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Purloined Letters. An International Journal of Quotation Studies is a peer-reviewed, biannual scientific journal which addresses the fields of literature, art, cinema, history and the humanities. With its focus on the theory and practice of quotation, the journal has an essentially interdisciplinary approach, publishing articles on the textual re-use of verbal, visual and musical materials, and specifically the appropriation of fragments and their re-insertion into a different context, from classicism to postmodern rewritings. Prospective contributors may consider the question of quotation both in theoretical and interpretative/historical perspectives. Contributions can be written either in French, English, Italian, Dutch, Spanish or German.

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GIULIANA IANACCARO

**INTRODUCTION:
EMPOWERING SHAKESPEARE**

When Alessandra Petrina and myself first circulated our proposal for a special issue on “Shakespeare as the Voice of Established Power”, many scholars who answered our call offered to investigate the use of Shakespearean quotations as a cultural weapon against oppression. They chose to interpret the topic we addressed in accordance with the vast majority of literary and cultural studies on Shakespearean adaptations and appropriations of the last fifty years – that is, as powerful artistic means to question, challenge and demythologise oppressive powers in any given time and place. Reading those proposals, we could not escape the impression that most would-be contributors to the volume were rather taken aback by the idea of investigating Shakespeare as a tool of cultural and political domination. Indeed, the image of an intrinsically positive and ethically unblemished literary and moral authority – whatever use we make of it – seems to surface almost automatically as soon as we start discussing ‘Shakespeare’.

In recent years, indeed, a wide variety of critical studies have investigated the use of Shakespeare's works to question and debunk the way in which the political, religious, and cultural establishment has supported its hegemonic agenda for centuries through the voice of the Bard. Shakespeare's plays have catalysed the creative efforts of artists in all fields: stage adaptations, transpositions, parodies, and translations, which have come under critical scrutiny since the 1980s, have often been made to speak the voice of the oppressed and marginalised to react against a dominant, Anglo-centric ideology. Scholars from all over the world have enthusiastically taken up the challenge and analysed this new and unexpected lease of life given to the writer.

However, together with contemporary re-readings of Shakespeare's plays as a way to speak forcefully against oppression, discrimination, and racism, there are fewer (but no less significant) recent critical investigations that take up the challenge of exploring a more dated but persistent phenomenon: the use of Shakespeare's status as a classic within the English, and indeed worldwide, literary tradition in order to impose and enforce political and cultural domination. As an icon of quintessentially English principles and values, Shakespeare has become, very early in the history of British imperialism, one of the essential cultural products of the colonial enterprise within and without the national borders. Before representing vigorously the voice of the oppressed, Shakespeare was celebrated as the ideal spokesman for those who wanted to extol the voice of the English Bard to enforce and justify a white, male, anglocentric/protestant/suprematist discourse.

In due time, the volume took its present shape, and we are grateful to its authors for dealing with quotations in the light of pivotal issues, like the use of Shakespeare as a celebrated source of literary, moral, and political authority; as eminent spokesman for nationalism and military action; as the

‘great educator’ of both Western citizens and colonial subjects; as the reassuring tutelary deity who brings order to a chaotic present; and, finally, as a matchless creative force at the basis of modern language and literature. This short introduction to the volume is meant to go through the various critical issues discussed in the book’s six chapters and make explicit the connections between them.

The topic of Shakespearean quotations as sources of absolute authority – quotations to which, paradoxically, that same authority is repeatedly conferred by the very act of quoting – permeates the whole volume. It is possible to address the issue of the dual nature of quotations by reflecting on the alternative meanings of the phrase “empowering Shakespeare”. With ‘empowering’ intended as an adjective, authority descends from the playwright and informs, as from above, the words of others; used as a verb, that same term underlines the complementary effect that quotations have on their source texts: they empower them by acknowledging their notoriety, their necessity, and ultimately their prestige. In the case of William Shakespeare, this double movement has gone on for centuries, and its effects are still singularly poetic.

With a view to investigating the conservative quality of quotations, Shakespeare’s literary and moral authority have always been in close relation. Given the cultural pre-eminence of the English playwright throughout the centuries, all contributors to the volume have addressed the issue of Shakespeare as a moral guide, both in favour and against ideological and political conformity. In the case of Luigi Marfé’s chapter, which deals with cultural propaganda during the First World War, there is a total correspondence between culture, nation, and the moral standing of the British subjects, who are expected to respond readily and proudly to their country’s call. In fact, Marfé reminds us that besides the British use of Shakespeare to exploit his “symbolic capital” for the purposes of war

propaganda, there were other European countries – first and foremost the German enemy – which retraced the steps of their country’s history through a “nostrification” of the English Bard, and capitalised on a foreign literary tradition made domestic. A similar protean attitude towards the symbolic and moral value of the playwright’s words is shown in Giuliana Iannaccaro’s chapter on early twentieth-century quotations from Shakespeare by mission-educated South African writers. In that case, the link between a foreign, dominant literary tradition and the moral authority attached to it proved indispensable to uphold the missionaries’ claims not only to cultural superiority but, even more importantly, to the necessity of their moralising action. Moreover, together with anglophone missionaries, also their native alumni concurred in the celebration of Shakespeare as the paramount literary model and ethical guide.

Marfe’s and Iannaccaro’s case studies can also be put in dialogue addressing the question of nationalism. Germany appropriated the English playwright’s words to sustain its belligerent cause in the Great War, thus glorifying the nation in the name of a literary tradition that was not the country’s own (although previously acquired through the reading of the great Romantics). Similarly, coeval South African writers used Shakespeare in the name of their occupied land, and Herbert Dhlomo, the author addressed in this volume, was particularly keen on ‘ventriloquising’ his cherished English literary source to shape and justify his vision of a peaceful South African nation to come, liberated from violence, discrimination, and oppression. Dhlomo, in addition, wrote almost exclusively in English because his nationalistic drive was more important to him than supporting native languages. The linguistic colonisation that centuries of anglophone domination had bestowed on the country could at least be exploited to achieve what, according to many South African intellectuals, would otherwise have been impossible: that is, the shaping of

a nation sharing one common language, which made it possible not only to communicate among different ethnic groups but also, for the people, to feel part of a new whole. The issue of language as an element of national cohesion and nationalistic pride connects us to Iolanda Plescia's chapter, in which the question of Shakespeare as "the father of English" is investigated from a revisionist perspective: the myths of Shakespeare's matchless lexical inventiveness and of the exceptional size of his vocabulary are peculiarly resilient, in spite of the quantity and quality of studies that have problematised both assertions. Undoubtedly, the propensity to attribute (also) a linguistic pre-eminence to the most celebrated English playwright goes hand in hand with what Plescia defines as a "narrative of greatness". If the early modern period is to be considered as "*the* period in which English 'came into its own'", then the myth of Shakespeare as a "primary cause of change" perfectly fits the need of a prestigious forefather; indeed, that myth has fed the nationalistic agenda for a long time, and still proves very hard to dismiss.

Luigi Marfé's and Maria Grazia Dongu's chapters are closely related from another viewpoint: both discuss the exploitation of the Shakespearean icon in the context of the Great War. If Marfé, as mentioned above, studies the practice of quoting Shakespeare for political and military reasons, Dongu's essay investigates the friction between war propaganda – celebrating an idealised Britannia which defends itself from evil – and the ensuing reflection on the reality of war. In Virginia Woolf's and Frederic Manning's war novels, the role of Shakespeare as the great demystifier of deceptive ideologies is counterbalanced by the side effects that quotations from his plays have on the reader: at least temporarily, the fragments singled out from the Bard's plays and recontextualised in the narratives do stand for the voice of established power, reminding the reader of Shakespeare's pivotal role in enforcing the British subjects' ready response

to their country's call. The same happens in Andrea Peghinelli's discussion of the much more recent *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, a play written by Tim Crouch in 2012. Indissolubly related to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the twenty-first-century play radically appropriates and recontextualises Shakespeare; by so doing, it also celebrates it in its orthodox form. In Peghinelli's words, "the incidence of certain quotations – whether intentional, casual, or disembodied – emphasises the conservative authority of the Shakespearean text and therefore its capacity to provide iconic models of symbolic or political signification".

There is a last aspect related to Shakespearean quotations that connects the volume's chapters: namely, the image of the English playwright as the 'principle' that brings order to a chaotic present. In Dorothy Sayers' literary world, investigated by Alessandra Petrina, chaos intrudes suddenly on an otherwise ordered universe in the form of murder. In accordance with the conventions of early twentieth-century detective fiction, only the specially gifted (and well-read) investigator will finally be able to put things back in their place by restoring law and order. In the case of Sayers, literary authority and detective ability are even more closely associated: a sophisticated knowledge of literary classics, over which William Shakespeare predictably towers, helps the detective to interpret the signs that murderers leave behind; in Petrina's words, "Shakespearean quotations in general are often the clue to the crime, or to the identity of the culprit". Moreover, Sayers uses the playwright's icon as an "infallible compass in the detection not so much of crime, but of the principle of right and wrong". Thus, the figure of Shakespeare as a moral guide – discussed at the beginning of this introduction – resurfaces here in the form of an ethical compass present both within and without the literary world. Sayers uses Shakespeare to convey to her readers an underlying moral message that concerns not only fiction but also life; similarly, as we have seen, the

relevance of Shakespeare as a moralising force appears in Marfé's, Dongu's, and Iannaccaro's chapters. Going back to the question of order and chaos, Tim Crouch's contemporary dramatic world is also morally confused, and Peghinelli makes clear that the recourse to Shakespearean quotations helps the audience to confront the critical issues of the play; these have to do first and foremost with the concepts of authority and authorship, both of which are problematised by the character of Cinna. The task of finding answers to the play's questions is entrusted to the young audiences for whom it was written, who are, in addition, personally involved in the performance. Peghinelli remarks that only a few fragments of the source text survive in Crouch's appropriation; nevertheless, "Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is still *the text* from which the protagonist quotes – and sometimes misquotes – at topical moments, thus preserving its authority as a model and its iconic power".

The contributors to "*A Glass of Godly Form*": *Shakespeare as the Voice of Established Power* successfully remind us of the conservative nature of quotations in an age that has been working on adaptations, transpositions, parodies, and appropriations on an unprecedented scale. Together with the reinvigorating power of derivative texts and their remarkable capacity to challenge religious, political, and cultural establishments, the other side of the coin – the use of well-known literary sources to enforce domination – still persists. In the case of Shakespeare, the creative force of his literary production is such a worldwide phenomenon that it is impossible to keep track of its daily growth. And yet, quotations from his plays 'strike back' and legitimate power at the same time: they can speak forcefully against oppression *and* support established authority, even unintentionally. Indeed, each line from Shakespeare, 'casual' and decontextualised as it may be, takes us back to those myths – of greatness, of origin, of unchallenged authority – we still live by.



GIULIANA IANACCARO

**“THE BOERS OR THE ENGLISH... THAT IS NOT
THE QUESTION”: THE SHAKESPEAREAN
TRAGEDY IN HERBERT DHLOMO’S “DINGANE”**

1. *Dhlomo and Shakespeare*

In his historical plays, the Zulu writer and journalist Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo (1903-56) made reference to William Shakespeare’s dramatic works in more than one way. *Richard III*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest* are present in Dhlomo’s plays either as unattributed quotations – thus implying an ideal readership sharing a common literary background – or, even more conspicuously, as structural models, albeit thoroughly recontextualised. In the particular case of *Dingane*, a historical tragedy depicting the parable of the eponymous nineteenth-century Zulu King, prophecy, betrayal, murder and vengeance constitute the main *topoi* around which the action revolves; the backbone of the play is clearly *Macbeth*, even if explicit references to

Julius Caesar and *Hamlet* can also be found.¹ Among Dhlomo's other dramatic historical works – *The Girl Who Killed to Save*, *Ntsikana*, *Cetshwayo*, and *Moshoeshoe*² – *Cetshwayo* is the play that engages with Shakespeare the most. The motifs of power, conspiracy, dissimulation, betrayal, and revenge – together with the potency of prophecies, curses, and ghosts – all find their place in a tragedy that stages the rise and fall of the last independent king of the Zulus, before the final victory of the British forces in 1879. The quotation in the title is taken from *Cetshwayo*: it is unequivocally built on Hamlet's "To be, or not to be; that is the question" (III, 1, 58), arguably the most famous line in the whole Shakespearean dramatic corpus. In Scene Four, Bafikile, a young Zulu woman, tries to suggest caution in dealing with white people to the powerful but unwise Cetshwayo: "The Boers or the English... that is not the question. The question is, the white people or we. [...] Blood speaks to blood. The English and the Boers may fraternise in the end, and both stand against us".³ Before

¹ Tim Couzens remarks that "The play is modelled on *Macbeth*" and that "The equivalent of Macduff is Jeqe" in his groundbreaking monograph *The New African. A Study of the Life and Work of H. I. E. Dhlomo*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985, p. 318. Elmar Lehmann, following Couzens, mentions *Macbeth* as the source of *Dingane*, and argues that "nemesis rules over [the Zulu Chief's] reign" (*Colonial to Post-Colonial South African-Style. The Plays of H. I. E. Dhlomo*, in *Imagination and the Creative Impulse in the New Literatures in English*, ed. by M. T. Bindella and G. V. Davis, "Cross / Cultures", IX, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1993, p. 116).

