

Khaki Hamlets: Shakespeare, Joyce, and the Agency of Literary Texts

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Abstract

In the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Stephen Dedalus and his friends debate the cultural afterlife of *Hamlet*. Stephen concludes that *Hamlet* has had a decidedly negative impact on successor cultures. There is, however, considerable irony in Stephen's position: Stephen's prosecution of *Hamlet* is eerily similar to the trials of *Ulysses*, itself the target of years of censorship amid accusations that the book was obscene, with a strong tendency to corrupt its readers. Stephen's comments in *Ulysses* and the novel's legal travails illustrate that the modernist desire to bracket artistic works as autonomous and separable from moral considerations is ultimately illusory and falls prey to its roots in a Kantian project that refuses such a separation.

Nowhere is Shakespeare's ambivalent, complex, and spectral legacy within successor cultures more apparent than in the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), where Shakespeare, his plays, and their cultural value for later generations are debated extensively by a number of Joyce's characters.¹ Rooted in an highly unorthodox interpretation of *Hamlet*, the so-called "Shakespeare theory" that Stephen Dedalus constructs in this chapter interrogates the long term moral trajectory of the play with a prosecutorial zeal that finds in Shakespeare furtive sponsorship of a violent and pernicious cultural agenda that, ultimately, is "a forecast of the concentration camp" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 240). Here, I wish to argue that Stephen's case against *Hamlet* is built upon an understanding of literary reception as a form of authorial liability and cultural agency whereby both the work and its author are held responsible for actions rendered in their name, even in unforeseeable future contexts.

Stephen's intense questioning of the cultural authority of Shakespeare and his works anticipates many twentieth-century concerns about literature's engagement with society. Despite a prevailing intellectual climate that, with notable exceptions, defends and fosters artistic expression, those on both sides of the political spectrum agree that in certain instances, this freedom must be curtailed

and the producers of socially damaging works from time to time held accountable. Shrouding truly profane literature in the integument of *l'art pour l'art*, at least since Benjamin, has been routinely condemned (Jay 1988, 112 and 1993, 71). Stephen argues that Shakespeare's reputation is a function of just such a skewed emphasis in favor of abstracted aesthetic criteria, that readers tend to praise Shakespeare's plays as autonomous works of art (in a Kantian sense) unconnected and undisturbed by any kind of moral and contextual considerations. Interrogating Shakespeare in this manner offers a model for cultural agency and textual reception that explicitly recognizes the political valences latent in literary works and disrupts the humanist consensus that automatically and uncritically affirms the ethical value of the "classics" for future generations, anticipating a major reorientation in the way literary works were critically understood and appreciated.

Paradoxically, Stephen's prosecution of *Hamlet* is eerily similar to the trials of *Ulysses*, itself the target of years of censorship amid accusations that the book was obscene, with a strong tendency to corrupt its British and American readership. If *Hamlet* contains material that might affect future readers detrimentally, prosecutors and moralists provided abundant evidence that *Ulysses* was doing the same thing in the present. Stephen's claims against *Hamlet* therefore seem to be motivated not by an altruistic desire to rid the world of artistic productions that might lead to nefarious social outcomes, but rather, as a way of coming to terms with the literary fathers that haunted both Stephen and his own literary progenitor, Joyce. The kind of literary paternity that Joyce and his characters find unavoidable in Shakespeare is, on the one hand, extremely vexing yet, by subtly rebuking the established figures of previous literary periods, proves to be an important conduit through which the literary field is transfigured to allow a much different modernist sensibility to flourish. Stephen's line of inquiry is even more provocative given the strong autobiographical connection often supposed between that character and Joyce, himself a burgeoning artist struggling with the monolithic and haunting literary legacy bequeathed to him by Shakespeare.²

Stephen's engagement with Shakespeare, then, is clearly evocative and symptomatic of what Harold Bloom has termed the anxiety of influence. Heavily inflected by Freudian psychoanalysis, this theory of individual creation suggests that artists are inspired by "misreading," that they seek to diminish the achievements of their predecessors in order to equal and supplant them. Bloom's theory has been rightly criticized for treating the literary or artistic field as an autonomous and decontextualized sphere, divorced from the specific historical factors that condition literary production, yet it is not difficult to imagine a similar form of aesthetic and psychological apprehension played out through the more tangible mechanisms with which writers must actually contend in any given period. It is my intent, therefore, to show how Stephen's bitter critique of

Hamlet in a modern context and *Ulysses'* own prosecution for its alleged negative influence on readers provide a concrete historical manifestation of the agency of literary works, both in their ability to detrimentally affect a hypothetical readership and in their productive effects on future writers; it is an effort, in other words, to historicize the "anxiety of influence," which too often is understood and ultimately dismissed as an abstract, almost mystical, and decidedly individual, process. Unlike most instances of Shakespearean appropriation, in which a third party adapts Shakespeare to promote some kind of artistic or political agenda, Stephen's comments in *Ulysses* suggest that the middle term is unnecessary and largely irrelevant, that Shakespeare's plays take on an agency of their own to produce various outcomes in future contexts: the plays themselves constitute their own afterlives.

I

From the Restoration through the nineteenth century, Shakespeare's cultural ascendancy seemed destined to continue indefinitely. The plays were comfortably understood as stable and uncontested vessels for the articulation and dissemination of a transcendent vision of human nature. His works were, as Ben Jonson anticipated in 1623, "not of an age, but for all time" and the author himself destined to live as "a monument without a tomb" (Shakespeare 1997, 3351-52). A century later, Dryden was only the first of many subsequent and influential literary figures to speak of the "divine Shakespeare"; the works, after all, constituted "a lay bible," with the author himself presiding over a "kind of established religion."³ And it was exactly this kind of adulation and perceived transcendence that animated Paul Hifferman's ultimately abortive attempt, in 1770, to consecrate a temple to the Memory of Shakespeare, complete with towering columns, painted ceilings, and of course, an enormous painting of the playwright emanating like the sun from behind "clouds of Gothic ignorance and barbarism" (Marder 1963, 19).

