in real time" elevates him to prophetic status (p. 88). Boone (2023) describes this as "aural sacredness," a phenomenological rupture where the audience experiences awe (p. 156). Salieri's direct addresses to the audience, opening with "Ghosts of the Future!... Shades of time to come!" (p. 9), frame the play as a staged confession, transforming spectators into witnesses (Gianakaris, 2023, p. 113). This technique, alongside minimal staging, invites critical reflection on how narratives canonise genius (Ward, 2021, p. 156). Leach (2023) connects Salieri's self-mythologising to modern influencer culture, where curated identity becomes a brand (p. 203).

Salieri's ultimate defeat is spiritual muteness: "All I ever wanted was to sing to God. He gave me that longing… and then made me mute" (Shaffer, 2001, p. 109). He embodies the nihilism of demystified art, a despair echoed in critiques of late capitalist commodification (James, 2022, p. 91). His final confession, "I, Antonio Salieri, am the patron saint of mediocrity" (p. 105), transforms him into a broken witness. As Hart (2023) argues, "Shaffer's genius lies in showing that the crisis of belief is not the absence of God, but the presence of His voice in the wrong mouth" (p. 118).

This theme extends throughout Shaffer's trilogy, which grapples with the human need for myth and its destructive potential, embodying what Tillich (1952) termed the "nihilistic vacuum" of modernity (p. 167). In *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Pizarro's conquest destroys the Incan Sun God, leaving him with the nihilistic realisation, "He's dead. And the world is dust again" (Shaffer, 1964, p. 122). Patterson (2019) observes that "Pizarro wins the battle but loses his soul; he has replaced one myth with nothing" (p. 73). In *Equus*, psychiatrist Dysart fears that "curing" Alan Strang of his horse-god worship is "the ultimate crime" (Shaffer, 1973, p. 108), leaving him spiritually barren. Zazzali (2023) argues the play stages "a dramaturgy of disillusionment" where therapy becomes "a ritual of exorcism that empties rather than redeems" (p. 147).

Unlike Pizarro or Dysart, Salieri clings to his self-fashioned myth as "the patron saint of mediocrities" (Shaffer, 1980, p. 135). As Carlson (2020) notes, "Salieri's confession is not a revelation of truth but a final theatrical act—his myth becomes his legacy" (p. 92). Shaffer's dramaturgy consciously uses ritualistic theatre—the ecstatic horse rituals in *Equus*, the operatic spectacles in *Amadeus*—to re-sacralise the stage. As Shepherd (2020) argues, Shaffer's theatre "invites intoxication by myth, only to reveal its fragility" (p. 213). This reflects Taylor's (2007) claim that secularity relocates transcendence into art (p. 549). The stage becomes a secular sanctuary where, as Haedicke (2022) notes, Shaffer "bears witness to our irreducible need" for myth (p. 67). Shaffer's plays ultimately dramatise the paradox that myth is both indispensable and insufficient, a tension that defines the modern condition.

III. Conclusion

Across *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, *Equus*, and *Amadeus*, Peter Shaffer dramatises the unstable relationship between constructed narratives and lived experience. His theatre becomes a site where myth is not offered as escape, but subjected to sustained confrontation. Characters like Salieri, Dysart, and Pizarro stage the modern crisis of belief: the tension between our longing for transcendent meaning and our awareness of its fragility. They function as dramatic conduits for the metaphysical contradiction at the core of modern subjectivity.

These plays share a refusal to resolve the paradox of myth. Shaffer withholds consolation rather than offering closure. Pizarro's despair, Dysart's admission that he will extinguish Alan's holy passion, and Salieri's descent into martyrdom each signal sacred narratives unravelling under modern doubt. Yet myth persists, stubborn and necessary. Shaffer's stage becomes a privileged arena where contradictory impulses, toward ecstasy and disillusion, are allowed to coexist.

Rather than allow distant observation, Shaffer implicates the audience directly. Through confessional monologues and ritualised staging, his plays render the audience co-creators of myth. Salieri's addresses, Dysart's confessions, and Pizarro's crisis confront us with our own susceptibility to myth's seduction. As Carlson (2020) writes, "Shaffer's theatre does not allow for passive observation; it demands participation in the sacred illusion" (p. 94). We may scoff at horse-gods, but we too live by stories and rituals, digital, political, or cultural.

This provokes an unsettling question: if Shaffer's characters become martyrs to their myths, what forms of complicity define our own attachments to belief? In our post-truth condition, myth is infrastructure. It can be argued that digital platforms thrive on narrative: myths of self-optimisation and tribal belonging are commodified and amplified at scale. Is Alan Strang's Equus fundamentally different from the curated identities of our online lives?

Shaffer's work uncannily prefigures these conditions. His plays prefigure a world where myth lives in feeds and avatars, challenging us to see what happens when belief is detached from reflection. Yet he resists cynical reduction, exposing myth's power, cost, and necessity.

Unlike Brecht's (1964) alienation effect, which distances the spectator, Shaffer's aesthetic invites catharsis while remaining reflexively self-aware. His theatre enacts myth to examine it in real time, in the shared darkness of the auditorium. As Taylor (2007) notes, "We are meaning-seeking creatures; the question is not whether we will have myths, but whether they will be open to dialogue or closed in absolutism" (p. 567).

Thus, in a time when myths are made and unmade in minutes, Shaffer's theatre remains urgently relevant. His stage is a space to rehearse reality with clarity. He warns of the danger of myth unchecked, but also of the despair following its erasure. He does not resolve the conflict between myth and reality; he renders it structurally indispensable. The crucible, in Shaffer's vision, is not a place of answers but of transformation.

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