² Dhlomo's historical plays were presumably written between 1935 and 1937; during his lifetime, the author succeeded in publishing only *The Girl Who Killed to Save*, which was issued by Lovedale Press in 1935. In addition to the five titles mentioned above, there is evidence of two lost plays by him, similarly dealing with the legendary life of great South African chiefs: *Shaka* and *Mfolozi*. See Couzens, *The New African*, cit., p. 125. Dhlomo also wrote less 'Shakespearean' plays dealing with coeval and highly controversial political and social questions, as some of their titles suggest: *The Living Dead*, *The Pass*, *The Workers*, and *Malaria*.

³ H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, ed. by N. W. Visser and T. Couzens, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985, pp. 140-141. Dhlomo wrote his plays during the 'Union' years (1910-1948), when, in the wake of the South African War, the formerly

the girl's speech, Cetshwayo himself had addressed Bafikile in Shakespearean words: the Zulu king's lines "Thou art raging mad. Man's business unsexes you",⁴ are reminiscent of Lady Macbeth's cry to the evil spirits ("unsex me here", I, 5, 40), meant to render her masculine and merciless in front of the idea of murder.

Some of *Cetshwayo*'s Shakespearean echoes have been noticed by the relatively few critical investigations of Dhlomo's dramatic production; generally speaking, that play has drawn more attention than the others, probably because of its direct engagement with South Africa's early-twentieth-century political issues. The aim of Dhlomo in historical writing was artistic, didactic, and nationalistic at the same time: besides giving vent to his literary vein, he meant to provide a counter-discourse to the official, colonial version of the South African past, conceived and disseminated by white historiography. Indeed, his story of the last independent Zulu king, correctly situated in the second half of the nineteenth century, raises questions that pertain even more strongly to the following decades, when the white Union government (1910-1948) excluded native South African citizens from the possession of their land and took highly discriminatory socio-political measures. Tim Couzens dedicates ten pages to *Cetshwayo* in *The New African. A Study of the Life and Work of H. I. E. Dhlomo*,⁵ but pays no similar attention to *Dingane*, which is more briefly discussed.⁶ Bhekizizwe Peterson remarks that "In both *Dingane* and *Cetshwayo* the

independent provinces had been united under a coalition government shared by British and Afrikaners. Bafikile's words are thus meant to be prophetic and anticipate a grim future, which is, indeed, the playwright's present.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁵ T. Couzens, *The New African. A Study of the Life and Work of H. I. E. Dhlomo*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985, pp. 125-134.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 318-319.

influence of Shakespeare and Renaissance drama are fairly marked”;⁷ accordingly, he highlights the parallels between *Macbeth* and *Cetshwayo* and, like Couzens, dedicates almost ten pages to the exclusive investigation of the latter play. By dealing mainly with *Dingane*, I wish to bestow more critical attention on a play which is nevertheless one of the Zulu writer’s most ‘Shakespearean’ dramatic works – a play over which Shakespeare’s great tragedies loom as unavoidable presences, both as repositories of quotations and as structuring models, as we shall see.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to do justice to the pervasiveness of Shakespearean references and unattributed quotations in Herbert Dhlomo’s vast literary production. The line of investigation proposed here, after an introduction to the cultural context in which the author wrote, provides a reading of *Dingane* as a representative text, useful to explore both the extent and the typology of Shakespearean echoes in the Zulu writer’s dramatic works. Together with the literary investigation of the play, an inquiry into the political significance of the British canonical tradition in the writer’s literary production is also proposed. As we shall see, Dhlomo’s play is not built on the mere imitation of Shakespeare, but represents an autonomous and complex literary proposal, which is conservative *and* challenging at the same time. His choice to write in English was a deliberate didactic option to promote the emergence of a

⁷ B. Peterson, *Monarchs, Missionaries and African Intellectuals. African Theatre and the Unmaking of Colonial Marginality*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2000, p. 200. Peterson contends that the significance of Renaissance theatre for Dhlomo lay in “the dramas’ encapsulation of the Elizabethan-Jacobean interrogation and scepticism towards providential belief and their concomitant critique of social power” (*ibidem*); he also points out that “in a number of crucial moments in Dhlomo’s plays his language and style of representation are clearly indebted to English Romantic poetry” (*ibidem*). Indeed, Dhlomo’s historical drama also combines tragedy with romantic comedy and with other comedy-like features, both linguistic and thematic. The discussion of these aspects, however, lies beyond the terms of reference of the present article.

'new' South African citizen, spurred by literature to acquire the allegedly superior culture of the white man, overcome tribalism and superstition, and take over both the control of his life and the government of his country. Such an agenda was, in itself, relatively moderate: instead of racial conflict, Dhlomo endorsed integration between blacks and whites, and was highly suspicious of left-wing political proposals;⁸ at the same time, he was radically anti-racist. Likewise, through his imitation of Shakespeare and other canonical English writers (especially the Romantic poets), he acknowledged the worth of the British literary tradition and the importance to learn how to write from foreign models, in view of the creation of a national literary corpus; nevertheless, he was also able to re-invent Shakespeare's tragedies to celebrate the African past and advocate for unity and national pride. Dhlomo's political stances are fruit of compromises as well as of an idealistic vision of society; they cannot be understood in terms of 'conformism vs. radicalism', and the same can be said for his ambivalent use of the English language and literary tradition. Studying quotations can foster understanding of the ideological and cultural climate of those decades by discouraging oversimplified critical interpretations; indeed, the widespread practice of quoting from British texts on the part of early twentieth-century black writers and intellectuals cannot be easily classified according to well-defined political categories, like 'conservative', 'progressive', or 'radical'. By borrowing the words of Shakespeare, Bacon, Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Wilde, African authors both acknowledged (and

⁸ As early as 1929, Dhlomo the journalist would write: "The Natives should not mistake the disciples of destructive systems and doctrines as advocates of socialism. For while socialism aims at a properly organised society, Communism means a society where all men are equal in all things, and say and do what they please anytime, anywhere. Where Communism exists, pandemonium reigns". *Socialism*, in "Umteteli wa Bantu", January 19, 1929, p. 1.

reinforced) the cultural superiority of the establishment in power *and* appropriated its language and literary tradition to protest against oppression. Since the critical field revolving around the deliberate, political appropriation of the dominant cultural tradition by the dominated has been thoroughly investigated in the last decades, I will try to highlight the much more nuanced, and at times ambiguous effects that the use of Shakespeare on the part of mission-educated black intellectuals – living and writing between two worlds – actually produced.⁹

2. *Mission Shakespeares*

Before addressing *Dingane*, a brief introduction to the cultural panorama in which Herbert Dhomo lived proves indispensable, since he was by no means the only mission-educated author who, in the first half of the twentieth century, wrote in English for both an African and a European readership, at the same time celebrating and questioning an imposed foreign cultural tradition.¹⁰ The figure of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje

⁹ It is worth mentioning a few more and less recent contributions that focus specifically on South African Shakespeare and engage with the early 20th century: D. Johnson, *Shakespeare in South Africa*, Oxford [Clarendon Press, 1996], Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011 (chapters 3 and 4 deal with the early twentieth century and the 1930s in particular); N. Distiller, *South Africa, Shakespeare, and Post-Colonial Culture*, Lewiston and Lampeter, The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005 (chapter 3 on the first decades of the 20th century); B. Willan, *Whose Shakespeare? Early Black South African Engagement with Shakespeare*, in “Shakespeare in Southern Africa”, XXIV, 2012, pp. 3-24; A. Seeff, *South Africa’s Shakespeare and the Drama of Language and Identity*, London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018 (chapter 3 on the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries).

¹⁰ On Herbert Dhomo, his cultural and political milieu and his eclectic literary production, see, among others, *H. I. E. Dhomo: Literary Theory and Criticism*, in “English in Africa” (Special Issue), edited by N. W. Visser, IV, 2, 1977; T. Couzens, *The New African*, cit.; N. Masilela, *The Cultural Modernity of H. I. E. Dhomo*, Trenton, Africa World Press, 2007; B. Peterson, *The Black Bulls of H. I. E. Dhomo: Ordering*

(1876–1932) is better-known to cultural and literary critics, both for his deep socio-political commitment to the South African cause and for his outstanding linguistic and literary accomplishments. Plaatje's translations of Shakespeare into Setswana promoted that language and its culture also among white intellectuals, besides bearing testimony to his love and regard for the Bard's works.¹¹ As for creative writing, Thomas Mofolo's novel *Chaka* allegedly draws on *Macbeth*, like Dhlomo's *Dingane*; written in SeSotho at the beginning of the century, it was published in 1925 and translated into English in 1931 with the title: *Chaka, an Historical Romance*.¹² Unlike Plaatje and Mofolo, Dhlomo adopted English as his

History out of Nonsense, in "English in Africa", XVIII, 1991, pp. 25-49; B. Peterson, *Monarchs, Missionaries and African Intellectuals*, cit. A very recent collective study of Dhlomo's works, investigated according to the literary genres they belong to (and their betrayal), can be found in *Thinking Out of the Box in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by R. Coronato, M. Parlati and A. Petrina, Padova, Padova University Press, 2021, pp. 223-298.

¹¹ Plaatje allegedly translated five plays by Shakespeare into English, but only his *Diphosho-phosho* (*The Comedy of Errors*) and *Dintshontsho tsa Bo Julius Kesara* (*Julius Caesar*) have survived. The first was published in 1930 in the *Bantu Treasury Series*, a series of 'Bantu literature' volumes issued by the Lovedale Press (see R. H. W. Shepherd, *Lovedale and Literature for the Bantu. A Brief History and a Forecast*, Lovedale, Lovedale Press, 1945, p. 35); the second appeared posthumously, published by the University of the Witwatersrand. On Plaatje's Shakespeare there is a distinguished body of scholarship; among others, see S. Gray, *Plaatje's Shakespeare*, in "English in Africa", IV, 1977, 1, pp. 1-6; T. Couzens, *A Moment in the Past: William Tsikinya-Chaka*, in "Shakespeare in Southern Africa", II, 1988, pp. 60-66; N. Distiller, *South Africa, Shakespeare*, cit., chapter 3; B. Willan, *Whose Shakespeare?*, cit.; A. Seeff, *South Africa's Shakespeare*, cit., chapter 3. Plaatje also wrote *A South African's Homage* in *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare*, ed. by I. Gollancz, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1916, pp. 336-339, commemorating the tercentenary of William Shakespeare's death in 1916; on Plaatje's contribution, see D. Johnson, *Shakespeare in South Africa*, cit., chapter 3 and B. Willan, "A South African's Homage" at *One Hundred: Revisiting Sol Plaatje's Contribution to the Book of Homage to Shakespeare (1916)*, in "Shakespeare in Southern Africa", XXVIII, 2016, pp. 1-19.

¹² The novel was also translated into French in 1940. See M. Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*, London, Longman, 2003, p. 211 and *passim*; C. Heywood, *A History*

literary language for didactic and political reasons, as mentioned before; yet, it is worth noting that his historical plays, *Dingane* included, are interpolated with greetings, exclamations, whole sentences, and even complete poems in isiZulu. The writer was also careful to uphold the oral tradition of the ‘izibongo’ (praise poem) by introducing many songs and poems in praise of people, animals, and landscapes in his dramatic works.¹³

The mission-educated generations of African intellectuals who lived and wrote before the apartheid period came in contact with European literary icons of the stature of Shakespeare very early in their school years, probably using the same reductions, adaptations, and ‘readers’ available to young children in the missionaries’ mother countries. Within the anglophone missionary context, children were introduced to Shakespearean plays through the more and less recent ‘stories from Shakespeare’ that were being massively exported worldwide. For instance, in the 1938 bulletin of the Transvaal branch of the Carnegie Non-European Library,¹⁴ the librarian

of South African Literature, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 95-96; B. Peterson, *Black Writers and the Historical Novel*, in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. by D. Attwell and D. Attridge, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 296. L. Balogun draws on Heywood and discusses the parallel between the Zulu epic story and *Macbeth*, highlighting the dramatisation of power, violence, and the role of the supernatural in the novel; see *Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa: Shakespeare, Thomas Mofolo’s Chaka, and Welcome Msomi’s uMabatha: The Zulu Macbeth*, in “Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies”, X, 2017, pp. 36-54.

¹³ In *Dingane*, Scene Two is almost entirely devoted to the celebration of the beauty of Zululand and its language: Jeqe’s beloved, Nosi, who is a Swazi young woman, gives voice to an enraptured commendation of the Zulu tongue, which is paradoxically uttered in English and in response to a long ‘Zulu’ poem in hexameters recited by Jeqe in English: “Nosi: How wonderful the Zulu tongue! It is both strong and full of stabbing music” (p. 74).