By the later nineteenth century, praise of Shakespeare took on a more theoretically rigorous and teleological character as Shakespeare's writings were enlisted as an integral component in a Hegelian movement from more primitive forms of social existence towards enlightenment. For Hegel, Shakespeare not only "soared above [other tragedians] at an almost unapproachable height" (1962, 85), but the plays themselves took part in the liberating emergence of the World Spirit as it "bursts asunder the crust of earth which divided it from the sun" (1896, 3:547). Not coincidentally, Hegel's metaphor for the steady accretion of philosophical enlightenment through "the recesses of thought" is that of the "old mole" to which Hamlet compares the ghost of his father, steadily prompting the eventual discovery of the truth from below the stage (1896, 3:547).⁴ Understanding the plays in this way was, of course, made possible by the emergence of the aesthetic

as a separate sphere of discourse and the epistemological separation of literary works from the material existence of both the author and reader. In the Third Critique, Kant argues that an aesthetic judgment

[d]oes not depend upon any present concept of the object, and does not provide one. When the form of an object (as opposed to the matter of its representation, as sensation) is . . . estimated as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an object, then this pleasure is also judged to be combined necessarily with the representation of it, and so not merely for the subject apprehending this form, but for all in general who pass judgment. (Kant 1970, 30)

These a priori judgments of "the beautiful" demand universal assent and force us to consider the work as an independent entity, regardless of the circumstances of production or reception.

Hegel's appropriation of Shakespeare continued a tendency to understand him in messianic terms and suggests that the true meaning of the plays was not fully recoverable without the more astute cultural sensibility of later ages. Emerson enlists Shakespeare as a "speculative genius" in a transcendental project that includes himself and his own intellectual predecessors: Kant, Fichte, Schiller, and Coleridge. Later, Emerson formulated a more explicit theory of literary authorship where the poet, of which Shakespeare was the prime exemplar, is in constant dialogue with both the past and the future.⁵ His genius, therefore, was obscured from his contemporaries:

[I]t was not possible to write the history of Shakespeare till now. It was not until the nineteenth century, whose speculative genius is sort of a living Hamlet, that the tragedy of Hamlet could find such wondering readers. Now literature, philosophy, and thought are Shakespearized. His mind is the horizon beyond which, at present, we do not see. (Emerson 1883, 194-95)

The playwright's ability to speak meaningfully and presciently to the concerns of future generations is what identifies him as "the poet of the human race . . . our poet-priest" (Emerson 1883, 193, 209). But by positing interpretation of Shakespeare as an ongoing process of discovery and revision, Hegel and Emerson unwittingly allow for the possibility of rupture and reversal in some future age. If Shakespeare's works were somehow prophetic, would it not then be possible, from the more enlightened vantage of subsequent generations, to understand Shakespeare as a regressive influence and the plays as documentary justification for retrograde developments in both aesthetic and sociopolitical spheres?

The modernists' relation to Shakespeare, as well as to other "classic" authors, was significantly more unsettled than that of their predecessors. Their trenchant observations of an increasingly alienating social world, governed by technology and economics, and its attendant psychological angst forced these writers to qualify their acceptance of their literary forebears, just as they questioned other supposed "gifts" of the past. Though falling short of indicting Shakespeare on ethical grounds, T. S. Eliot did much to demystify the unqualified reverence accorded to Shakespeare; in a not-so-subtle satire of the philosophical pretensions of contemporary critics who continued in a tradition inaugurated by the Romantics (Bate 1998, 258-65), he dismissed readings of the plays that strove to "bring in a new philosophy and a new system of yoga," suggesting instead that "it is good that we should from time to time change our minds" about Shakespeare's genius (Eliot 1964, 107).⁶ By famously isolating and exposing the structural and aesthetic difficulties in *Hamlet*, Eliot typifies his generation's tendency to understand Shakespeare in opposition to still emerging contemporary standards of literary taste (Taylor 1989, 232). He also assumed that Shakespeare, like the modernists, was searching for some kind of literary aesthetic to counter the "period of dissolution and chaos" that supposedly marked his age as well as Eliot's own (107). But unlike his own dramatic forays, notable for their unity and rational control, the Elizabethan drama, according to Eliot, was deficient in offering a lucid rejoinder to a perceived existential discord; lacking both aesthetic unity as well as a coherent philosophical worldview, "none of the plays of Shakespeare has a 'meaning'" (115). Shakespeare encapsulated the spirit of his age, to be sure, but did so unconsciously, even haphazardly, by deploying conventions without doing "any real thinking" (116). By questioning the true nature of Shakespeare's contributions to Anglo-American culture, Eliot offered a precedent for subsequent commentators who refused to endorse the accrued wisdom on the matter, yet still believed that Shakespeare's work formed an indispensable part of the cultural "tradition" they inherited and in which they participated. This same ambivalence allowed Eliot's contemporaries to extend their censure of Shakespeare to the more urgent impostures so evident in modern life.

Joyce was similarly haunted by the legendary dramatist, as are the characters that populate his works. In a 1918 letter to Martha Fleishmann, he nervously compares his accomplishments to those of Shakespeare at the same age, alarmed that he falls short, and dismayed that "*je me sens plus vieux encore*," that he is running out of time and is unable to match the literary output of the great dramatist (Joyce 1957, 2:189). Joyce's private anxieties are echoed in *Ulysses* where, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, Shakespeare's spectral image appears, "rigid in facial paralysis," to both Stephen and Leopold Bloom in the bathroom mirror at a Nighttown brothel. Shakespeare's ghost is

