

# Introduction

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*"But, because loss is his gain, [Shakespeare] passes on towards eternity in undiminished personality, untaught by the wisdom he has written or by the laws he has revealed." — James Joyce, Ulysses (1922)*

Much like the ghost of Hamlet's father, Shakespeare haunts literary history. In the 400 years since his plays were first performed, no author has been invoked as frequently by writers or in such a plurality of literary works, even as his plays and characters have served as models for countless novels and poems. Sometimes Shakespeare is the subject of reflexive and uncritical praise and adulation, a model to be emulated and the signifier of literary achievement *qua non*. For Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing in 1849, Shakespeare was representative of all poets, a transhistorical genius and the author who "wrote the text of modern life." Others, however, were considerably more circumspect about the legacy bequeathed by the playwright; T. S. Eliot's Prufrock, for instance, understands himself in opposition to Shakespeare's best-known character: "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." For some, like Jane Smiley who transposes Lear's Britain to an Iowa farmstead, Shakespeare is not a writer of historical interest whose literary merits might be debated retrospectively, but a living part of the present, an integral part of both the form and content of contemporary novelistic practice.

Some have seen Shakespeare as the representative of high culture and a marker of cultural distinction: the duke, in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, notes that "these Arkansaw lunkheads couldn't come up to Shakespeare, what they wanted was low comedy." Others, like Mr. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, disparage the cultural hegemony that Shakespeare has been crucial in constructing, grumpily observing (and secretly hoping) that "the very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare," failing to understand the irony of making such a statement in a work consciously understood by its author as contributory to an elitist Modernist aesthetic. Regardless of the precise valence attributed to Shakespeare and his works, the plays remain a durable cultural referent that many writers find not simply difficult to ignore, but essential to their own creative practice and social commentary.

Not surprising to readers of this journal, this cluster of essays seeks to capitalize on the growing interest in the remarkably eclectic adaptations, revisions, and other uses of Shakespeare's plays in

an equally varied ensemble of media over the centuries. Rather than looking at the more familiar staged adaptations or filmed versions of Shakespearean plays, these four essays concentrate on allusions to and subtexts of Shakespeare in self-consciously literary works. These afterlives offer a more deliberative and formally complex way of rethinking the playwright's legacy precisely because they actively and self-consciously participate in the construction of a literary tradition by using perhaps the most central figure in that tradition. When an author invokes Shakespeare in a work that is culturally assumed to have achieved the status of literature (or at least has pretensions to that category), she simultaneously affirms the enduring aesthetic value of the plays, even while calling attention to the literary status claimed by the host text. Looking at these afterlives — whether brief verbal echoes or more extended and complex intertexts — requires that we see these works, their their local historical significance aside, as literary contributions in their own right. Unlike other forms of adaptation, literary allusions function both synchronically (they help us understand how a given text resonates at a particular historical moment) and diachronically (they show us what works have been culturally selected, given contemporary significance, and bequeathed to subsequent generations).

Looking at these allusions and intertexts raises important methodological and theoretical questions. How can this vein of study embody some kind of scholarly rigor beyond pointing out various verbal, textual, and characterological echoes? How can we say something meaningful about Shakespeare's *literary* afterlives that is not at the same time true of Shakespearean appropriation more generally? Where do we locate the differences between rewritings of a Shakespeare play in a poem or a novel as opposed to a staged performance, film (or critical essay, for that matter)? These questions — when they have been addressed at all — have typically been approached as a matter of aesthetics or literary influence, either as a proleptical and formal question associated with Kantian aesthetics and its New Critical avatars (both often presumed to be deeply conservative), or, alternatively, a deeply psychoanalytic reading that stresses authors' intense anxiety when approaching the legacy of Shakespeare. Harold Bloom's now famous formulation is no doubt a powerful resource with which to analyze this topic, not least because Bloom has situated Shakespeare as the "center of the canon," with subsequent authors attempting to negotiate their relationship with this paternal figure.

While the cogency of both these models has been challenged for their reliance on abstracted aesthetic criteria that are not universally shared and for their failure to consider any kind of context in sorting out the vicissitudes of literary influence, they remain the best-known attempts to understand Shakespeare's literary afterlives even when they are the object of repeated rebuke. I would also argue that the theoretical resources that they draw upon remain indispensable for

an attempt to characterize Shakespeare's literary afterlives over against other forms of adaptation and appropriation. Studying Shakespearean resonances in these works, for one, demands that we recognize the uniqueness of literary form, its highly deliberative stylistics, and its self-referentiality, as a vehicle for commenting on Shakespeare. Works of literature, unlike productions that use pre-existing playscripts, however adapted, are autonomous works of art, even though they heavily invoke and even rely upon Shakespeare's plays. We must recognize to some degree, with Eliot, the existence of a literary "tradition," that literary works are connected to other literary works in special and more palpable ways than the linear progress of ordinary historical events. Yet how can we recuperate the importance of literary form without falling prey to a reductive, even oppressive, aestheticism that ignores the rich historical contexts that lend so many of the afterlives discussed in these papers their unique contribution to the history of Shakespearean reception?