¹⁴ The Carnegie Non-European Library was a branch of the Carnegie Corporation, a philanthropic trust founded in New York in 1911 by Andrew Carnegie for the advancement of knowledge. A. Seef, in chapter 3 of her *South Africa’s Shakespeare*, remarks that the miscellaneous volumes that reached the Cape Colony from Britain already in the 1830s “included the ‘Beauties of Shakspeare’ [*sic*], Lamb’s

lists Thomas Carter's *Stories from Shakespeare* in the children section, together with U.W. Cutler's *Stories from King Arthur and his Knights*, S. Cunnington's *Stories from Dante*, and H. L. Havell's *Stories from Don Quixote, Stories from the Aeneid, and Stories from the Odyssey*.¹⁵ The compiler of the 1938 bulletins was very probably Herbert Dhlomo himself, who had been appointed librarian-organiser of the Carnegie Non-European Library in Johannesburg from 1937 to 1940. As Tim Couzens remarks, that cultural institution was in operation in the Transvaal since 1931 and provided books for both educational and recreational reading.¹⁶

Teenagers and young men, instead, both at a secondary level of education and in teacher training colleges, read Shakespeare's literary production in unabridged editions, and the practice of quoting by heart lines from his plays was widespread. Dan Twala, a contemporary of Herbert Dhlomo who studied at the Lovedale missionary school in the 1920s, still remembered the syllabus at the time of an interview he had with Tim Couzens (July 26, 1979); the reading list, according to Couzens, was very likely similar to the Amanzimtoti Training institute where Dhlomo studied, because "the educated elite was receiving very much the same schooling and values all round the country".¹⁷ The Shakespearean syllabus at Lovedale consisted of plays such as *The Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Tempest* – Shakespeare and the Romantic poets being "the most important section of the course"¹⁸. In Twala's words:

Tales from Shakespeare, The Shakespeare Gallery, 'elegantly bound,' and Bowdler's *Family Shakespeare*" (cit., p. 51).

¹⁵ Bulletin of the Carnegie Non-European Library, Transvaal, n. 1, May 1938, pp. 3-4. On textbooks and readers in the Eastern Cape mission schools see also B. Willan, *Whose Shakespeare?*, cit., pp. 17-18 and *passim*.

¹⁶ T. Couzens, *The New African*, cit., pp. 101 and 199.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

“I used to boast being able to quote to the other students,’ says Dan Twala. ‘*Et tu, Brute*. All those little things we got from Shakespeare, we used to repeat them outside. *How now, Malvolio?* [...] Since the scholars were being ‘civilised’ and the language of civilisation was English, a knowledge of the ‘peaks’ of the literature of that language was a distinct status symbol.’ Asked how this all came about, Dan Twala replied, ‘It was our teachers influencing us more than anything else because everybody thought if you can’t say anything about Shakespeare then you don’t know English’”.¹⁹

Isabel Hofmeyr’s essay *Why Mandela Quotes Shakespeare*²⁰ helps investigate the conception and the role of literature in missionary-school classrooms and in the so-called ‘debating societies’, created within the most distinguished and well-resourced educational institutions. Literary quotations were, as Dan Twala remembered, “a sign of erudition and eloquence”;²¹ moreover, the most politically-engaged African students tried to convert missionary literary societies into political forums, in order to

“develop and practice the requisite rhetorical skills so as to take their place as scions of the African elite. In this configuration, literature came to be defined as a source of maxim and motto, a domain for fossicking quotation. By contrast, for most teachers, literature properly functioned as a secular evangelical force, a quasi-religious domain which would moralize leisure time, instill virtue, and uplift its readers”.²²

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ I. Hofmeyr, *Reading/Debating, Debating/Reading: The Case of the Lovedale Literary Society, or Why Mandela Quotes Shakespeare*, in *Africa’s Hidden Histories. Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, ed. by K. Barber, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006, pp. 258-277.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 260-61. On the spreading of debating societies in South Africa in the 1930s, see Rev. Ray E. Phillips’s comment in the above-mentioned “Transvaal Carnegie Non-European Library’s Bulletin” (n. 2, July 1938, p. 1): “There is a rapidly increasing interest among African men and women in the Transvaal in debate. On the Witwatersrand there have been formed a dozen Gamma Sigma Clubs which foster debating among other things. Other clubs are being formed on the Reef; at Pretoria, and at Lady Selborne”. See also T. Couzens, *The New African*, cit., pp. 82-124.

Hofmeyr's identification of three main strategies for using quotation by Lovedale alumni is indicative of how African writers and public speakers took advantage of their Euro-centric schooling: quoting a famous sentence at the end of a speech gave emphasis to the whole rhetorical performance, and could be "used as a final flourish which epitomize[d] the key message of the speech".²³ Likewise, dropping in a quotation from time to time without identifying its source "signif[ied] an ideal readership, namely one that [would] instantly recognize these quotations and where they come from".²⁴ Finally, authors could also adopt, besides direct quotations, a specific style or narrative strategy in patent imitation of the mode of writing of a well-known literary forefather (Hofmeyr makes the example of John Bunyan's allegorical narrative in *The Pilgrim's Progress*).²⁵ The present analysis of Dhlomo's *Dingane* brings to the fore the multiple ways in which the Zulu playwright refers to the Shakespearean corpus in his historical works: through faithful or 'distorted' quotations, by imitating the style and lexicon of specific characters in Shakespeare's plays, and, above all, by alluding to the plot and motifs of one or the other Shakespearean tragedy – among which, the story of *Macbeth* is the most consistently followed dramatic pattern in *Dingane*.

3. *Dingane and the great Shakespearean tragedies*

The historical Dingane's reign, which lasted from 1828 to 1840, began in treachery and blood: he killed his half-brother Shaka to seize power over the Zulu tribes, recently united under the latter's 'iron fist';

²³ I. Hofmeyr, *Reading/Debating, Debating/Reading*, cit., p. 272.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

soon after, Dingane also betrayed and murdered his other half-brother, Mhlangana (his accomplice in Shaka's assassination) thus rising to the status of paramount chief of the Zulus. In the eponymous play by Dhlomo, Dingane is equally guilty of double fratricide: in Scene One we see him, together with his brother Mhlangana and Shaka's main servant Mbopha, treacherously murdering the Chief – the import of the almost sacrilegious deed being underlined by Dhlomo through a clear reference to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, as we shall see. In Scene Four, the arch-villain Dingane has both his fellow murderers killed in an escalation of violence that rivals Macbeth's heinous crimes against his king, his kinsmen, and his friends. Both the historical and the fictional Dingane are finally defeated by yet another half-brother of theirs, Mpande, himself a traitor who had sought the alliance and protection of the Afrikaner Voortrekkers to gain power. However, Dhlomo's protagonist does not manage to run away at the end of the decisive fight, as the historical figure allegedly did, but dies off stage at the hands of the hero of the play, Shaka's faithful body servant Jeqe, who is finally able to avenge the untimely death of his great Chief.

Even from a concise outline of the plot, it is not difficult to deduce that *Dingane* is a play deeply soaked in blood and built on conflicts, internecine fights and betrayals; the driving forces of action, as in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, are both greed for power and revenge. In addition, there is yet another essential element that links the tragic parable of the Scottish medieval baron with that of the Zulu nineteenth-century king – namely, the inscrutable force of destiny, personified from the very beginning in both plays by uncanny and amoral figures, clearly reminiscent of the inexorable Greek and Roman goddesses of Fate (the Moirai or Parcae). Shakespeare's witches, or “Weird Sisters”, famously open *Macbeth*, and their prophecies set in motion the ruinous train of events that

leads to disaster. Dhlomo, similarly, has Scene One preceded by a Prologue in verse staging non-specified weaving forces who sing collectively, in the mode of a Greek chorus, the power of indifferent Fate and the vanity of all human endeavours:

“We weave!
We weave!
We sing!
We sing!
The song ‘Tomorrow’,
Of joy or sorrow.
Blind are we,
Weavers free.
[...]
Why wail your anguish?
It is but Fate’s wish.
And no strife
Change it can!
In calm or storm cape,
No soul can Fate ’scape”.²⁶

In the section “Introducing African Authors” of the Carnegie Bulletin, Dhlomo associates the Weird Sisters’ prediction that Banquo’s issue, and not Macbeth’s, would reign over Scotland²⁷ to the nineteenth-century line of Zulu paramount chiefs: “Among the Bantu tribes of South Africa there is no greater succession of kings, perhaps, than the line beginning with Shaka and ending with Dinizulu. [To] Senzangakona

²⁶ H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, cit., pp. 69-70. This play’s opening recalls *Macbeth*’s first scene also stylistically: Dhlomo chooses short verses, often trochaic, for his emissaries of Fate, possibly in imitation of Shakespeare, whose opening scene is in tetrameters, but who has the witches speak in even shorter lines throughout the play. The latter’s fast trochaic pace and incantatory verse are also strongly alliterative, and the same can be said for Dhlomo’s pressing couplets. *Dingane* is written mainly in prose, but it is interpolated by many songs and poems.

²⁷ See *Macbeth*, I, 3, 65 and IV, 1, 128-140.

[Shaka's father] as to Banquo, the fates decreed, 'Thou shalt get kings' and what kings came from those loins!"²⁸

At the end of the Prologue, dramatic action begins under the banner of violence and prophecy. The stage directions recite: "*The scene shows Dingane and Mhlangana holding assagais dripping with blood. Mbopha, who has just drawn out his assagai from Shaka's body, springs back and joins the other two assassins while Shaka says, 'And you, too, Mbopha!'*"²⁹ Shakespeare's Julius Caesar has just three more words to say before dying, besides "Et tu, Brute?", which are: "Then fall, Caesar!" Shaka, instead, is granted one last, though brief, prophetic speech: "Shaka: You kill me, my brothers! You will not reign long. I see foreign white swallows and strange, coming to rule over you. I shall be avenged. Jeqe, my guard, remember me. By Zulu! I speak and swear it! (*He dies*)"³⁰ The prophecy would come true, both historically and fictionally. Mpande's betrayal at the end of *Dingane* and his alliance with the whites is a clear sign of the progressive downfall of the Zulus; in *Cetshwayo*, the unnatural "white swallows" – that is, the Boers and the British – finally defeat the eponymous King's warriors in 1879, thus putting an end to the long series of sanguinary fights called the Anglo-Zulu wars. Shaka's white swallows, by the way, are reminiscent of various Shakespearean avian omens. *Macbeth*'s "temple-haunting martlet", in particular, which nests in the interstices of the murderer's castle, is a kind of bird very similar to the swallow: the fact that its presence is considered a good omen by Duncan, *Macbeth*'s first victim, ironically emphasises the King's total blindness in

²⁸ "Bulletin of the Carnegie Non-European Library, Transvaal", n. 4, December 1938, p. 3.

²⁹ H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, cit., p. 70.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

front of his kinsman's heinous designs.³¹ Shaka's brothers are equally blind to the danger of internal strife and division among the tribes. Towards the end of *Dingane*, the wise Jeqe asks the crucial question: "But must we destroy ourselves, partner the white man and let him come between us? Will this not give him the chance forever to divide and weaken us?"³² This is one of the many instances in which the playwright indirectly spoke to his contemporaries: by putting prophetic words in the mouth of his nineteenth-century characters, he meant to remind his fellow citizens that foreign rule, in history, is frequently preceded by the well-known political strategy of 'divide et impera'.

For the same reason, it is no surprise that Shaka dies honourably at the beginning of the play, since the paramount chief of the Zulus represented, for Dhlomo, a potent symbol of unity among fragmented tribes.³³ Even if he leaves the stage almost immediately, his shadow hovers over both *Dingane* and *Cetshwayo* very much like the ghost of Caesar, who, appearing to Brutus at Sardis and Philippi (Acts IV and V), shows his undiminished power to the fighting republican: "Brutus: 'O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet. / Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords / In our own proper entrails'" (V, 3, 93-95). Dingane feels haunted by Shaka's shadow from beginning to end and at last perceives his antagonist Jeqe as the living manifestation of the great Zulu king: "Dingane: (*In despair*) Ah!

³¹ Lady Macbeth, of course, knows better – in her soliloquy, the bird who welcomes her victim's arrival to the castle is a well-known ill-omen messenger: "The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements" (I, 5, 37-39).

³² H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, cit., p. 105.

³³ Dhlomo used Shaka Zulu's image more than once as a symbol of unity among the Bantu peoples, even if he stigmatised the Chief's violent methods and destructive militarism, which dissipated the energy of the Zulus and caused massive migration. See his article *Tshaka. A Revaluation*, published in the journal "Umteteli wa Bantu", June 18, 1932, http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafire/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/18_6_32.gif.

It is the shadow of Shaka! It has hunted and haunted me ceaselessly, and has tracked me down at last! 'Tis Jeqe! Shaka lives: he is not dead".³⁴ If Shaka is Caesar, then Dingane can be associated with Macbeth in many respects: both traitors are crushed by the bloody images of their victims appearing vividly before their eyes and scaring them to death. If Banquo's ghost shakes his "gory locks" (III, 4, 50) at the usurper during the banquet, Dingane, "*muttering madly to himself*" and "*staring into space*",³⁵ re-experiences with horror Shaka's and Mhlangana's assassinations. Both traitors are shocked by the unnaturalness of their visions and feel mocked by the vexing apparitions; the dismayed Macbeth bursts out:

"The time has been
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end. But now they rise again
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
And push us from our stools.
[...]
Hence, horrible shadow,
Unreal mock'ry, hence!" (III, 4, 77-81 and 105-106).