crowned, to be sure, but only "by the reflection of the reindeer antlered hatrack in the hall" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 15, 671). This demonic and seemingly omniscient ghost, unlike that of King Hamlet, is not responsive to his son's queries, nor does he provide the anticipated guidance that will alleviate the hero's emotional turmoil. Instead, he chides Bloom for his "vacant mind," which would deign to trade in Shakespeare's dramatic legacy. Much like the specter in *Hamlet*, this ghost might be seen as an embodiment of both Dedalus' and Bloom's conscience. Amid the chaotic dramatic environment of the "Circe" episode, Shakespeare's ghost raises even more doubts and evinces far greater anxiety than at Elsinore. In this scene, referred to by some as "the Court of Conscience," Shakespeare's ghost is the culmination of a variety of spirits, including those of Paddy Dignam (whose funeral Bloom attends in the "Hades" episode), Stephen's deceased mother, and "The Sins of the Past," among several others who remind both characters of their mortality, especially when contrasted with the literary immortality achieved by the playwright. Indeed, "God, the sun, [and] Shakespeare" will preside over the day of judgment, claims Stephen (Joyce 1968, Chapter 15, 649, 623). This motley cast of characters, including Shakespeare, though so expressive to Dedalus and Bloom, at the same time fails to achieve the gravitas ordinarily accorded the dramatist, appearing as they do in a burlesque cabaret at a whorehouse. Characters in *Ulysses* encapsulate the general modernist opinion of Shakespeare: they agree that he possessed prodigious creative talent — he was, after all, "[t]he Playwright who wrote the folio of this world" — but admittedly, he "wrote it badly" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 273). The modernists' acute awareness of their literary debts, although often experienced as a violent rupture with the literary tradition rather than an harmonious integration into it, is nevertheless tempered by farce, offering unprecedented opportunities to interrogate the precise valences and social legacy bequeathed by the great writers of the past through the agency of their literary artifacts.

II

These highly ambivalent allusions to Shakespeare, and especially to *Hamlet*, abound in *Ulysses*, but are most fully developed as explicit commentary on Shakespeare's long-term cultural authority in "Scylla and Charybdis." In this chapter, Stephen Dedalus, the burgeoning young poet, participates in a wide-ranging literary conversation — focused on the meaning of *Hamlet* and its ramifications for the subsequent aesthetic and ethical estimation of Shakespeare — with George Russell, John Eglinton, Thomas Lyster, and all others who care to listen in the National Library in Dublin, a physical and symbolic archive where the canon is both visually celebrated and intellectually appreciated. Stephen, exemplifying an acute anxiety of influence shared by many modernists, associates Shakespeare with his own colleagues and rivals in what

to him is an impermeable Dublin literary establishment from which he is regularly and painfully excluded (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 245-47). He feels that he must diminish Shakespeare's literary reputation and the moral authority of his work in order to overcome the massive impotence that this monolithic literary tradition evinces in young writers. Far from being a disinterested intellectual hero overcome by extraordinary circumstances, he feels that the title character should rightly be seen as *le distrait*, an absentminded and callous murderer who set an alarming precedent justifying death on a large scale to satisfy his own curiosity and overly stringent standards of verification (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 239). Because according to tradition Shakespeare himself played the role of King Hamlet, the instigator of the violence, Stephen transfers responsibility for the potentially detrimental influence of *Hamlet* immediately onto the playwright, for whom, he claims, the drama was intensely autobiographical; in it, Shakespeare expressed the trauma of his youth, his seduction by Anne Hathaway, the untimely death of his son Hamnet, and his subsequent estrangement from his wife and his own brothers Edmund and Richard, with whom Anne had an affair. Taking his cue from several popular nineteenth-century biographies, Stephen believes that Shakespeare's dysfunctional family life prompted the violence and nihilism of the tragedies and the deep skepticism of the problem plays, before an eventual reconciliation found its literary manifestation in the later romances. But even this resolution cannot, ultimately, erase the rupture; "no later undoing," according to Stephen, "will undo the first undoing" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 251). These traumatic events left the playwright permanently scarred, and his deeply pessimistic attitude necessarily infused the plays. So it is quite possible — even likely — that Shakespeare's plays exert an intensely negative pressure on those who subsequently encounter them.

The modernist reception of Shakespeare, therefore, extended beyond routine discussions of aesthetic worth to the plays' function as a locus for ethical valuation — Stephen notes that Hamlet had "a strong inclination to evil" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 272) — and their educational value for contemporary society. My contention here is that Stephen, by considering Shakespeare not simply as an important literary influence, but as "himself the father of all his race," moves the debate into the juridical sphere, so that Shakespeare is called to answer for damages committed against society in his name and in the name of his works. The legal terminology that abounds throughout the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode is consistently directed at Shakespeare himself in an effort to prove his liability.⁷ An accusation against a long-dead literary figure for an ensemble of vaguely articulated transgressions *ex post facto* is, of course, untenable in the common law and achieves plausibility only through the trans-historical and dialectical method that Stephen adduces throughout the book; nevertheless, Stephen not only suggests an analogy between the actions perpetrated in *Hamlet* and

by the biographical Shakespeare, but also argues for a direct transference between the two. The author must answer for unanticipated actions damaging to the general social well-being that are being perpetrated by those significantly influenced by his literary progeny.

Stephen's prosecution depends on a materialist understanding of art, constantly and intimately engaged with the world and capable of producing manifold effects — both positive and negative — on a diverse variety of individuals. By rejecting A. E. (Russell's) idealist conviction that "art has to reveal to us ideas, formless spiritual essences [and that] . . . the words of *Hamlet* bring our mind into contact with the eternal wisdom," Stephen argues against the deliberate exclusion of non-aesthetic criteria and suggests that literary works cannot be understood outside of particular social contexts; they have an iterative existence and are reenacted afresh by subsequent generations of readers (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 236). Once *Hamlet* is no longer considered a vessel for the transmission of universal truths and timeless ideals, the text becomes decidedly less profound, even sinister, and is no longer recuperable for Kantian aesthetics or Hegelian teleology. Instead, Stephen imagines this almost banal *Pièce de Shakespeare* performed in a French provincial town before a plebeian audience, for whom the twists of the plot and the deeds of the characters are significantly more interesting and provocative than any philosophical speculation they engage in. Before this decidedly more representative audience, the play's dark overtones are focused more clearly and its abundant violence unavoidable: *Hamlet* is "a sumptuous and stagnant exaggeration of murder" and Shakespeare "a deathsman of the soul" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 239; cf. also Chapter 15, 673). In yet another context, *Hamlet* evokes a much more current tragedy:

