

30<sup>th</sup> August 2021

## Comeuppance

**“For ‘tis the sport to have the enginer hoist with his own petard.”**

*William Shakespeare, Hamlet*

The second half of the quotation above is used often in modern speech. It literally means a bomb-maker (an “enginer”, a 17<sup>th</sup> century military engineer or sapper) being lifted (“hoist”) off the ground by his own bomb – a “petard” being a small explosive device. It’s used to indicate an ironic reversal, a “poetic justice”, if you like. If we’re crude about it, we could say it shows the pleasure we take when someone gets their “comeuppance”.

I was interested to learn that Shakespeare’s phrase – not uncommon for a man so skilled with words – contains a rude joke, which might be somewhat lost on us now. The word “petard” is based on the French, *pétard*, which comes to us from the Latin *pedere*, meaning “to break wind”, or, in common slang, “to fart.” Although Shakespeare’s audiences were probably not familiar with the origin of the word, the related French word *petarade* was in common use in 17<sup>th</sup> century English. It meant, a “gun shot of farting”. So, “hoist with his own petard”? You work out the joke!

Joke or no joke, Shakespeare has identified an important truth. “Be sure your sins will find you out”, my old granny warned me. That’s what Robert Southey’s recalcitrant pirate, Ralph the Rover, in the poem *The Inchcape Rock* discovered when his ship foundered in the very rocks from which he’d removed the mariners’ warning bell – as I referenced yesterday.

Isn’t it natural to take pleasure in such comeuppance? Does seeing a perpetrator being tripped up by their own wrongdoing not give us some satisfaction? “I told you so!” “Serves her right.” “He got what was coming to him.” “Live by the sword, die by the sword.” “Beaten at their own game.”

It isn’t good to take pleasure in all the misfortunes of others, of course. But how do we stop ourselves finding delight in things going awry because of someone’s wrongdoings? I don’t really have an answer to that, though it’s worth pondering. But, perhaps more importantly, when *I* fall into bad ways and turn to making the odd *petard* myself, if it blows up in my face, or just farts loudly in my hands, who else do I have to blame?

### **A prayer for today**

*Wrongdoings? Lord, help me to stop and think  
before the bad things I’m preparing start to do damage. Amen*