Similarly, Dingane exclaims in a raving mood: "Horror! O living mockery! O walking memory! Soul that art no soul! Men that are no men! Shadow that is life!"³⁶ At the end of the play, despite their treachery and cruelty, both traitors are granted a dignified death: they face their last fights with martial courage, and the once treacherous Zulu chief, who finally understands that his brother Mpande is giving up his people to the whites, is even elevated to the status of defender of the fatherland: "Dingane: (*Shaking himself from stupor, stands erect and dignified, and raises the*

³⁴ H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, cit., p. 108.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

royal assagai and shield.) 'Tis we or they! Arise, Zulus! Forward! Fight!"³⁷

Before realising his mistake, though, Dhlomo's Dingane plays the part of the ruthless tyrant, like Macbeth; only, he is brutal from the very beginning of the play: his displays of cruelty are untempered by the anguish that Macbeth's conscience inflicts on his vivid imagination both before and after Duncan's death. Immediately after killing his half-brother, Dingane decrees the extermination not only of Jeqe, the fugitive servant, but also of his innocent relatives: "Go now and send warriors to capture him and burn his kraal and kill all his people!"³⁸ In the case of Macbeth, instead, the brutality against his enemies' families emerges only in III, 3, when he hires killers to murder Banquo and his son Fleance, and most notably in IV, 2, when he has Macduff's whole family ruthlessly slaughtered to punish the head of the household's 'betrayal'.

Dingane appears not only as a bloody murderer, but also as an irritable, impulsive, and therefore unreliable king: for instance, he has his own warriors suddenly executed in Scene Four without even giving them the possibility to plead for their lives, because they have been unable to find out the hiding place of Jeqe, Shaka's avenger. Dingane's emotional weakness and irresolution find a Lady Macbeth-like counterpart in his paternal aunt Mkabayi, herself a historical figure who took part in the conspiracy against Shaka. The warlike and politically shrewd woman towers on her male relatives from her first appearance on stage to the end, when she is finally poisoned by Dingane's enemies; she spurs her nephew to action and scorns him for not being manly and steadfast enough. Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth blames her husband for not behaving like a

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

man more than once in the play,³⁹ Mkabayi does the same, but, unlike her Scottish counterpart, she does not eventually succumb to the weight of guilt. On the contrary, in Scene Five, she even takes military action against the Boers, unbeknown to Dingane and his men, whom she considers timorous as children. “There speaks a child!”⁴⁰ exclaims the scornful Mkabayi, just as Lady Macbeth had stigmatised her husband’s fear of Duncan’s stabbed corpse: “Infirm of purpose! / Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures. ’Tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil” (II, 2, 50-53).⁴¹ Mkabayi’s figure, her sinister power and intrigues, are also reminiscent of *Macbeth*’s witches: in Scene One, right after Shaka’s murder, she enters the stage “*roaring with laughter*” and announced by thunder and lightning, just like the Shakespearean Weird Sisters. On that occasion, she immediately makes fun of her nephews’ fear of the rage of the elements, thus setting the tone of her future role in the play, between stateswoman and sorceress:

“Mkabayi: Fools! [...] Why should the elements not rage when such a great one as Shaka dies? You begin your reign as frightened children – and you will remain so always. Ha! Ha! Ha! Kings helpless before the process of nature! (*The two men stand crestfallen while her mad laughter and the raging elements mingle*)”.⁴²

³⁹ See I, 7, 35-61; II, 2, 50-53 and 62-63; III, 4, 72-73.

⁴⁰ H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, cit., p. 96.

⁴¹ Lady Macbeth’s lines resonate in other passages of *Dingane*: the Zulu King, finally crushed by violence, solitude and fear, loses himself in visions of death and utters the following words: “Who ever thought so white and fair a skin had spots all black beneath its surface fair?” (p. 95); the sleep-walking Lady Macbeth betrays her murder by saying “Out, damned spot! out, I say! [...] What, will these hands ne’er be clean? [...] all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (V, 1, 33, 41, 48-49). Indeed, the dichotomy ‘white and fair’ / ‘black’ is also reminiscent of the witches’ “foul and fair” in *Macbeth*, and it pervades the lines of *Othello*.

⁴² H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, cit., p. 71.

Before passing on to the figure of Jeqe, who presents many traits in common with the Shakespearean Macduff, it is worth remarking that *Dingane* stages another strong female figure next to Mkabayi, who plays double roles. Indeed, Mawa is Mkabayi's counterpart for several reasons: firstly, because she is her sister but lives under the false name of Ntombazi in another country, Swaziland; secondly, because of her part in the conspiracy against Dingane, whom Mkabayi instead supports; and lastly, because she is at the same time a healer (presented as a "Renowned teacher of herbal lore" in the list of characters) and the vengeful Senecan woman, who lives only to punish Mkabayi and Dingane, "as foul a pair of nation-breakers as ever lived".⁴³ She is the one who welcomes the fugitive Jeqe in the land of the Swazi people,⁴⁴ where she herself had found refuge to escape Dingane's rage, and helps him, in the end, to go back to Zululand and avenge his murdered chief, Shaka. The character of Mawi-Ntombazi wavers between the irrational fury who precipitates disaster and the tragic figure who loves her land, tries to redress the mistakes of its leaders, and honourably kills herself in the last scene. However, in order to take revenge on Dingane she chooses the wrong ally, Mpande; at the end of the play, her potentially heroic role is belittled by Jeqe, who is finally confirmed as the only rightful moral authority in the play.⁴⁵

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁴ Swaziland plays an important role in Dhlomo's play, which is set in a period of increasing tension and warfare among the many competing forces for the ownership of the region: the warlike Zulus, the equally expanding Swazi people, the Afrikaner Voortrekkers in search of land and cattle, and the British colonising forces. For the relationships between Zulus and Swazis under the historical Dingane's reign and the following chieftainship of his brother Mpande, see P. Bonner, *Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires. The Evolution and Dissolution of the Nineteenth-Century Swazi State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, chapters 3 and 4.

⁴⁵ To the twenty-first-century reader, the sexist undertone of Jeqe's words sounds gratuitous: on the one hand, he acknowledges the nobility of Mawa's intentions and her

The characters of Jeqe and Macduff are similar in many respects, as anticipated above, and not only because they oppose the usurping Kings and ultimately kill them, but also because they flee from the tyrants' rage and seek help in another country: Macduff reaches Duncan's firstborn Malcolm in England, at the court of Edward the Confessor, and Jeqe flees to Swaziland to King Ngwane, where he finds refuge and plans Shaka's revenge. Both of them are perceived as harbingers of death by the regicides: Macbeth sees his own fears reflected in the first supernatural Apparition's warning, "Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth, beware Macduff; / Beware the Thane of Fife" (IV, 1, 87-88); Jeqe depicts Dingane as a coward in front of an equally pusillanimous Swazi King: "Jeqe: My lord, he is a cracking, shivering reed! He fears me as he fears death".⁴⁶ The two 'angels of death' fight and kill the usurpers at the end of the play; the real Dingane managed to escape after Mpande's victory in 1840, but of course his death on the battlefield at the hands of Shaka's avenger was dramatically much more effective than the historical truth. Having Shaka avenged by Jeqe, just like Macbeth is executed by Macduff, allowed Dhlomo to capitalise on Shakespeare's figures and elevate his hero to the role of an instrument of Nemesis.

courage; on the other, he downplays her heroism and even attributes the futility of seeking revenge to her being a woman: "To think that she still thought of love and loved its kingdom false! Ah! sex is sex and woman is woman! [...] To think that such a noble life was lit and held together, dominated and propelled by this one flimsy common thing – revenge! Ah! vanity of all!" (p. 112). A survey of Dhlomo's conception of and relationship with women exceeds the scope of the present article, but T. Couzen's literary biography of the Zulu writer, *The New African* (cit.) provides several insights into his private life. Moreover, Dhlomo's (controversial) opinions on women can be inferred from many of his journal articles; see, for instance, *Bantu Womanhood*, published in "Umteteli wa Bantu" (May 10, 1930), where he writes: "They [women] should know that though physiologically, emotionally, and perhaps psychologically different to [*sic*] man, they are none the less man's equal".

⁴⁶ H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, cit., p. 110.

Not only *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* pervade *Dingane's* structure, themes, and language: through the character of Mpande, the most distinctive feature of Hamlet Prince of Denmark, that is his simulated madness, finds a place in the Zulu play. Mpande is 'Hamletic' in some respects, but not in others: he feigns madness to seize power, while the Shakespearean Prince shunned the court's intrigues and ostentation; nevertheless, Mpande's feigned madness to avoid suspicion allows him to conspire against his brother Dingane from within his kraal, not unlike Hamlet, who weighs up and finally opposes his own family as a distinguished member of the royal house. Mpande 'the fool', moreover, is suspected by Dingane's Induna ('advisor') Ndlela, who gives voice to his mistrust in words which, if not the exact citation of Polonius' lines, are still strongly reminiscent of them and have the effect of an indirect quotation: "I hate this Mpande, and see sanity in his insanity".⁴⁷ Of course, Polonius' aside, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (II, 2, 207-208), has the same function of detecting clear signs of rational, consequential reasoning in the Prince's seemingly rambling speeches.

If the fratricide Dingane understands his mistake and partially redeems himself before his death, the treacherous Mpande plays the part of the unrepentant Renaissance villain, the traitor of his people, who sides with the Boers and fatally divides the Zulu tribes. He paradoxically stigmatises his own execrable deeds in a long speech addressed to Jeqe, which is reminiscent of the various passages in which Iago lays bare to Roderigo, or to the audience, his devious ways and his ruinous plotting against Othello.⁴⁸ Yet, Mpande's self-incrimination has a strong moral

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ See *Othello* I, 1, 41-65; I, 3, 375-396; II, 1, 285-311; II, 3, 44-59; II, 3, 327-353.

undertone that Iago's lines do not even imply; the following passage ends up conveying a somewhat inconsistent picture of the villain of the play:

“Is it not sheer insanity to wreck and ruin my own King and brother; to win over and be a partner with the hateful, hating whites; to do something that must help destroy my own people – and all this in spite of great Shaka's wise words of warning? I do not like to do all these things, but I cannot help myself! I am not responsible for my actions. I am mad! Mad! Stark mad! Ha, ha, ha!”⁴⁹

This is not the only instance in which Dhlomo's dramatic characters are used as mouthpieces for relevant moral issues, no matter their role in the plot; Mpande had to formulate an unequivocal denunciation of his own deeds in order to send a clear message to the audience/readers of the play. The fact that the above-quoted lines impair the consistency of the figure of the villain – which remains inconclusive, since at that point Mpande leaves the stage for good – was less crucial for the playwright than the explicitness of the moral message he wanted to convey to his public.⁵⁰

Questions of character consistency also concern Dingane, not so much because he opens the play as a ruthless traitor of his King and dies defending his fatherland, but rather because his lines sometimes betray a tone of ‘unwitting foolishness’ that hardly matches his tragic role. In order to clarify this point, it is necessary to go back to Macbeth. The Shakespearean protagonist follows a regular ‘path of nothingness’

⁴⁹ H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, cit., p. 105.

⁵⁰ Dhlomo believed in the superiority of plays written for reading, rather than for acting: “We must strive to build great, lasting literary drama, and not be carried away by the desire to produce plays that [...] act well and are good for immediate, commercial purposes only [...] the greatest drama of all time is literary” (*Why Study Tribal Dramatic Forms?*, in “Transvaal Native Education Quarterly”, March 1939, pp. 20-24; reprinted in *H. I. E. Dhlomo: Literary Theory and Criticism*, cit., p. 38). On the relationship between didacticism and character consistency in Dhlomo's historical plays, see G. Iannaccaro, *The Teacher and the Bard: Herbert Dhlomo's Historical Drama*, in *Thinking Out of the Box*, ed. by R. Coronato, M. Parlanti and A. Petrina, cit., pp. 225-242.

throughout the play, which brings him from an emotional and mental condition of puzzlement to utter nihilism: the "nothing is / But what is not" (I, 3, 140-141) of his first, perplexed soliloquy leaves space to the "To be thus is nothing / But to be safely thus" (III, 1, 49-50) of the anxious tyrant, and is finally substituted by the "Signifying nothing" (V, 5, 27) of the disillusioned nihilistic philosopher, who has reached a state of total indifference towards human existence, ultimately considered meaningless.⁵¹ Dingane's very long speech in front of his perplexed Induna, which is clearly meant to mimic (or to parody?) the philosophical profundity of Hamletic-Macbethian monologues, entraps the reader into a tangle of tautologies and antitheses that appear nonsensical and ultimately ludicrous. Given the length of Dingane's speech, only some exemplary excerpts can be quoted here:

"Dingane [after having decreed the search parties' death because they have come back with no news of Jeqe]: Now, what do the dying fools say? To report nothing means nothing. And failure means nothing. And nothing is nothing. It does not exist. It is not life. It is dead if it ever lived. Yet it could not have died if it were nothing and never lived. For nothing is void. But if death and the dead are not nothing, then life and the living are nothing. For death and life are opposites and not alike. If one is nothing, the other is something. Or are we wrong? Are they one and the same thing? If nothing is something, then what is something? [...] What, then, is nothing? It seems something. Nothing ever was. Nothing is. For we are nothing and yet we live. [...] And who here dares say I talk nothing and am nothing because I am dealing with nothing and saying nothing?"⁵²

⁵¹ Apart from the lines in which the main character utters the words 'nothing' or 'nothingness', many other passages in *Macbeth* keep up the play's peculiar structure based on antitheses and the progressive loss of life's meaning. For instance, after Duncan's murder Lady Macbeth observes: "Naught's had, all's spent, / Where our desire is got without content" (III, 2, 6-7); Macbeth's address to the witches in IV, 1, 66-77 contemplates universal destruction, as well as his "I 'gin to be aweary of the sun, / And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone" (V, 5, 47-48).

