

Who Needs A Re-Invented Shakespeare?

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“A work is held in hand, a text is held in language” – wrote Roland Barthes in “From Work to Text.” As I was discussing Barthes’ propositions about textuality last week, I found myself asking where do we locate and situate Shakespeare? Are we concerned with Shakespeare the man, if not, not obviously in the sense people sought out the biography of the writer through the “works” (Wordsworth displayed one example of such an exercise), then what are we assembled here for, what are we interested in re-inventing? Contemporary theoretical interventions obviously do not permit us to subscribe to the kind biographical criticism practiced till the early years of the last century. We are now more interested in exploring the faultlines and politics in cultural formations, and the possibilities of a textualised Shakespeare have yielded insights that previously were not even envisaged. In one of the path-breaking anthologies of Shakespeare studies to emerge in the last two decades, *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield make a very interesting observation: “[C]ultural materialism does not pretend to political neutrality. It knows that no cultural practice is ever without political significance – not the production of *King Lear* at the Globe, or at the Barbican, or as a text in school, popular or learned edition, or in literary criticism, or in the present volume. Cultural materialism does not, like much established literary criticism, attempt to mystify its perspective as the natural, obvious or right interpretation of an allegedly given textual fact.” (Dollimore and Sinfield, 1994: viii). This stance is significant for it contends that it does not try to pass off one particular position as valid, which in turn would invalidate others, and secondly, it suggests that any critical approach that announces its neutrality must be viewed with suspicion. In many ways this skepticism about the absoluteness of a given critical perspective is characteristic of the conditions inaugurated by the new theoretical engagements, especially since the early 1970s. As in the case with other figures of the haloed Western canon, Shakespeare has now become the subject, or rather site of serious theoretical rhetoric. At the same time, the very fact that we have now so many different Shakespeares, also brings to fore the issue of what we actually end up with – an entity that we hardly recognise as being synonymous with the label we attach to it. It is in this context that I would like to invite your attention some of the problems associated with the subject of “Re-inventing Shakespeare.”

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One: Has there ever been a non-invented Shakespeare? I am not referring to the issue of the “historical” Shakespeare, the figure regarding whose location and placement in history we have some information, his years of birth and death, his career as a playwright, actor and sonneteer; what I would like an answer to relates to the issue of critical reception of Shakespeare, more specifically from the early twentieth century. We have had a series of appropriations, from Nahum Tate in the seventeenth century to Jane Smiley reworking *King Lear* in our own time. In an exciting critique of excessive theoretical shadow-boxing titled *Appropriating Shakespeare*, Brian Vickers observes: “Each of the groups involved in this struggle for attention is attempting to appropriate for its own ideology or critical theory. The great change in – so far mainly English-speaking – culture over recent years has been this division of the field of criticism into clearly labelled competing groups, each with its preferred journals, founding mythology, terminology, and other codes of reference. Those who do not belong to any group risk being ‘marginalised’ – dismissed, ignored.” (Vickers 1993, x) During the course of the twentieth century, Shakespeare criticism has travelled far and wide, not to mention his being pronounced dead. I shall come to the death of Shakespeare a little later, but to come back to my first proposition: we have always had an invented Shakespeare, for the “real” is now lost beyond recovery, most certainly in this age of post-structuralism. So why re-invent? Isn’t it something like the Platonic double-fantasy of reality, where we re-imagine an already imagined text? In the process of appropriating Shakespeare, we are now re-assessing the terms of such engagements, but then, this isn’t problem-free. As Harry Berger notes: “. . . a so-called Renaissance thinking cap cannot get us any further toward, or into, the so-called Renaissance mind than a Darwinian, Freudian, or new-critical thinking cap. All are equally perspectives on, not avenues into, that mind; all are equally interpretations made ‘from here’” (Berger 1968, 3) The issue here is inaccessibility, for while we may have alternative structures, we are still offering proposals that that are conditioned by provisionality.

Two: We need to re-invent Shakespeare because the earlier, let’s say, conventional modes of appropriating him no longer works for us. From the celebrated quarrel between Plato and Aristotle about the function of mimesis to the issue of patriarchal posturing in Shakespeare, the “I-am-right/you-are-wrong” paradigm has functioned as an inevitable structure of enquiry, which each proponent has sought to validate by repudiating others. As scholarship has grown more and more rigorous, Shakespeare like many other “sites” in culture has been the subject intense intellectual archaeology. If we only briefly bring to mind the history of philosophical enquiry in the West, we shall see a series of arguments and counters, each of which has offered a “new” interpretation of

realities and truths. It goes without saying that the narrative of critical inquiry has seen the same theme repeated time and again – that of suggesting “new,” often radical ways of understanding a given subject – classical, romantic, modern, post-modern. Each “new age” Shakespeare is then a re-invention, where the terms of appraisal are set afresh. Are we doing something that Shakespeare scholarship has not pursued for ages? One could argue that it cannot stop us from appropriating Shakespeare in our own way, in our own time; it doesn’t, not now, nor later. For are we not doing what Dryden and Pope and Wordsworth and Arnold and Eliot and Hillis Miller and Lacan and Derrida and Greenblatt and Dollimore have been doing? One of the ways of addressing this could be through a reference to Shakespeare’s iconic status; but quite significantly, the figure of Shakespeare remains elusive, and to quote Germaine Greer, whose “invisibility” is so “essential” (Greer 1986, 68) to the constitution of the Shakespearean mystique. An element of invention has thus remained characteristic of the configuration of Shakespeare all these years.