Nine lives are taken off for his father's one, Our Father who art in purgatory. Khaki Hamlets don't hesitate to shoot. The bloodboltered shambles in act five is a forecast of the concentration camp sung by Mr. Swinburne. (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 239-40)

Concentration camps and khakis, both innovations of the Boer War (1899-1902), amplify and economize death; the former allow an occupying force to incarcerate swiftly and efficiently their political enemies and the indigenous populations who support them, albeit with alarming collateral damage, while the latter represents the anonymous veneer of modern warfare. In reaction to Algernon Charles Swinburne, an English poet and literary critic who justified the high mortality rates in South African concentration camps as a necessary consequence of armed conflict and the imperialism that spawned it, Stephen abhors needless violence. Unlike Swinburne, who thought *Hamlet* was similarly pragmatic, that his disposal of Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern were all part of an elaborate scheme to exact vengeance on Claudius where the end result justified the needless loss of life along the way — the epitome of a khaki *Hamlet* who "doesn't hesitate to

shoot" (Clissold 1997, 47)⁸ — Stephen thinks the social cost exacted by Hamlet's idiosyncratic and solipsistic retribution is too grievous and provides an alarming precedent for subsequent generations.

Stephen suggests that *Hamlet's* orgy of violence originates ultimately with the ghost, an image of the father who confronts Hamlet with dual, equally binding, imperatives: to remember and to avenge. The demands imposed by the spectral presence of *Hamlet* in successor cultures are also twofold and no less compelling. Given the macrotemporal notoriety of the author and the play's saturation throughout Western society, any performance of *Hamlet* automatically facilitates, and even necessitates, a powerful awareness of cultural memory. *Hamlet* also, according to Best, "is a ghoststory" whose spirits haunt subsequent generations and, indubitably, enjoin some kind of response. Passive remembrance begets active revenge. For Stephen, a ghost is "[o]ne who has faded into impalpability through death, through absence, through change of manners" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 240). But far from completely disappearing and thereby vitiating any tangible influence over subsequent readers, this spectral existence, "returning to the world that has forgotten him," amplifies cultural influence through his very incorporeality and becomes "himself the father of all his race, the father of his own grandfather, the father of his unborn grandson" (267). Lacking a fixed identity in the usual sense, the ghost carries out his purgatorial mission with relative impunity. This ghost's mission, moreover, is not one of enlightenment or social emancipation; he was designed to "make our flesh creep." And, due to the strong correspondence between the ghost of Hamlet's father and the playwright, Stephen thinks that Shakespeare "passes on towards eternity in undiminished personality, untaught by the wisdom he has written or by the laws he has revealed" (252). Because of the poet's underlying and pervasive negativity, Shakespeare's legacy is ultimately irredeemable, prone to underwrite senseless violence, fratricide, and widespread disorder precisely because of his ubiquity as a paternal figure in the cultural sphere.

But how can Shakespeare, as an intentional agent, be considered liable for these atrocious and inconceivable developments in modern warfare? According to Dedalus' idiosyncratic Aristotelian logic, literary authorship is a process of continuous recreation, and the author, himself a paternal figure, is bound in a very intimate ethical relationship to his literary progeny. Shakespeare, in this view, embodies both the ghost of Hamlet's father as well as Hamlet himself: "the son [is] consubstantial with the father," and "the Father was Himself his own son" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 252, 267). In addition to rehearsing Catholic doctrine concerning the trinity, Stephen's theory implies that Shakespeare is, in a very meaningful sense, many people simultaneously, that characters literally embody their authors.⁹ His theory substitutes a metaphysical understanding of

fatherhood for a biological one, claiming that parent and child are different stages in a single life taken in its entirety and should not be understood as two radically different or separate entities (Michels 1982, 177). Literary paternity functions in a similar way; each performance or readerly instantiation of a given work operates discretely, separable from the others, yet functionally related to and traceable to an ordinary source that sponsored it. On this view, Shakespeare, as the ethical progenitor of *Hamlet*, initiated a process of continued renewal over time that, in some of its forms, has asserted a pernicious social influence and justified certain insidious practices utterly incomprehensible and unknowable to the author. But even given this possibility, Shakespeare, of course, would not be liable for the murderous tendencies of his dramatic progeny as an intentional agent. The playwright was simply the accidental originator of something he could not possibly foresee and cannot be held responsible for: "The world believes," argues Eglinton, "that Shakespeare made a mistake . . . and got out of it as quickly and as best he could." But Stephen refuses to accept this logic and continues his indictment: "A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are *volitional* and are the portals of discovery" (Joyce 1968, 243, italics added).

Relying on an elaborate rehearsal of Aristotelian logic, Dedalus' contention is that the efficient cause, according to Aristotle (another spectral figure throughout the chapter),¹⁰ is ultimately inseparable from and ethically connected to the final cause, the effect or influence on the reader or audience. Stephen's argument here depends on a tendentious understanding of entelechy,¹¹ or what he calls the "form of forms," an Aristotelian concept fiercely debated throughout Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *De Anima*, Aristotle claims that the most essential characteristic or essence of living substances is the animating force: "the soul in animals, like the fruit in plants, is that which is potentially such and such a body . . . The body, on the other hand, is simply that which is potentially existent" (1907, 412b 22-413a 22: 10-11).¹² Scientists found in these Aristotelian precepts a ready, malleable, and, most of all, authoritative justification for a stable conception of the soul as the decisive origin of all future action in any living being, a kind of "intelligent design" that allows for divine agency even within a Darwinian paradigm of natural selection. By justifying a strong *causal* link (in addition to a merely formal resemblance), Stephen, in this scholarship, finds a useful counter to a Platonic cultural logic, a logic that persists in the formalist aesthetics of Kant and his followers, that regards literature as timeless and immutable and in so doing, forecloses the possibility of authorial liability in any meaningful sense.