⁵² H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, cit., p. 92.

The whole monologue is so awkward that only a humorous turn could redeem it; indeed, the comical lines finally appear and conclude Dingane's tirade, when he addresses the bewildered Nzobo: "'Dingane: Let us hear the nothing that is coming and examine it closely for it may lead to something. Nothing is the pregnant womb of everything. Nzobo, speak.' 'Nzobo: Nothing ... I – I mean s-something'".⁵³ A more Macbethian kind of 'nothing' appears in the next scene, when the Zulu King, aware of the impending disaster – a suicidal fight against the Boers and Mpande's allied forces – perceives the flimsiness of human life. His "I am a shadow – nothing!"⁵⁴ sounds like a reduced version of the much more imaginative and resonant soliloquy of the disillusioned Macbeth:

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing" (V, 5, 23-27).

As anticipated, the end of *Dingane* is reminiscent of *Macbeth* (the murdered King is finally avenged), but also of *Hamlet*: as Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, lays claim to the sceptre of Denmark and puts an end to the court's internecine fights, likewise the much less valiant Swazi king Ngwane appears on stage in the last scene, and, thanks to Jeqe, defeats his old enemy, Dingane. Portraying Ngwane as a coward, terrified by the Zulus, allowed Dhlomo to uphold the image of his people's ancestors as undaunted warriors, in spite of their chiefs' shortcomings and fatal mistakes. Nevertheless, as in *Hamlet*, the play ends with the victorious entrance of a foreign army, which is heard offstage and announced in a

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

strongly alliterative conclusive sentence: "Like the roar of distant thunder, comes the mighty but muted music of the victorious Swazi warriors".⁵⁵ The last lines in the play are uttered by Jeqe, who, in that respect not differently from Horatio, is King Shaka's real and only friend. Likewise, the general tone of the ending – Mawa committing suicide, all onlookers falling on their knees in mourning – is in tune with the tragedy of the Prince of Denmark, which ends in fraternal blood and unaccompanied by the rhetoric of rightful revenge. Jeqe underlines the feeling of emptiness and lack of purpose that the victory over one's own people engenders, to the point of even declaring the vanity of revenge, as noted, despite his having tirelessly pursued it for the whole length of the play.

4. *Using Shakespeare, loving Shakespeare*

As we have seen, *Dingane* follows in the footsteps of well-known Shakespearean tragedies to stage the motifs of betrayal, murder, usurpation, prophecy, conspiracy, and final but fruitless revenge; some of the political and existential issues raised in *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* are likewise tackled in the Zulu play and adapted to different times, circumstances, and authorial intentions. A thick net of Shakespearean references constitutes the backbone of a dramatic work that celebrates the English playwright's most renowned tragedies by drawing on their structure and plot, their very words and phrases, and the moral propositions attached to them. Albeit not fully rewarding from a dramatic point of view – due, as we mentioned before, to character inconsistency and the ill-timed blending of the tragic and the ridiculous – Dhlomo's historical tragedies remind us that it is not always possible to draw sharp

⁵⁵ H. I. E. Dhlomo, *H. I. E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, cit., p. 112.

divisions between politically conformist and non-conformist literary texts, in spite of the appeal exercised by clear-cut dividing lines, which undeniably simplify the job of the literary critic. In other words, Dhlomo's Shakespearean plays can be considered oppositional insofar as they make use of a foreign, established literary tradition to denounce the reckless practices of that same colonial power, whose land grabbing, labour exploitation, and socio-political discrimination were in jarring contrast with the prospects of progressive assimilation into white society put forth by missionaries and philanthropic institutions. On the other hand, those same plays do enforce the idea of Shakespeare as the voice of established power: the power of sublime art and unmatched genius, which for Dhlomo and many other South African intellectuals was embodied in the English Renaissance poet, who, in turn, was the most outstanding representative of British civilisation and culture. Of course, the underlying aporia at the basis of such widespread admiration and imitation of Shakespeare on the part of African writers is that his works were among the most solid literary pillars, together with the Bible, on which the European settlers were building their cultural, religious, and ultimately political supremacy.

All appropriations are, at least up to a certain extent, legitimations; the legitimization of British culture through Shakespeare was particularly strong in the South Africa of the 1920s and 1930s. As Dan Twala's words made clear in the above-cited interview, being able to quote Shakespeare, both within and without an educational institution, gave the speaker prestige and authority. However, the functional use of quotations was not the only reason why South African writers studied, learnt by heart, translated, and rewrote the English playwright's works. Solomon Plaatje, Herbert Dhlomo, and many others also felt what Natasha Distiller calls "the

discursive power profoundly affective English works still assert”:⁵⁶ their relationship with Shakespeare and the British literary tradition, far from being merely instrumental, was firmly based on admiration, love, and reverence, mainly instilled at an early age and subsequently reinforced. Dhlomo, for one, would have fully endorsed the following observation by Robert Shepherd, principal of Lovedale: “No individual and no nation will reach their highest development without a thoughtful and reverent love for good literature”.⁵⁷ By ‘good literature’, Shepherd clearly meant Western Christian literature, considered by missionaries a vital tool to sustain their instructive and civilising effort. What Dhlomo wrote as early as 1929 in a journal article entitled *Words* could not be more in line with Shepherd’s statement and betrays an emotional involvement with Shakespeare’s art of writing which goes far beyond the deliberate use of the Poet’s words to gain authority and prestige:

“What is the difference between a liar and a scientist; a fool and a diplomat; a bore and a poet? Nothing but the words they use and the way they use them. Give Karl Marx 26 letters to form into words, and he sets people at one another’s throats, ruins countries, and overthrows governments and dynasties. But give the same letters to Shakespeare –, and the world looks as gorgeous as the hues of heavens, as odorous as all Arabia, and as merry as Fairyland”.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ N. Distiller, *South Africa, Shakespeare*, cit., p. 100.

⁵⁷ R. H. W. Shepherd, *Lovedale and Literature for the Bantu*, cit., p. 26.

⁵⁸ H. I. E. Dhlomo, *Words*, in “Umteteli wa Bantu”, September 21, 1929, p. 1.



LUIGI MARFÈ

**“SHAKESPEARE IN TIME OF WAR”:
TEATRO E PROPAGANDA
DURANTE LA GRANDE GUERRA**

“Maintenant, sur une immense terrasse d’Elsinore, qui va de Bâle à Cologne, qui touche aux sables de Nieuport, aux marais de la Somme, aux craies de Champagne, aux granits d’Alsace, l’Hamlet européen regarde des millions de spectres”: per il Paul Valéry de *La Crise de l’esprit* (1919), l’Europa, alla fine della grande guerra, guardava i suoi morti come Amleto davanti allo spettro del padre.¹ Solo pochi anni prima, tuttavia, i riferimenti alla tragedia di Shakespeare nel linguaggio politico avevano un altro tono. Nel 1914, per Conrad von Hötzendorff, feldmaresciallo austriaco, la guerra era questione di “essere o non essere”. La propaganda tedesca aveva stampato le stesse parole (“Um sein oder nicht sein handelt es sich”) su cartoline con i ritratti dei due imperatori, Wilhelm II e Franz Joseph, e l’immagine di soldati in festa per la vittoria. Un giornale francese, l’“Echo

¹ P. Valéry, *La Crise de l’Esprit*, in “La Nouvelle Revue Française”, Août 1919, p. 328.

de Paris”, replicò che il “ne pas être” della citazione sarebbe diventato per entrambi un “ne plus être” e la guerra li avrebbe spazzati via.²

Tra le molte operazioni di mobilitazione culturale che si sono servite a fini politici del capitale simbolico legato alla figura di Shakespeare e alla sua opera, i tentativi di appropriazione durante la grande guerra sono particolarmente rilevanti.³ Shakespeare fu allora conteso tra istanze identitarie contrastanti: quella inglese, per cui era il perno della “comunità immaginata”⁴ dell’impero; quelle di altre nazioni di lingua inglese, che attraverso la tradizione letteraria ripensavano alla propria storia; quella tedesca, che si produsse in una ‘nostrification’⁵ della sua opera. L’articolo si propone di verificare, attraverso l’analisi di alcune citazioni capziose, gli usi (o meglio l’abuso) di Shakespeare durante la guerra, in funzione di ‘morale booster’ e come portatore di un’ideologia nazionalista, quando non

² *Um sein oder nicht sein handelt es sich*, 1914, cartolina, Universität Osnabrück, reperibile [online](#)). Cfr. T. Hoenselaars, *Quotations at War: The First and Second World Wars*, in *Shakespeare and Quotation*, edited by J. Maxwell and K. Rumbold, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 170-177. Id., *Great War Shakespeare: Somewhere in France, 1914-1919*, in *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare*, XXXIII, 2015, ricorda altre riprese di *Hamlet*. Nell’agosto 1914, la rivista “La Croix” invitò Wilhelm II a chiedersi se ci fosse “qualcosa di marcio” in Germania. In una vignetta su “Le Rire” del 1916 un ufficiale inglese teneva in mano un teschio con l’elmetto tedesco e diceva: “Alas! Poor bochy!”.

³ Sulle riprese ideologiche di Shakespeare, si vedano M. Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Authorship, 1660-1769*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992; J. Bate, *Shakespeare Nationalised, Shakespeare Privatised*, in “English”, XLII, 1993, pp. 1-18; *Celebrating Shakespeare: Commemoration and Cultural Memory*, edited by C. Calvo and C. Kahn, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

⁴ Cfr. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983.

⁵ Sulla ricezione di Shakespeare in Germania, cfr. W. Habicht, *Shakespeare Celebrations in Times of War*, in “Shakespeare Quarterly”, LII, 2001, pp. 441-455, e M. Pfister, “*In States Unborn and Accents Yet Unknown*”: *Shakespeare and the European Canon*, in *Shifting the Scene: Shakespeare in European Culture*, Newark, Delaware University Press, 2004, pp. 41-63.

di una vera e propria retorica della guerra.⁶ L'obiettivo è delineare sia le forme della 'cultura della citazione' all'opera durante il conflitto, sia i processi retorici di riscrittura, omissione, riallocazione mediante cui la propaganda, soprattutto in area anglofona, si è appropriata dei testi shakespeariani, nonché le contraddizioni implicite in tali operazioni.⁷

1. *Shakespeare, 'the patriot'*

Fin dal 1914 il War Propaganda Bureau inglese cercò soccorso tra gli scrittori per la 'guerra di parole', parallela a quella reale, da combattere sul fronte interno.⁸ Nell'aprile 1916, in coincidenza del tricentenario della morte di Shakespeare, la Gran Bretagna attraversava un momento drammatico: il corpo di spedizione britannico in Francia era allo stremo, il Military Service Act aveva reso obbligatoria la leva, gli Stati Uniti rimanevano neutrali e in Irlanda si era alla vigilia dell'Easter Rising. In un tempo in cui la lettura aveva un significato sociale molto diverso da oggi, fu naturale arruolare alla causa anche Shakespeare. Le celebrazioni del 1916 finirono così per delinearne l'immagine di "playwright and patriot".⁹

Le ricorrenze shakespeariane erano state occasione di celebrazioni pubbliche fin dallo Shakespeare Jubilee del 1769, forgiandone il mito

⁶ Cfr. J. Lee, *Shakespeare and the Great War*, in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by T. Kendall, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 134-152, e *Shakespeare and the Great War*, edited by M. Smialkowska, in "Shakespeare", X, 2014.

⁷ Sulla "cultura della citazione" all'opera durante la guerra, si veda T. Hoenselaars, *Quotations at War*, cit., pp. 170-177.

⁸ Cfr. P. Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: British, American and Canadian Propaganda and Fiction, 1914-1933*, Vancouver, British Columbia University Press, 1987, e S. Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, London, Bodley Head, 1990.

⁹ C. Calvo, *Fighting over Shakespeare: Commemorating the 1916 Tercentenary in Wartime*, in "Critical Survey", XXIV, 2012, p. 59.

nell'immaginario collettivo, ben al di là della sua opera.¹⁰ Nel 1916 il responsabile del comitato per il tricentenario era Israel Gollancz, primo professore di origine ebraica al King's College di Londra, dove insegnava letteratura inglese. Gollancz si propose di realizzare "some fitting memorial to symbolize the intellectual fraternity of mankind in the universal homage accorded to the genius of the greatest Englishman".¹¹ Il risultato fu *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare* (1916), un volume che raccoglieva i testi di 166 scrittori e studiosi di tutto il mondo. Questo libro è un esempio di 'invenzione della tradizione',¹² che fa di Shakespeare il simbolo della cultura inglese e della sua portata universale, fondamento dell'impero. Molti contributi sono in lingue diverse dall'inglese (gaelico, cinese, giapponese, setswana, ebraico, sanscrito, birmano, arabo, pāli) con traduzione a fronte. Il volume inscena una "cultural performance":¹³ l'intertestualità shakespeariana è in esso crocevia di spinte identitarie che si incontrano, contraddicono, completano a vicenda.