While various forms of "new" historicism, cultural studies, and related methodologies have waxed ascendant in literary studies over the last several decades, a growing minority of commentators have worried that these commitments to various cultural issues have evacuated some of the close reading skills and reflection on the literariness of the text traditionally thought to be indispensable to our discipline. In opening ourselves up to the broader context surrounding literary works, we have attenuated our focus on the text, treating them instead as vessels of historical and cultural content. Nowhere, perhaps, is this turn more apparent than in the study of Shakespeare more generally, and the afterlives of his plays in particular. While I don't wish to call into question the scholarly merit of these cultural studies approaches, I would suggest that dealing with uniquely literary afterlives requires a slightly different approach. To quote Marjorie Levenson, we need to recognize "the critical (and self-critical) agency of which artworks are capable when and only when they are restored to their original, compositional complexity" (2007, 560).

These "new formalists" call for the continued relevance "of such aesthetic criteria as autonomous form, disinterest, and embodiment as they were worked out in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most centrally by Kant" (Loesberg 2005). This is not a call to return to the ahistorical formalism often associated with the New Criticism, now so thoroughly discredited, but a dedication to "examining the social, cultural, and historical aspects of literary form, and the function of form for those who produce and consume literary texts" (Bruster 2002, 44). These scholars believe that the disparaging of literary form, predominantly by those who believe that these aesthetic categories are ideological mystifications in the service of bourgeois values, has oversimplified the Kantian and Hegelian antecedents of these ideas and impoverished our own critical practice by evacuating anything intrinsically unique in works that have attained a literary status. Historicism, at times, has become a deliberate anti-formalism, blinding us to

the nuanced techniques and critical value of this kind of reading. New formalists believe that negligence of — and indeed, hostility towards — form and its theoretical underpinnings have diminished our ability to engage with other important issues by "obscuring the way formal choices and actions are enmeshed in, and even exercise agency within, networks of social and historical conditions" (Wolfson 2000, 7).

This "return to form" is important to the authors of these essays, and, I would argue, for interrogating Shakespeare's literary afterlives as an important and distinct subspecies of Shakespeare appropriation. For all of the authors discussed in these papers — Rossetti, Conrad, Joyce, and Nabokov — issues of aesthetic value, artistic autonomy, and literary agency temper their engagement with Shakespeare, not the political and social concerns that animate many other appropriations of the plays. Unlike many more pointedly political treatments of Shakespeare's plays, these literary afterlives have no explicit use value; any estimation of their worth can only take place in the future using necessarily abstracted criteria. The works discussed in these essays envision an audience that transcends present historical conditions and geographical location, imagining their true fulfillment — and critical reckoning — only in the fullness of time. This, of course, does not mean that we should or could abandon our commitment to context and sociohistorical study, but that in paying attention to form as an essential component of the structure of these afterlives, we unearth new and important contexts for understanding them.

Issues of form are important in a discussion of these particular literary uses of Shakespeare for two reasons. For one, adopting a post Romantic aesthetic that privileges the autonomy and sanctity of a uniquely literary value, the authors discussed in these essays were the inheritors of and advocates for an idealist Kantian aesthetics that many now see as politically oppressive and complicit in the construction of a bourgeois ideology and elitist culture. However noxious these notions have become to subsequent generations, they were an important *historical* context for these writers and many of the essays here deconstruct the inherently conservative values imbedded in these texts and in their engagement with Shakespeare.

Perhaps more importantly, these texts, by their invocation of Shakespeare, ask that we revisit the problematic of form itself to develop a theoretical vocabulary for examining literary afterlives. When the authors discussed here invoke Shakespeare, they do so not to appropriate his perceived cultural authority as a durable global icon, but to draw on an assumed reservoir of transcendent literary value, and do so in constructing their own self-consciously artistic contributions. Shakespeare is repeatedly enlisted in the project of manufacturing, evaluating, and commenting on how artistic capital is reproduced over time, without explicit regard to more parochial historical circumstance. John Shade, Nabokov's fictional author in *Pale Fire*, chooses

*Timon of Athens* as a subtext because of the literary cache of its author, using it to gain entrée into a conversation among (both fictional and real) professional critics, as distinct from ordinary historical agents. In *Ulysses*, Shakespeare is the subject of another conversation about aesthetic value. And even though Stephen Daedalus' take on Shakespeare is decidedly more negative, appearing to argue against those formal features that have forged Shakespeare's literary reputation, by doing so in a work whose attention to literary language and modernist experimentation is legendary, he ends up reifying Shakespeare's literary value. The ideas so centrally at stake in these conversations are ruminations on literary value and the abstracted aesthetic qualities that are its necessary productive features. In both cases, moreover, it is through attention to the dynamics of formal stylistics that the authors discussed here perceive and rework various Shakespearean texts and through which we are invited to critically understand their relationship to Shakespeare's plays.

Finally, each of the essays included here is interested in determining how Shakespearean intertexts have contributed to both the critical opinion and popular reputation of the plays themselves. Shakespeare is, of course, unique among English authors for having achieved canonical status as a literary figure while at the same time saturating popular culture. These two facets of Shakespeare's cultural authority, though sometimes understood in isolation, reinforce one another; Shakespeare's broader cultural appeal is predicated on and sustained by his literary reputation. It is our hope to show how Shakespeare's further integration into the literary canon through the work of other writers has contributed to Shakespeare's own broader celebrity. In short, we hope that understanding something of the shapes Shakespeare has taken in literary texts will generate some new answers to the perennial question, "Why Shakespeare?"

## References

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