By denying mechanistic and accidental accounts of literary reception, Stephen implicitly argues that Shakespeare's plays are pure potential and might therefore generate (or degenerate into) any number of material or ideological possibilities. The forecast of the concentration camp is

embryonic in *Hamlet's* much different emphases on alternate forms of justice and revenge, which can — and should, according to Stephen's logic — be ascribed to Shakespeare as its creator. The armature of violence that pervades the plays exists "between the lines of his . . . written words, it is petrified on his tombstone under which her [Anne Hathaway's] four bones are hidden. Age has not withered it. Beauty and peace have not done it away. It is in infinite variety everywhere in the world he has created" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 272; cf. *Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.2.239-41). Stephen's deliberate contortion of these lines from *Antony and Cleopatra* discloses a macabre narrative written "between the lines" of Shakespeare's plays when taken out of context, as they must be in a very different cultural milieu. Shakespeare's plays, just like the methods used to perpetrate violent acts, change with the times.

III

So are we ultimately to believe Stephen's convoluted description of literary paternity and, consequently, indict Shakespeare for the malevolent social consequences allegedly condoned and perpetuated by his works? Of course not. Neither did he.¹³ Nevertheless, we have every reason to take seriously the related charge that *Hamlet* has the potential to influence negatively future generations when taken to represent and rationalize an ethos of violence and revenge. Politics is frequently aestheticized, and artistic productions have consistently been enlisted to support various caustic political regimes and justify their totalitarian projects. The operas of Richard Wagner and elements of German and Christian mythology notoriously depicted in Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* (1934) were readily assimilated into the Nazi propaganda machine throughout the 1930s. Today, a significant portion of the legislative effort designed to mitigate the deleterious effects of violence on television or in the cinema calls for producers to regulate content and to adopt a more socially responsible marketing strategy. The pervasiveness of these kinds of arguments in the popular imagination attests to an ongoing awareness of the potentially harmful consequences of artistic works and a concomitant desire to minimize the social ills they might cause, even in relatively free and open societies.

Despite the no-doubt intentional hyperbole, Stephen's argument against Shakespeare seems to make sense — that is if we can accept for a moment the questionable premises on which it rests. His allegations, however, collapse entirely and seem transparently self-serving when we consider the reception of *Ulysses*. Joyce himself was found subject to a similar offense when a New York District Court upheld the ban against *Ulysses*, and 500 copies of the novel were detained by state post office authorities in October 1922. The book was also censored in Great Britain. Out of two print runs (1000 copies published by Shakespeare and Company in February 1922 and 2000 more

published in Paris, under the imprint of the Egoist Press, London), for a total of 3000 copies, augmented by a special order of 500 to redress the original American seizure, due to the ongoing legal difficulties only 250 books ever reached their prospective owners. Are these two situations really analogous? Many would claim that the *Ulysses* scandal lacks the premeditated intent that Stephen imputes to Shakespeare, that censorship of Joyce's text was entirely beyond the author's control and carried out by the book's American detractors only after the novel was substantially complete. The publication history of *Ulysses*, however, begins well before 1922. Commencing in 1918, the book was published serially in *The Egoist* in London and *The Little Review* in New York (although it was printed in France). Certain installments of the latter magazine were periodically denied entry into the United States when parts of "Lestrygonians" (in January/February 1919) and "Cyclops" (in January/February 1920) were deemed offensive, according to postal authority regulations (Vanderham 1998, 31-33).

A charge of obscenity in federal law soon followed. First raised by The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice in December 1920 in response to the allegedly lurid description of Bloom masturbating at the sight of Gerty MacDowell in "Nausicaa" (published in the *Little Review*, July/August 1920), Anthony Comstock and John Sumner, the group's leaders, argued that *Ulysses* ran afoul of the prevailing legal standard for obscenity, first articulated in British Common Law in *Regina v. Hicklin* in 1868. The decision stated that a work might be deemed obscene and therefore subject to censorship if *certain parts* of the work, *taken separately*, tended to "deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences" (3 QB 360, Joyce 1992, italics in original).¹⁴ This case, and the legal test subsequently derived from it, epitomized the conservatism of Victorian sexual morality by implicitly identifying susceptible youth as the arbiters of obscenity, even in the most abstruse of literary works that most educated adults, let alone children, fail to fully understand. As a result of the decision in favor of the libellant, serial publication ceased in 1920, nearly two years before *Ulysses* was published in monograph, allowing Joyce ample opportunity to revise or delete the offensive passages. Joyce's decision *not* to do so is usually hailed as a triumph of artistic sensibility and authorial discretion over against the homogenizing tendencies of public decorum and political conservatism. But in failing to emend *Ulysses* satisfactorily, Joyce — if he was not already — certainly became aware of consequences for future distribution, as the periodicals that first brought out the work suffered a serious decline in advertising revenue, and numerous other potential publishers were reticent to publish something that was already subject to criminal prosecution and boycotted by a large readership (Vanderham 1998, 36; Arnold 1991, 4-5). Far from a disinterested observer concerned primarily with his own integrity as a creative

artist, Joyce was obsessed with the ongoing censorship of the book and its potential ramifications; an anxious letter from Joyce to Harriet Shaw Weaver (editor of *The Egoist* and Joyce's patron) on 22 December 1922 expresses regret for the ban and desire to see these difficulties resolved with all possible alacrity, and betrays an intricate knowledge of the vicissitudes of the case, as well as an uncommon grasp of the legal and procedural principles involved (Joyce 1957, 1:199).¹⁵

The rationale for censorship, then, essentially followed the same logic as Stephen's attack on *Hamlet*. *Ulysses*, like Shakespeare according to Dedalus, was found by the courts to contain material that was "obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, indecent, or disgusting" and therefore threatened the probity of its potential American readers (NY Penal Code § 1141, Consol. 1909; Joyce 1992). Lawyers for Random House, Joyce's American publisher, argued that the burden of proof finally rested with the courts in determining not only whether the book contained the offensive material, but also that this material posed a reasonable threat to the morality of its readers and therefore to society in general. They also argued that, according to the Supreme Court's 1897 decision in *Dunlop v. US* (165 US 486, 488), to sustain a guilty verdict, the defendant must have consciously intended to induce such malignant tendencies in readers. Although the court demurred to the defendant's construction of the statute, they found that the author was indeed conscious of the offensive material, that its publication was therefore intentional, and that the stationers were liable to prosecution. Despite the court's verdict against Joyce's publishers, the principles used in the decision signaled a shift away from strict content to intention and effect in adjudicating obscenity, paving the way for an eventual reversal.