Una lunga tradizione critica, che risaliva all'"unser Shakespeare"¹⁴ dei romantici, lasciava immaginare che nel volume ci fosse spazio anche per il punto di vista tedesco. Invitato alla British Academy nel 1913, Alois Brandl, presidente della Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft, aveva

¹⁰ "The Shakespeare-myth", per Graham Holderness (*Cultural Shakespeare: Essays in the Shakespeare Myth*, Hatfield, Hertfordshire University Press, 2001, p. IX), era "a powerful cultural institution, constructed around the figure of Shakespeare, that could be analysed to some degree separately from the person of the Elizabethan dramatist, and [...] his works".

¹¹ *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare*, edited by I. Gollancz, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1916, p. VII. Su Gollancz, si veda l'introduzione di Gordon McMullan all'edizione 2016 della Oxford University Press.

¹² Cfr. *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

¹³ C. Kahn, *Reading Shakespeare Imperially: The 1916 Tercentenary*, in "Shakespeare Quarterly", LII, 2001, p. 457.

¹⁴ Su questa espressione, si veda F. Günther, *Unser Shakespeare. Einblicke in Shakespeares fremd-verwandte Zeiten*, München, Deutscher Taschenbuch, 2014.

affermato che Inghilterra e Germania, per il tricentenario, avrebbero acclamato insieme il Bardo "as the greatest creator in literature".¹⁵ Poi scoppiò la guerra, "and the dream of the world's brotherhood", come scrisse Gollancz, "was rudely shattered". *The German Contribution to Shakespearean Criticism* fu così affidato a un inglese, Charles H. Herford.¹⁶ Era impensabile che in *Homage* fosse accolta, a guerra in corso, la voce del nemico. Shakespeare era il poeta della nazione, come avrebbe ribadito Walter Raleigh in *Shakespeare and England* (1918), e il suo successo all'estero la prova della superiorità britannica. Non a caso, il termine 'race' ricorre spesso in *Homage*. La coincidenza tra lingua, cultura e nazione era un'idea condivisa: come affermò Frank Benson, tra i più noti uomini di teatro dell'epoca, Shakespeare era "the representative genius of our race".¹⁷

L'impostazione nazionalista del tricentenario è alla base anche delle *Notes on Shakespeare the Patriot* (1916), redatte da Gollancz per le celebrazioni nelle scuole. Il canone dello Shakespeare 'patriota' si articolava intorno a tre passi irrinunciabili: le battute finali di *King John* (V, 7), le parole di John of Gaunt in *Richard II* (II, 1) e il discorso di San Crispino di *Henry V* (IV, 3), sovrano che secondo Gollancz rappresentava per Shakespeare "the ideal Patriot-Englishman".¹⁸ Nel discorso di San Crispino, l'esercito inglese in Francia viene definito una "band of brothers":

¹⁵ A. Brandl, *Shakespeare and Germany: British Academy Third Shakespeare Annual Lecture*, London, The British Academy, 1913, p. 17.

¹⁶ C. H. Herford non esitò in verità a riconoscere i meriti degli studiosi tedeschi: "No estrangement [...] can affect the history of the services rendered by Germany to the study and interpretation of Shakespeare", *The German Contribution to Shakespeare Criticism*, in *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare*, cit., p. 231.

¹⁷ In C. Kahn, *Reading Shakespeare Imperially*, cit., p. 467.

¹⁸ In J. Bate, *Shakespeare Nationalised, Shakespeare Privatised*, cit., p. 6.

“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
 For he today that sheds his blood with me
 Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile,
 This day shall gentle his condition”. (IV, 3, 60-63)

L’esortazione ai soldati prima della battaglia di Agincourt (1415) si basava su un’idea di patria che rende fratelli coloro che sono disposti a morire per difenderla. Un invito che riprendeva a sua volta *King John*, nel quale gli inglesi erano dichiarati invicibili, a patto di rimanere uniti: “This England never did, nor never shall, / Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror / But when it first did help to wound itself” (V, 7, 112-114).

Jonathan Bate ha biasimato lo zelo di Gollancz, che piegava il tema shakespeariano della libertà a fini nazionalistici.¹⁹ “Shakespeare’s boundless love of country”, si legge nelle *Notes* di Gollancz, “is solidly based upon his belief that English ideals make for righteousness, for freedom, for the recognition of human rights”.²⁰ Dietro tali ideali, il testo sosteneva una visione sociale conservatrice, avallata anche attraverso un altro passo shakespeariano, il discorso di Ulisse sulla gerarchia, in *Troilus and Cressida*:

“O when degree is shaken,
 Which is the ladder to all high designs,
 The enterprise is sick. How could communities [...]
 But by degree stand in authentic place?
 Take but degree away, untune that string,
 And hark what discord follows”. (I, 3, 101-110)²¹

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 4.

²⁰ I. Gollancz, *Notes on Shakespeare the Patriot*, in *Shakespeare Tercentenary Observance in the Schools and Other Institutions*, London, G. W. Jones, 1916, p. 11 e ss.

²¹ Cfr. anche W. Raleigh, *Shakespeare and England*, London, British Academy, 1918, p. 9, secondo cui Shakespeare “believed in rank and order and subordination”.

Critici meno severi hanno visto in *Homage* anche spazi per rivendicazioni nazionali diverse, e l'accenno a una concezione 'globale' o persino extraterritoriale dell'opera shakespeariana.²² Del resto, la polifonia dei contributi, pensata a maggior gloria dell'impero, non poteva che far emergere prospettive alternative. Un caso emblematico, in questo senso, è quello dell'Irlanda, rappresentata da Douglas Hyde, allora presidente della Gaelic League. Hyde compose un poemetto in gaelico, che definiva la Gran Bretagna "deceitful sinful guileful / Hypocritical destructive lying slippery". Gollancz gli chiese di modificare il testo, ma Hyde sostenne che "after all, Ireland is not England, and if she does homage to Shakespeare, it must be more or less in her own way".²³ Il testo gaelico rimase invariato, ma le offese sparirono nella traduzione inglese. D'altra parte, il tricentenario veniva a cadere nel momento di massima tensione tra Londra e Dublino: la vigilia dell'Easter Rising (24-29 aprile 1916), la sollevazione per l'indipendenza dell'Irlanda cui parteciparono intellettuali come Patrick Pearse.²⁴

La dialettica tra impero e nazione, centro e periferia, opera anche in altri contributi di *Homage*, come quelli del sudafricano Solomon Tshekiso Plaatje e del birmano Maung Tin.²⁵ La coincidenza con la guerra fece del tricentenario "a complex commemoration paradigm",²⁶ un campo di forze in lotta tra loro per appropriarsi della memoria di Shakespeare.

²² Cfr. G. McMullan, *Goblin's Market: Commemoration, Anti-Semitism and the Invention of 'Global Shakespeare' in 1916*, in *Celebrating Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 182-201.

²³ In W. Habicht, *Shakespeare Celebrations in Times of War*, cit., p. 451. I versi di Hyde sembrano riecheggiare il monologo di Amleto (II, 2, 582): "Remorseless treacherous lecherous kindless villain!".

²⁴ Cfr. A. Murphy, *Bhíos ag Stratford ar an abhainn: Shakespeare, Douglas Hyde, 1916*, in *Shakespeare and the Irish Writer*, edited by J. Clare and S. O'Neill, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2010, pp. 51-63.

²⁵ Cfr. C. Kahn, *Reading Shakespeare Imperially*, cit., pp. 456-478.

²⁶ C. Calvo, *Fighting over Shakespeare*, cit., p. 68.

2. Citazioni e propaganda

Nel paesaggio culturale dell'età edoardiana, Shakespeare faceva capolino ovunque già prima della guerra: a teatro, nelle scuole, sui giornali, nelle pubblicità. Tale consuetudine lo rese una potente arma culturale²⁷ per la propaganda, che riconvertì ai suoi scopi questa fitta rete di pratiche culturali. L'autorità di Shakespeare poteva spingere l'opinione pubblica verso una "mental self-mobilization",²⁸ e su materiali propagandistici come cartoline o manifesti non era raro incontrare i suoi versi.

I manifesti del Parliamentary Recruiting Committee facevano spesso leva su subdoli ricatti morali. L'amor di patria e quello familiare erano sovrapposti, e mogli e figli chiedevano a padri e mariti di combattere.²⁹ Su un manifesto fu stampato un passo di *Macbeth*: "Stand not upon the order of your going, / But go at once" (III, 4, 118-119).³⁰ Il significato dei versi – pronunciati in origine da Lady Macbeth, ma indicati come "Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 3-4" per dare al messaggio il prestigio dell'autore, senza il discredito del personaggio – era stravolto. In altri casi, la rideterminazione semantica giocò sull'interazione iconotestuale: tolte dal contesto originale, le citazioni erano poste accanto a immagini attuali.³¹

Durante la guerra, inoltre, i versi di Shakespeare vennero utili alla retorica della demonizzazione del nemico: la rappresentazione dei soldati

²⁷ W. Habicht, *Shakespeare Celebrations in Times of War*, cit., p. 449.

²⁸ M. C. Hendley, *Cultural Mobilization and British Responses to Cultural Transfer in Total War: The Shakespeare Tercentenary of 1916*, in "First World War Studies", III, 2012, p. 41.

²⁹ Sulle attività del War Propaganda Bureau, cfr. M. L. Sanders e P. M. Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War*, London, Palgrave-Macmillan, 1982.

³⁰ *Stand not upon the Order of your Going, but Go at Once*, 1915, litografia, Imperial War Museum, London, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/28444>.

³¹ Per le citazioni shakespeariane nei manifesti per l'arruolamento, si veda T. Hoenselaars, *Quotations at War*, cit., pp. 170-177.

tedeschi subì un processo di 'calibanizzazione'. In *Shakespeare and England*, ad esempio, Raleigh, rileggendo l'incontro di Caliban con Stefano e Trinculo, immaginò un corpo di spedizione inglese in terra straniera incontrare "an ugly low-born creature" e soprannominarlo "the monster and the mooncalf, as who should say Fritz, or the Boche", per poi chiudere l'analogia citando esplicitamente *The Tempest*: "Where the devil should he learn our language?" (II, 2, 66-67).³² Retoriche simili, tuttavia, furono usate anche dai tedeschi. Nel 1915, Gerhart Hauptmann chiese se in Germania fosse ancora consentito il culto di Shakespeare e le risposte non tardarono: la "Münchener Allgemeine Zeitung" scrisse che l'Inghilterra era Iago e altri giornali paragonarono i nemici a Shylock e Falstaff.³³

Tali tentativi di appropriazione approdavano invariabilmente a conclusioni strumentali, se non del tutto inverosimili, come quando il "Daily Mail" scrisse che il corteggiatore tedesco disprezzato da Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* ("When he is best he is a little worse than a man, and when he is worst he is little better than a beast", I, 3, 84-86) doveva essere reduce dall'occupazione di Reims.³⁴ Naturalmente, in questa guerra di citazioni, gli inglesi vedevano solo l'impostura delle appropriazioni tedesche. "We may ask by what insolence of egotism", scrisse il drammaturgo Henry A. Jones, "what lust of plunder, or what madness of pride Germany dares add to the hideous roll of her thieveries and rapes this topping impudence and crime of vaunting to herself the allegiance of Shakespeare?" La Germania non era per lui Amleto, come aveva scritto

³² Qui cit. da T. Hawkes, *Swisser-Swatter: Making a Man of English Letters*, in *Alternative Shakespeares*, edited by J. Drakakis, London, Methuen, 1985, p. 39.

³³ W. Habicht, *Shakespeare Celebrations in Times of War*, cit., p. 451. Durante la guerra, a Weimar e a Berlino ci furono rappresentazioni di *Macbeth*, *Measure for Measure* e dell'*Otello* di Verdi.

³⁴ Cfr. C. Grabau, *Zeitschriftenschau 1914*, in "Shakespeare Jahrbuch", LI, 1915, pp. 218-244.

Ferdinand Freiligrath nel 1844, ma a “bloodstained Macbeth”, capace di uccidere bambini innocenti e destinato a fare la stessa fine.³⁵

Ogni frase attribuita a Shakespeare era investita dell’ autorità morale che emanava dalla sua figura. “We must be free or die, who speak the tongue / that Shakespeare spake”, aveva scritto a suo tempo Wordsworth.³⁶ L’ opera shakespeariana era l’ ideale per cui combattere, la prova che gli inglesi si trovavano dalla parte giusta della storia. “Shakespeare stood and stands for Democracy”, osservò Edward Salmon, “for Empire, for Humanity; his message for all mankind and for all time is Nature’s own; it will ring down the ages, a challenge to prejudice, a clarion call to Patriotism”.³⁷ Era una retorica che paradossalmente si proponeva insieme come democratica e imperiale, e che dietro il nome di Shakespeare tentava di occultare le contraddizioni implicite in questa associazione.