Three: Is “re-invention” associated more with the contexts than the texts of Shakespeare? Let me quote Dollimore and Sinfield once again, who have sought to justify the new critical avatar of Cultural Materialism through the Shakespearean site in their “Preface” to *Political Shakespeare*: “A play by Shakespeare is related to the contexts of its production – to the economic and political system of Elizabethan and Jacobean England and to the particular institutions of cultural production (the court, patronage, theatre, education, the church). Moreover, the relevant history is not just that of four hundred years ago, for culture is made continuously and Shakespeare’s text is reconstructed, reappraised, reassigned all the time through diverse institutions in specific contexts. What the plays signify, how they signify, depends on the cultural field in which they are situated.” (Dollimore and Sinfield 1994, viii) Two characteristics emerge from this gloss: Shakespeare is a text that may be read in a variety of ways and that we are reading not just the figure of Shakespeare in isolation, but in conjunction with the “institutions of cultural production.” In such a case, how do we set the parameters of critical inquiry? The advent of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism has provided us exciting ways of reviewing the Renaissance, including the politics and the strategies involved in different cultural formations, where we also have the Shakespearean texts besides others. This engagement, however, also becomes an act of great responsibility, for it demands that we justify our present circumstances of reading as much as the contexts that we seek to read. In an essay titled “Rewriting the Renaissance, Rewriting Ourselves” Peter Erickson draws our attention to this very problem associated with the new studies of Shakespearean contexts: “Renaissance scholarship involves two historical moments: the past we

are studying and the present in which we are writing. Historicism, when fully historicized, implies historical consciousness of our immediate context as well as of the Renaissance; the latter does not reduce to the former but the two are inextricable. This means that the present cannot be treated as a nuisance or irrelevance – an obstacle to good thinking – but must be accorded the same intellectual sophistication and emotional investment as our assertions about the past.” (Erickson, 1987: 11)

Four: We need to re-invent Shakespeare because he has been pronounced “dead,” a condition in English studies that has been the subject of intense debate in the last few decades. (I may here refer to the dropping of Shakespeare from the English course offered by Indiana University in 1994, when Patrick Brantlinger was the Chair; the reasons cited, however, had not much to do with Shakespeare becoming “irrelevant,” but with the need to accommodate other writers and texts. See Patrick Brantlinger “Who Killed Shakespeare: An Apologia for English Departments,” *College English*, Vol. 61, No. 6, 1999, 681-690) From the 1960s, English as a discipline has changed considerably, in the way we read literary texts, consider cultural practices and *do* critical theory. Many “theorists” that we have in the syllabuses of English departments across the world have had hardly anything to do with literature in the conventional sense; Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Barthes, Hayden White have had more things to say about philosophical, social and cultural formations than the literary text. If and when Derrida and Lacan have commented on *Hamlet*, Paul Celan or Poe, they have done it incidentally, certainly not as the exponents of “close reading” did in reading Wordsworth or Keats. We today study Derrida, Lacan and Foucault because of the growing importance of interdisciplinarity for literary studies, what these theorists have to say, can enable us to *read* literature in newer, more fruitful and more meaningful ways. It does not appear fruitful enough to continue asking about Lady Macbeth’s children in the Knights fashion; we need to re-invent Shakespeare, read him anew. Is the re-appropriation of Shakespeare associated with the emergence of revisionist tendencies in literary studies?

Five: Are we referring to the growing incidence of the reworkings of Shakespeare by the term “re-invention”? In different narrative formats Shakespeare has been re-worked and re-read, from films, novels, poems to the theatre. We have new deconstructed versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* in films, *King Lear* and *Hamlet* serving as frames for poems and novels. These are indeed re-inventions of Shakespeare that seek to appropriate his texts in newer guises. From Mark Twain’s the Duke and the King reading Shakespeare in *Huckleberry Finn*, Joyce, Pasternak, and Anna Akhmatova reading *Hamlet* in novels and poems, Vishal Bharadwaj reading *Macbeth* and *Othello* in versions that subscribe to the Bollywood logic to the novelistic narratives of Michelle Cliff

and Jane Smiley, these are just some illustrations of the possibilities that the Shakespearean texts continue to engender. Most of these versions take extensive liberties with the *original*, some reversing the ethical structures (as in the villainisation of Lear in *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley) and others inventing new, radical contexts in fascinating experiments of displacement and re-situation. In Smiley's novel, there is an inversion of the entire ethical paradigm and all the character-roles of Shakespeare's *King Lear* are inverted: Lear becomes Lawrence Cook, a rich twentieth century American farmer who rapes his three daughters, and in the place of the villainous Goneril and Regan we have the quiet, docile and submissive figures of Ginny and Rose. Cordelia becomes Caroline. Once released, the book invited a mixed reception, hailed as a wonderful feat by critics and readers – it won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1992 – but it was also banned in some American schools as having nothing “literary.” The transformation of the contexts of Shakespeare's plays has been attempted before, but Smiley's experiment with *King Lear* was quite radical. It indeed “re-invents” Shakespeare and relocates the entire story-frame in 1970s Iowa. Some critics have suggested that Smiley's novel cannot be considered Shakespearean for it violates too much, takes too much license with the original. This remains an issue of serious importance in discussions of Shakespearean re-inventions: where do we draw the line?

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