The decision by District Court Judge John M. Woolsey that eventually permitted the importation, copyright, and subsequent publication of *Ulysses* in the United States was based on a revised statute that, in part, redressed the procedural ossification in prevailing case law. According to the Tariff Act of 1930, only those materials that, taken in their entirety, could be deemed offensive by any reasonable person according to prevailing community standards were prohibited (19 USC 1305).¹⁶ Here the determination of malfeasance turns on the triangular relationship between author, work, and the general public rather than on a hypothetical readership. More important for my purposes, a reasoned and balanced consideration of the author's intention becomes the most important basis for absolving *Ulysses* of the obscenity charges. The work's sensual content is secondary to Joyce's "attempt sincerely and honestly to realize his objective": because "Joyce did not write *Ulysses* with what is commonly called pornographic intent" (Joyce 1992), neither the work nor its author can be held liable for any charges leveled against it when taken out of context. Any pornographic tendencies present in the work are therefore not deliberate because they

are an important component of the high artistic pretensions of the author; they were not intended to evoke a debased, physical arousal nor can they, of themselves, constitute a justifiable basis for prosecution. On Woolsey's view, an author's volition encompasses only those aspects of his artistic project of which he is self-consciously aware and are not, as Stephen would have it, the "portals of discovery" used to commune with future generations.

Following the libellant's argument, in adjudicating *United States v. One Book Called "Ulysses"* Judge Woolsey adopts precisely those abstracted aesthetic criteria that Stephen rejects as insufficient when considering the ethical character of *Hamlet* in contemporary society. The normative force of Stephen's claim against Shakespeare's corpus is precisely that literary works must ultimately be judged according to functional criteria drawn from an intersubjectively meaningful public sphere rather than a hypothetical and autonomous formal realm. He recognizes that the potential agency of "classic" works encompasses an ethical and political dimension in addition to a literary one. The Woolsey decision forecloses this possibility. For him, any work written with artistic intent cannot be deemed morally repugnant, at least not in any legally binding sense:

The reputation of "Ulysses" in the literary world, however, warranted my taking such time as was necessary to enable me to satisfy myself as to the intent with which the book was written . . . that is, written for the purpose of exploiting obscenity. In writing "Ulysses," Joyce sought to make a serious experiment in a new, if not wholly novel, literary genre . . . [H]is attempt sincerely and honestly to realize his objective has required him incidentally to use certain words which are generally considered dirty. (5 F. Supp. 182 [SDNY 1933], Joyce 1992, xiv)

In short, Woolsey practices the same kind of discursive relativism that blinds Russell and Eglinton to the difficult ethical problems posed by *Hamlet* in a modernist context. Neither is the judge willing to admit any kind of broader definition of intention, such as the one offered by Stephen, who suggests that immoral intentions are a form of self-deception used by artists to augment their creative powers. For Woolsey, intentions can refer only to consciously-held mental states, a significantly more stringent designation than usually required by the law.¹⁷ The "leer of the sensualist" becomes the arbiter of obscenity as if a strong predisposition to lewdness is the only plausible determination of the inclination to convey an erotically charged meaning. In an overriding effort to protect and preserve artistic freedom, the judge falls victim to a number of logical fallacies that effectively subordinate jurisprudence as a branch of intentionalist literary criticism (Vanderham 1998, 126-28).

Read in light of the Woolsey decision and Joyce's keen interest in its outcome, Dedalus' vehement and litigious critique of Shakespeare's long-term reception is in some ways extremely puzzling. He would seem to justify the banning of certain works based on an estimation of their tendency to corrupt readers in some unknowable future: "If the poet must be rejected, such a rejection would seem more in harmony with — what shall I say? — our notions of what ought not to have been" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 251). Stephen is in fact extending the scope of potential censorship to exclude certain works for the retrospective benefit of society. On these criteria, there would be little argument for not suppressing *Ulysses* if even a small percentage of a hypothetical readership could allege a deleterious influence.

On the other hand, Stephen's rejection of Shakespeare's oeuvre makes perfect sense as commentary on the paternalistic character of literary history. By dismissing the works of Shakespeare as immoral or obscene, Stephen highlights, in a literary sphere, the same ambivalent relationship many children bear to the obligations imposed by their fathers. Just as Hamlet, despite his own misgivings, was compelled to recognize and observe the will of his father, so Joyce finds Shakespeare's influence inescapable and even essential for his own creative productivity; his long-term literary success depends upon this connection to a literary forbear, just as Shakespeare's genius is predicated on his own personal travails.¹⁸ But both these parents are also ghostly devils that frequently exact a tremendous personal and social cost, leading to extreme hardship for their children.¹⁹ A kind of eucharistic connection exists between *Ulysses* and Shakespeare, one that exemplifies the transfer of literary vitality from one generation to the next, but also one that maddeningly entails its own specific demands that children must heed in order to participate in the ongoing tradition.