3. “*Khaki Hamlets don’t hesitate to shoot*”

Il Septimus di *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) di Virginia Woolf era partito per la Francia “to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays”.³⁸ Molti soldati, soprattutto tra i giovani ufficiali, portarono con sé libri di Shakespeare: leggere riannodava i fili con la patria lontana e offriva uno stimolo creativo per chi proprio al fronte iniziò a scrivere. “I manage to cart around my Shakespeare”, confessò un soldato in

³⁵ H. A. Jones, *Shakespeare and Germany (Written during the Battle of Verdun)*, London, Chiswick Press, 1916, pp. 3-4 e 23.

³⁶ W. Wordsworth, *It is not to be Thought of* (1802), vv. 9-11, in *William Wordsworth*, edited by S. Gill, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 245.

³⁷ E. Salmon, *Shakespeare and Democracy*, London, McBride, 1916, p. 58.

³⁸ V. Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), London, Penguin, 1992, p. 94.

una lettera pubblicata sul "Times", "Some of those speeches in *H[enry] V* on war are the most wonderful things – *absolutely true*".³⁹

Tra i lettori di Shakespeare c'era anche Edward Thomas, che si arruolò a 37 anni, quando era già un poeta affermato. In Francia aveva con sé l'edizione dei *Plays and Poems*, pubblicata da William Pickering nel 1825. Molti passi del suo diario, tra il febbraio e l'aprile 1917, poco prima della morte, mostrano cosa leggesse: i *Sonnets*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Cesar*.⁴⁰ In Shakespeare, Thomas vide un modello per la sua poesia, che in *Lob* (1915) diede voce alla generosa abnegazione dell'Inghilterra più profonda: "One of the lords of No Man's Land, good Lob, – / Although he was seen dying at Waterloo, / Hastings, Agincourt, and Sedgemoor too, – Lives yet".⁴¹

Per altri, tuttavia, la lettura di Shakespeare suonava lontana dalla realtà della guerra: "it's too exotic for the trenches", scriveva un soldato.⁴² Dopo aver letto le poesie di Siegfried Sassoon, anche Wilfred Owen osservò: "Nothing like his trench life sketches has ever been written or ever will be written. Shakespeare reads vapid after these".⁴³ La convinzione che la guerra rendesse vana ogni cura estetica pare anticipare le tesi adorniane

³⁹ In "The Times", 30 October 1916. Sulla lettura tra i soldati, si vedano P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1975, e B. Engler, *Shakespeare in the Trenches*, in "Shakespeare Survey", XLIV, 1991, pp. 105-111.

⁴⁰ Cfr. E. G. C. King, "A Priceless Book to Have out Here": *Soldiers Reading Shakespeare in the First World War*, in "Shakespeare", X, 2014, p. 242.

⁴¹ E. Thomas, *Lob*, vv. 138-142, in Id., *Poems*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 39.

⁴² In W. Meynell, *Aunt Sarah and the War: A Tale of Transformations*, London, Burns-Oaths, 1914, p. 34.

⁴³ W. Owen, *Collected Letters*, edited by H. Owen and J. Bell, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 484.

sulla fine della poesia: secondo G.B. Shaw, persino Shakespeare, davanti alla guerra moderna, sarebbe ammutolito.⁴⁴

Su questa linea, in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Paul Fussell ha scritto che la tradizione letteraria non fu d'aiuto al racconto della guerra. A suo parere, gli echi intertestuali attenuavano l'orrore, rendendo la rappresentazione poco efficace: meglio la poetica scabra di Sassoon e Owen. All'inizio della guerra, in effetti, la propaganda si era servita ipocritamente di un'estetica cavalleresca – “the old Lie”,⁴⁵ secondo Owen – per nobilitare l'intervento. Autori come Rudyard Kipling, Hilaire Belloc, Arthur Machen condivisero la prospettiva patriottica, riprendendo il mito dell'Inghilterra espresso nei passi summenzionati di *King John* e di *Henry V*.

La forma più compiuta di tale estetica eroica è nei versi di Rupert Brooke, poeta soldato che morì senza combattere, prima di sbarcare a Gallipoli. L'incipit di *The Soldier* (1915) – “If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England”⁴⁶ – riprende da vicino le parole di John of Gaunt in *Richard II* (“Thy deathbed is no lesser than thy land”, II, 1, 95). In seguito, la commemorazione di Lord Kitchener, morto nel Mare del Nord nel 1916, si sarebbe basata su un analogo uso ‘liturgico’ di Shakespeare, delle cui opere fu realizzata un'edizione speciale, donata agli invalidi di guerra.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Cfr. la prefazione di G. B. Shaw, *Heartbreak House: A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes*, London, Constable, 1919, in particolare pp. 38-39.

⁴⁵ “My friend, you would not tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori*”, W. Owen, *Dulce et Decorum est* (1917), in *Collected Poems*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1920, p. 15.

⁴⁶ R. Brooke, *The Soldier* (1914), in *Collected Poems*, London, Sidgwick, 1918, p. 302.

⁴⁷ J. Lee, *Shakespeare and the Great War*, cit., p. 151. Sul Kitchener Shakespeare, si veda C. Calvo, *Shakespeare as War Memorial: Remembrance and Commemoration in the Great War*, in “Shakespeare Survey”, LXIII, 2010, pp. 198-211.

Non occorre rimarcare, tuttavia, come le letture ‘eroiche’ di Shakespeare siano parziali. All’esaltazione della guerra (la “funzione Hotspur”, secondo Bernard Bergonzi), fa da contrappeso, nella sua opera, una concezione opposta (la “funzione Falstaff”).⁴⁸ Si prenda *Troilus and Cressida*, in cui la guerra pare scaturire da un movente non certo eroico: “All the argument is a whore and a cuckold” (II, 3, 71). Per Edmund Blunden, poeta e soldato, Shakespeare è stato tra i primi a capire le miserie della vita militare e il punto di vista dei soldati: “the author of *King John*, *Henry V*, *Cymbeline*, *Coriolanus*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* knew very well what happens to men and round them in real war; he is exact in all points”.⁴⁹

Tra gli autori che meglio hanno colto questa ambivalenza, vanno annoverati il Robert C. Sherriff di *Journey’s End* (1928), un dramma che deve il titolo a *Othello* (V, 2, 267), il Frederic Manning di *Her Privates We* (1930), romanzo permeato di intertestualità shakespeariana, e il David Jones di *In Parenthesis* (1937), poema modernista a metà tra verso e prosa. La cultura della citazione opera soprattutto in *Her Privates We*, il cui titolo riprende un passo di *Hamlet* per rimarcare la cieca irrazionalità del destino dei soldati:

“GUILDESTERN On Fortune’s cap we are not the very button. [...]
 HAMLET Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favour?
 GUILDESTERN Faith, her privates we.
 HAMLET In the secret parts of Fortune? O, most true, she is a strumpet”.
 (II, 2, 231-238)

⁴⁸ Cfr. B. Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*, London, Constable, 1965. Sulla retorica della guerra in Shakespeare, cfr. *Shakespeare and War*, edited by R. King and P. Franssen, London, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008; P. Pugliatti, *Shakespeare and the Just War Tradition*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2010.

⁴⁹ E. Blunden, *War Poets: 1914-1918*, London, British Council, 1958, pp. 10-11.

Ciascuno dei 18 capitoli del libro è introdotto da un'epigrafe shakespeariana. Manning filtra l'esperienza bellica attraverso le parole dei personaggi di Shakespeare, mostrando ciò che i soldati leggevano nei suoi drammi.⁵⁰

Una visione decentrata di Shakespeare si trova anche in *In Parenthesis* di Jones, che condivideva la fiducia di Eliot e Joyce nel metodo mitico, secondo cui la tradizione letteraria non allontanava dalla realtà, ma offriva un punto di vista altro per orientarsi nella *waste land* della modernità: “Khaki Hamlets don't hesitate to shoot”, scrisse Joyce in *Ulysses*.⁵¹ In maniera analoga, Jones, che era stato al fronte da soldato semplice, riprese *Henry V* per arricchire l'impasto linguistico del suo poema e riflettere sulla ‘disciplina della guerra’. Il racconto frammentario dell'esperienza che lo portò fino al bosco di Mametz, dove rimase ferito, non offre visioni patriottiche né rassicuranti, ma un'idea tragica dell'esistenza.⁵²

4. *Il teatro di guerra*

Il tricentenario fu celebrato anche con numerosi spettacoli. Le rappresentazioni permettevano di raccogliere fondi e richiamare il fronte interno all'unità.⁵³ Non a caso, nel dicembre 1914, Benson decise di

⁵⁰ Su Manning, cfr. C. Calvo, *Shakespeare in Khaki*, in *English and American Studies in Spain: New Developments and Trends*, edited by A. L. Lafuente, M. D. Porto Requejo and Alcalá de Henares, Universidad de Alcalá, 2015, pp. 12-30. Si veda anche il saggio di M. G. Dongu all'interno di questo fascicolo.

⁵¹ J. Joyce, *Ulysses*, London, Penguin, 1968 [1922], Chapter 9, “Scylla and Charybdis”, pp. 239-240.

⁵² Il rapporto tra *Henry V* e l'opera di Jones è discusso in A. Poole, *The Disciplines of War, Memory, and Writing: Shakespeare's "Henry V" and David Jones's "In Parenthesis"*, in “Critical Survey”, XXII, 2010, 2, pp. 91-104.

⁵³ Sul teatro di guerra, cfr. R. Foulkes, *The Theatre of War: The 1916 Tercentenary*, in *Performing Shakespeare in the Age of Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge

rappresentare proprio *Henry V* allo Shaftesbury Theatre di Londra, come forma di propaganda per l’arruolamento. Dapprima immaginate con sfarzo, le rappresentazioni divennero via via più sobrie. Al Drury Lane e allo Shakespeare Hut furono allestiti spettacoli – in particolare un *Julius Cesar* interpretato dallo stesso Benson nel 1916 –, che legavano la celebrazione di Shakespeare alla commemorazione della guerra.⁵⁴

Nei Dominions, le celebrazioni shakespeariane furono pensate come supporto alla causa britannica, ma ebbero anche lo scopo di rimarcare un sacrificio che la madrepatria avrebbe dovuto riconoscere. In Australia, ad esempio, si può ricordare una lettura pubblica a Sydney della poetessa Dulcie Deamer, che legò la celebrazione di Shakespeare, con lettura di versi di *King John*, alla commemorazione dell’Australian and New Zealand Army Corps e della tragedia di Gallipoli.⁵⁵

Un’indagine delle appropriazioni ideologiche di Shakespeare durante la guerra deve tener conto anche delle rappresentazioni dei soldati. Se c’era chi non riteneva saggio allestire *Henry V* in Francia, le scene di Agincourt furono interpretate dagli inglesi senza suscitare polemiche nel 1915 a Rouen. Paradossalmente, un anno dopo, il rettore dell’Académie de Nancy Charles Adam citò proprio quella battaglia per motivare le ragioni dell’*entente cordiale*: “En attendant le grand jour de la paix, nous relirons les vers de Shakespeare qui s’appliquent si bien par avance à l’épopée

University Press, 2002, e *British Theatre and the Great War, 1914-1919*, edited by A. Maunder, London, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015.

⁵⁴ Su queste rappresentazioni, si veda A. G. Ferguson, *Performing Commemoration in Wartime: Shakespeare Galas in London, 1916-19*, in *Celebrating Shakespeare*, cit., p. 216.

⁵⁵ Cfr. P. Mead, *Lest We Forget: Shakespeare Tercentenary Commemoration in Sydney and London, 1916*, in *Celebrating Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 225-244.

actuelle, lorsqu'il célèbre la gloire de tous ceux qui, combattant pour la bonne cause, deviennent 'autant de frères', et en sont tous 'anoblis'".⁵⁶

Quanto accadde negli Stati Uniti è un caso ancora diverso. Nel 1916, l'ambasciatore americano a Londra, Walter H. Page, tentò invano di spiegare al presidente Wilson il valore simbolico di aderire alle celebrazioni inglesi.⁵⁷ Tra febbraio e aprile il "New York Times" ospitò inserti shakespeariani nelle edizioni domenicali. Altre iniziative – che coinvolsero J. M. Barrie, autore di *Shakespeare's Legacy* (1916) – furono orchestrate da Londra per convincere l'opinione pubblica della necessità dell'intervento in guerra.⁵⁸ L'appropriazione di Shakespeare presenta anche qui elementi specifici legati al contesto della sua ricezione. Di rilievo è soprattutto *Caliban by the Yellow Sands* (1916) di Percy MacKaye, elefantia *community masque* basata su *The Tempest*, che coinvolse un cast sterminato di comparse davanti a migliaia di spettatori assiepati al Lewisohn Stadium di New York.⁵⁹ Lo spettacolo intendeva avvicinare le nuove comunità di immigrati a un classico della cultura anglosassone;

⁵⁶ In C. Calvo, *Fighting over Shakespeare*, cit., p. 64. Cfr. anche Ead., *Shakespeare in Khaki*, cit., pp. 12-30, e T. Hoenselaars, *Great War Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 1-12. Per Id., il senso di patria emerge anche nel teatro dei prigionieri, in cui l'opera di Shakespeare assume le "istanze ibride della letteratura dell'esilio" (*The Company of Shakespeare in Exile: Towards a Reading of Internment Camp Cultures*, in "Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies", XXXIII, 2011, p. 89).