Shakespeare's quasi-divine corpus is transubstantiated into something much different with the ground-breaking publication of *Ulysses*, a work clearly undertaken in the memory of Shakespeare, Homer, and other literary predecessors (see Luke 22:19). Unfortunately, as the faults of the parent are too often repeated by their offspring, *Ulysses* could not escape the same corrupting tendencies that its father noticed in his own original; accordingly, the work was prosecuted, but eventually redeemed by Judge Woolsey with recourse to the same aesthetic criteria so often adduced as the hallmark of Shakespeare's own cultural value. The acute anxiety of influence registered here, most deeply and painfully intuited and articulated by those of artistic sensibility, like Stephen and Joyce, though enabling literary success, does not necessarily break away from the potentially negative impact of its progenitors (Bloom 1973, 78). Since literary anxiety might only be channeled through the concrete mechanisms available to writers of various periods, Joyce's *Ulysses*, in seeking to

supplant Shakespeare and to rectify the potentially harmful entailments contained in his textual legacy, is subject to different, but no less harmful impediments to the achievement of long-term cultural value. Finally, then, Stephen's prosecution of Shakespeare and his plays may be a vital — even inevitable — component in a larger aesthetic strategy for a very different reason. He uncovered, or rather imputed, in the biographical circumstances surrounding Shakespearean authorship a theory of literary production in which success is directly related to adversity. Joyce obviously benefited in a similar way: notwithstanding the obvious short-term hardships imposed by the censorship of *Ulysses*, his legal difficulties probably did more to generate widespread interest in that novel than did ordinary forms of literary publicity and endorsement.

Despite Stephen's tactile questioning of the moral value of *Hamlet* and other plays, these accusations did relatively little to dilute the overwhelmingly positive consensus on the probity of Shakespeare's works. Joyce and other modernists continued to revere Shakespeare and were largely responsible for constructing the critical infrastructure through which his plays were appreciated during much of the twentieth century (Grady 1991, 149). There were changes, though. No longer was the study of Shakespeare primarily philological, and governed by unrestrained adulation. Formalism and New Criticism, two self-proclaimed "scientific" approaches to reading literary texts that modernist authors like Eliot and Joyce did so much to invigorate, concentrated on what they believed was an objective engagement with the plays that left little room for unqualified value judgments. In performance too, noteworthy twentieth-century productions of the plays by vaunted cultural institutions around the world²⁰ were decidedly darker, politically-motivated, and more oppositional, strongly inclined to highlight the grotesque violence, social instability, and inherent contradictions in the original texts and so visible in the social, economic, and political dislocations of twentieth century Europe (Kott 1974). These novel ways of approaching Shakespeare did not ultimately entail his rejection or prosecution, as Stephen anticipates; they did, however, alert readers to alternate models of literary reception and the ways in which the works of the past have tangible repercussions in an ensemble of material circumstances. Ghoststories don't always have happy endings.

Notes

1. The discussion of Shakespeare in this episode has elicited remarkably wide-ranging critical commentary. Observers have characterized Joyce's engagement with both the plays and the various — and often inaccurate — biographical details of the playwright's life alternately as "usurpation" (Sword 1999, 184), "genuine admiration" (Fitzpatrick 1977, 65), "specifically Freudian . . . psychosexual fiction" (DiPietro 2006, 69-70), "intensely personal" (Shutte 1957,

- 84), "severe" (Bristol 1997, 230), or simply misunderstood (Gifford 1988, 192), to provide only a sampling of the diverse opinion on this highly unusual chapter.
2. See Bloom 1994, 417. External evidence also supports the notion that, especially with regard to his views on Shakespeare, the author's opinions were remarkably similar to Stephen's. Many of the same sources used by Stephen in constructing his theory of Shakespeare were integral to Joyce's own lectures on the topic in Trieste in 1912 and 1913 (DiPietro 2006, 73).
 3. John Dryden, "Preface" to *All for Love* in *Works* 1956-2000, 13:18; the term "lay bible" is quoted in Marder 1963, 18, while the idea of Shakespeare as a religion originates with Arthur Murphy, as quoted in Kastan 2001, 97. For Shakespeare's vaunted estimation in literary (as opposed to theatrical) circles throughout the period, see also Dobson 1992, Chapter 4, *passim* and, especially for the influence of Steele and Addison, Taylor 1989, 62-68.
 4. In *Ulysses*, Stephen uses the same metaphor to note the persistence of various critical statements on Hamlet: "that mole is the last to go," in response to Best's claim that Hamlet is consistently portrayed as "quite young" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 249). For an illuminating discussion of the teleological character of Shakespearean scholarship and the use of *Hamlet's* "mole" in philosophical discourse, see de Grazia 1999. For the importance of the Romantics in constructing the parameters for a subsequent understanding of Shakespeare, see Bate 1998, Chapters 8 and 9, *passim*.
 5. Emerson goes on to suggest that Shakespeare's normative force in shaping society and securing it on a progressively moral and enlightened trajectory is akin to that of Christianity. For Emerson's influence on subsequent Shakespearean criticism, especially in America, see Bristol 1991, 123-30.
 6. Despite these heretofore heretical statements on Shakespeare, or perhaps in an effort to be taken seriously in his own critical milieu, Eliot ultimately felt the need to reiterate the seemingly unassailable sentiment that "I have as high an estimation of the greatness of Shakespeare as anyone living" and that "I certainly believe there is nothing greater" (Eliot 1964, 108). And, of course, coming to terms with Shakespeare as the epicenter of the literary tradition is essential in the development of a truly individual talent and its assimilation in literary history.
 7. The prosecution is carried out by Stephen, with whom, as in ordinary criminal trials, "the burden of proof" rests (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 260), presided over by "Judge Eglinton" (272), with the other interlocutors acting as jury. The disputation also takes on many of the nuances of legal proceedings; Stephen realizes he must prove that Shakespeare's actions were premeditated, whether it is "possible . . . or probable that he did not draw or foresee the logical consequences of these premises" (241), that Shakespeare "had no truant memory" (244), thereby rendering his

actions deliberate, and understood the juridical ramifications since "his legal knowledge was great" (260). Stephen notes, almost as a summation of his case, that Shakespeare's exploits are destined for "the criminal annals of the world" (266).

8. Swinburne outlined this pragmatic view of *Hamlet* in *A Study of Shakespeare* (1880). His feelings on the Boer War and the deployment of concentration camps in that conflict are encapsulated in a sonnet entitled "The Death of Colonel Benson" (1901), which characterizes Boer women and children as the "whelps and dams of murderous foes." Elsewhere, he declared that the concentration camps were "monuments to our [British] leniency." In many ways, Stephen's condemnatory views on the South African concentration camps represent prevailing public opinion in Ireland. The Irish were decidedly pro-Boer; they saw English interventions in that country as analogous to their ongoing presence in Ireland. Not surprisingly, Swinburne was a vehement opponent of Gladstone and Irish home rule (Gifford 1988, 202; Clissold 1997, 47). For the etymology of the word "khaki," see OED *adj.* C.
9. If we are to take this idea seriously, it would invite us to identify Stephen with Joyce, an autobiographical connection forcefully suggested by Richard Ellmann, Joyce's most influential biographer (1982, 589).
10. Aristotelian terminology abounds throughout this episode whose argument, among other things, implicitly "compares Aristotle with Plato" using "dagger definitions" derived from these bifurcated philosophical traditions. Stuart Gilbert's architectonic diagram of *Ulysses'* structure lists "dialectic" as the chapter's "technic" and "literature" as its "art" while the Linati schema adumbrates Aristotle (as well as Hamlet and Shakespeare) as its overriding symbols (Gilbert 1963, 38; Gifford 1988, 192). In a letter to his mother of 20 March 1903, Joyce reports that "I am at present up to my neck in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and read only him and Ben Jonson" (1957, 2:38).
11. The term *entelechia* is most often rendered as "actuality," though translators often recognize the inadequacy of the English word. The concept seeks to describe the relation of the soul, or animating life-force, that will eventually develop into an exact replica of the body and intellect. "Entelechy" is thus the vital life element that controls and promotes maturation that transcends mechanistic or material causation.
12. Interpreting this passage, later theorists in the Aristotelian tradition made the stronger claim that entelechy was, in fact, teleological, that the existence of the original kernel automatically presupposed the eventual disposition of the being. Contrary to advocates of Darwinian natural selection, these biologists suggest that an organism does not adapt, it becomes what it has inherently inside it (Driesch 1914, 152). This meant that, as a precondition of experience, living

beings must be able to 1) impart a causal chain on any series of events; and 2) understand the role their own volition plays in affecting that series.

13. "—— You are a delusion," said roundly John Eglinton to Stephen, "you have brought us all this way to show us a French triangle. Do you believe your own theory?" "—— No," Stephen said promptly" (Joyce 1968, Chapter 9, 274). Richard Ellmann, however, records that Joyce himself took Stephen's theory very seriously and never recanted it (cited in Bloom 1994, 414).
14. This case subsequently became a mainstay of American jurisprudence, cited in *US v. Bennet* (24 Fed. Cas. 1093; Cir. SDNY 1879, the same court that would later consider the *Ulysses* case), *Rosen v. US* (161 US 29, 1896), and numerous other decisions in state supreme and appellate courts, especially in Massachusetts (see Pagnattaro 2001, 218-23).
15. Joyce's letters prior to and during the 1933 trial suggest a much more pragmatic reason for his concern with the ongoing censorship. By this time, Joyce was undergoing acute financial hardship and hoping to use the revenues from an American edition of *Ulysses* to settle his hemorrhaging debts. On 20 June 1932 in a letter to T. S. Eliot, after complaining that his fiscal situation prohibited travel, Joyce, desperate for money, hopes to profit from a pirated Japanese edition. When the novel was finally cleared for publication, copies could not be printed fast enough (21 October 1934, Joyce 1957, 1:349; 7 April 1935, 1:361; 1 May 1935, 1:365). Worry over the ongoing legal and contractual situation severely curtailed Joyce's productivity during this period (1:353). Joyce even came to interpret the ongoing legal difficulties of *Ulysses* and his other work as a personal conspiracy against him (3:242-44).
16. Note that the "reasonable person" reagent common in the law of torts replaces the implied juvenile ("those whose minds are open to immoral influences") from *Regina v. Hicklin*. In addition, the printed matter in question itself became the claimant in such cases, rather than the author, publisher, or their representatives. For many years Woolsey's decision was featured as a testimonial to the Random House edition of *Ulysses* and has itself been described as an important contribution to literary criticism (Arnold 1991, 61).
17. See, for instance, Holmes: "The test of foresight is not what [a] criminal foresaw, but what a man of reasonable prudence would have foreseen" (1991, 54) and Chapter 2, *passim*.
18. Cary DiPietro reads this as indicative of the modernists' Nietzschean ability to transform their disillusionment with the world into creative expression: "Shakespeare is portrayed in Stephen's theory as an artist who achieves salvation by embracing the morbid conditions of his existence" (2006, 80). Heavily reliant on Freud's theory that the sexual history of the child persists in the actions of the adult, DiPietro, like Bloom, elides the material conditions of authorship that so impinged on Joyce's publication of *Ulysses*.

19. When the ghost in *Hamlet* first appears, all characters immediately consider it a damned spirit. Horatio reacts to it by making the sign of the cross, a common action used to ward off evil spirits (1.1.108); the ghost only appears at night, suggesting that it is of the devil and cannot function in daylight (1.1.119); finally, Hamlet appeals to "[m]inisters and angels of grace [to] defend us" (1.4.20), and his first words to the ghost question his nature: "Be thou a spirit of health or a goblin damned, / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts form hell, / Be thy intents wicked or charitable" (1.4.21-23), emphasizing the extreme ambivalence evinced by this familiar, but altogether fearsome spirit. For a lucid survey of the ways spectators might have apprehended the ghost, see Greenblatt 2001, *passim*.
20. The Royal Shakespeare Company (founded by Peter Hall in 1960), Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble (1949), and the Stratford (Ontario) Festival (1953) increasingly adopted the more experimental performance values of smaller troupes, garnering a reputation for themselves as avant-garde (Taylor 1989, 298-311; Hortmann 1998, 56). Critics, too, became skeptical of Hamlet's speculative genius: for G. Wilson Knight in 1930, for instance, Hamlet was "the ambassador of death walking within life" (1930, 48). For a summary of anti-humanist, even confrontational, readings of *Hamlet* during the twentieth century, many of which take up some of the ideas outlined by Stephen (albeit for political purposes), see Goldstein 2001, Chapter 2. Of course, these studies consider the play as a literary text and none extends the critique to Shakespeare himself.

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