⁵⁷ M. C. Hendley, *Cultural Mobilization and British Responses to Cultural Transfer in Total War*, cit., pp. 38-39.

⁵⁸ Ead., *Celebrating the Tercentenary in Wartime: J. M. Barrie's "Shakespeare's Legacy" and the YWCA in 1916*, in "Shakespeare", X, 2014, pp. 261-275.

⁵⁹ Su questa rappresentazione si vedano T. Cartelli, *Shakespeare, 1916: "Caliban by the Yellow Sands" and the New Dramas of Democracy*, in *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations*, London, Routledge, 1999, pp. 63-83, e C. Kahn, *Caliban at the Stadium: Shakespeare and the Making of Americans*, in "The Massachusetts Review", XLI, 2000, pp. 256-284.

l'esito, tuttavia, fu ideologico e paternalista.⁶⁰ Altre rappresentazioni diedero voce più liberamente ai gruppi sociali che lo spettacolo di MacKaye voleva assimilare. Anche negli Stati Uniti le celebrazioni shakespeariane furono dunque l'occasione di un complesso processo di rinegoziazione identitaria.⁶¹

5. *Le antologie shakespeariane*

Un altro aspetto della cultura della citazione durante la grande guerra riguarda antologie come lo *Shakespeare in Time of War* (1916) di Francis Colmer e lo *Shakespeare Tercentenary Souvenir* (1916) di Fred Askew.⁶² Tali raccolte tentavano di interpretare gli eventi bellici attraverso le parole di Shakespeare, che venivano così investite di autorità nazionale.⁶³ Non si trattava delle prime antologie di citazioni shakespeariane.⁶⁴ Nuovo era però l'obiettivo propagandistico, che non solo sottraeva le parole di Shakespeare al loro contesto originario, ma le riassumeva per comporre una storia 'shakespeariana' della grande guerra. Fuori da ogni remora filologica, le

⁶⁰ "By appropriating *The Tempest*, MacKaye was selectively attempting to privilege and promote a construction of Shakespeare that was consistent with the paternalist ideology of his own social caste", T. Cartelli, *Shakespeare, 1916*, cit., p. 82.

⁶¹ Un'ipotesi critica argomentata da M. Smialkowska, *Shakespeare and "Native Americans": Forging Identities through the 1916 Shakespeare Tercentenary*, in "Critical Survey", 22, 2, 2010, pp. 76-90, e Ead., *Conscripting Caliban: Shakespeare, America, and the First World War*, in "Shakespeare", VII, 2011, pp. 192-207.

⁶² Cfr. F. Colmer, *Shakespeare in Time of War: Excerpts from the Plays Arranged with Topical Allusion*, London, Smith-Elder, 1916; F. Askew, *Shakespeare Tercentenary Souvenir: England's Thoughts in Shakespeare's Words*, Lowestoft, Flood, 1916.

⁶³ T. Hoenselaars, *Shakespeare, Shipwrecks, and the Great War: Shakespeare's Reception in Wartime and Post-War Britain*, in "Shakespeare" X, 2014, p. 248.

⁶⁴ Si pensi a *The Shakspearian Diary & Almanack: A Daily Chronicle of Events with Appropriate Quotations from the Poet's Works*, London, The Stereoscopic Photographic Co., [1869]. Sulle antologie di citazioni shakespeariane, si veda D. Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 50-81.

citazioni assumevano valore di monito, profezia, consolazione, rispondendo agli eventi più drammatici del presente. Invece di riportare al tempo in cui erano nate e all'intenzione che le aveva prodotte, esprimevano i timori e le speranze dei lettori.⁶⁵

Nel presentare la propria antologia, Colmer la paragonò al coro di *Henry V*: un commento che segue la storia nel suo farsi, cercando in Shakespeare il segreto degli eventi. “Out of this wondrous treasury of wisdom, with which we have been dowered, it is possible to draw a commentary suitable to every human occasion”, si legge nella prefazione, “No other book presents such a boundless scope, and from none can the sortes with such propriety be cast”. Gli accostamenti potrebbero apparire arbitrari, ma Colmer era convinto, non senza sprezzo del ridicolo, di aver rispettato la memoria del poeta. A suo parere, il montaggio di citazioni consentiva a Shakespeare di parlare al presente: “It has been necessary, I fear, to strain the interpretation considerably in many instances, and I trust I may be forgiven for presenting our great poet in such a motley garb of ‘shreds and patches’ wherein to speak to us across the centuries”.⁶⁶

Shakespeare in Time of War è diviso in sezioni tematiche dedicate a personaggi politici ed eventi bellici. La successione delle citazioni, tratte da più drammi, produce bizzarre poesie, le cui fonti sono esplicitate a piè di pagina. Ampio risalto è dato ai capisaldi della propaganda antitedesca: le atrocità in Belgio (“O cruel, irreligious piety! / Was never Scythia half so barbarous”, *Titus Andronicus* I, 1, 130-131), l'esecuzione di Edith Cavell (“Fie, your sword upon a woman?”, *Othello*, V, 1, 231), gli angeli di Mons

⁶⁵ T. Hoenselaars, *Quotations at War*, cit., pp. 174-175, ricorda un'antologia simile, redatta sul “Ruhleben Camp Magazine” dai prigionieri del campo presso Berlino.

⁶⁶ F. Colmer, *Shakespeare in Time of War*, cit., pp. XXXV-XXXVI. La scelta di trarre le sorti dall'opera shakespeariana appare viepiù significativa se si pensa che riprendeva un uso riservato in età medievale alla Sacra Scrittura e a Virgilio.

(“[...] if angels fight, / Weak men must fall; for heaven still guards the right”, *Richard II*, III, 2, 57-58), l’affondamento del *Lusitania* (“[...] the bloodiest shame, / The wildest savagery, the vilest stroke”, *King John*, IV, 3, 47-48).⁶⁷

Una lunga serie di personaggi – “merely players” (*As You Like It*, II, 7, 140) del teatro bellico – è presentata da citazioni di sapore epigrammatico. L’imperatore tedesco è un tiranno sanguinario (“Before him / he carries noise, and behind him he leaves tears”, *Coriolanus*, II, 1, 155-156), che governa su una nazione aggressiva, “the skilful and bloody opposite” dell’Inghilterra. La citazione da *Twelfth Night* (“the most skilful, bloody, and fatal opposite”, III, 4, 259-260) è modificata da Colmer, con soppressione non casuale dell’aggettivo ‘fatal’, che poteva alludere a una sconfitta inglese.⁶⁸

Le citazioni sono riallocate nell’attualità al prezzo di profonde manipolazioni. In questo passo di *Richard II*, ad esempio, il lamento di Bolingbroke per l’esilio diventa l’addio alla patria del corpo di spedizione britannico in Francia:

“Then England’s ground, farewell. Sweet soil, adieu,
My mother and my nurse that bears me yet!
Where’er I wander, boast of this I can:
Though banished, yet a trueborn Englishman!”. (I, 3, 269-272)⁶⁹

Spesso l’antologia non instaura un vero dialogo ermeneutico con i testi che cita e l’uso di Shakespeare è strumentale: a Colmer serviva una firma d’autore per accreditare il suo punto di vista sulla guerra.

⁶⁷ Ivi, pp. 75, 81 e 90-91.

⁶⁸ Ivi, pp. 39, 51 e 127.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 85.

In maniera analoga, Askew scelse di commentare le notizie del fronte con una serie di citazioni shakespeariane, in modo da produrre “some verbal expression for the nation’s soul in its hour of agony”.⁷⁰ Il suo *Shakespeare Tercentenary Souvenir* riprende schemi retorici rodati, come i riferimenti a Caliban per abbrutire i nemici, che fossero i ribelli dell’Easter Rising o i soldati tedeschi (a questi ultimi, in particolare, è riservato un passaggio di *The Tempest*: “My man-monster hath drowned his tongue in sack”, III, 2, 12-13). Il vaglio shakespeariano è applicato anche alle nuove tecnologie: lo Zeppelin, nelle parole del suo inventore, prestate da Prospero, è “This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (V, 1, 278-279).

Le antologie di Colmer e Askew volevano dar voce a uno Shakespeare libero dalla “wordy German imbecility”⁷¹ di interpretazioni filosofiche troppo complesse, per riportarlo alla gente comune. Alla base c’era l’idea che né la guerra né gli uomini fossero davvero cambiati nel tempo. La parola di Shakespeare era l’equivalente di un talismano: feticcio di un’identità condivisa, spia delle angosce della nazione, principio di condotta morale, inchiesta raddomantica sull’avvenire. Il sottotitolo di Askew è rivelatore: attraverso le citazioni, la sua antologia cercava dare ordine ai “pensieri d’Inghilterra”, per compattarne le fila e dirigerla alla vittoria.

Se la grande guerra ha prodotto, inevitabilmente, profondi mutamenti nella cultura letteraria europea, nel segno di una forte discontinuità con il passato e la tradizione, tuttavia non pose fine alla cultura della citazione, ma, almeno temporaneamente, contribuì a rafforzarla.⁷² Nelle antologie di Colmer e Askew, come nelle altre riprese intertestuali dell’epoca, i versi di

⁷⁰ F. Askew, *Shakespeare Tercentenary Souvenir*, cit., p. 3.

⁷¹ F. Colmer, *Shakespeare in Time of War*, cit., p. XXVII.

⁷² Cfr. T. Hoenselaars, *Quotations at War*, cit., p. 171.

Shakespeare rappresentano, spesso in maniera impropria, una ideale *band of words*, per così dire, da scagliare contro il nemico, o dietro cui cercare un riparo dalla fine di un mondo che la guerra stava facendo a pezzi.



MARIA GRAZIA DONGU

**SHAKESPEAREAN FRAGMENTS TO DEFINE
AND MOURN ENGLISHNESS IN
“MRS DALLOWAY” AND “HER PRIVATES WE”**

1. *Introduction*

In 2016, the celebrations of the quatercentenary of Shakespeare’s death and the first of the Great War fell together. The coincidence favoured the flourishing of essays on the propaganda uses of his works, as well as on Shakespeare’s cultural mobilisation on the part of Germany and France.¹ Historians turned their interest toward the war archives to trace the soldiers’ reading habits in the trenches. Some of the volunteers and conscripts took copies of Shakespeare’s works with them; others received theirs from the State. Lines from Shakespeare appear here and there in their

¹ See M. C. Hendley, *Cultural Mobilization and British Responses to Cultural Transfer in Total War: The Shakespeare’s Tercentenary of 1916*, in “First World War Studies”, III, 1, 2012, pp. 25-49; M. Smialkowska, *Introduction: Mobilizing Shakespeare During the Great War*, in “Shakespeare”, X, 3, 2014, pp. 225-229; T. Hoenselaars, *Great War Shakespeare: Somewhere in France, 1914-1919*, in “Société Française Shakespeare”, XXXIII, 2015, <https://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/2960>.

letters to comment on the present days and pit the soldiers' experience against that of fictional characters, assumed as the best representatives of England's virtues by the political and military authorities and their marshalling propaganda.² Shakespeare was the most potent literary voice of England, speaking directly to his fellow citizens and the world through his characters.

It is then no surprise that Shakespeare is one of the protagonists of the two novels analysed here. *Her Privates We* (1930) by Frederic Manning, first published under the title *Middle Parts of Fortune* in 1929,³ opens each of its chapters with epigraphs from Shakespeare's plays. Through the juxtaposition of Shakespeare's lines and Manning's narrative, a dialogue takes place between the poet and British soldiers, past and present. *Mrs Dalloway* exploits the identification between Shakespeare and his works more explicitly when the playwright becomes Septimus' interlocutor. Casual Shakespearean quotations⁴ are borrowed to express nationalistic feelings or ambiguous messages offered to characters and readers.

In both novels, the readers must play an active part, comparing the original and the new situational context in which the lines occur. Friction between the texts helps the readers discover the ideologies that underlie a collective history of England, where different discourses on Englishness

² See E. G. C. King, 'A Priceless Book to Have out Here': *Soldiers Reading Shakespeare in the First World War*, in "Shakespeare", X, 3, 2014, pp. 230-244; M. Helmers, *Out of the Trenches: The Rhetoric of the Letters from the Western Front, in Languages and the First World War: Representation and Memory*, edited by C. Declercq and J. Walker, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 54-72.

³ See F. Manning, *The Middle Parts of Fortunes*, London, Peter Davies, 1929. The same publisher issued the expurgated version of *Her Privates We* in 1930. Excerpts are from the Kindle book *Her Privates We*, issued by Reinkarnation in 2014, which contains the title page of the first edition.

⁴ Casual quotations are "simply verbal traces", which do not acknowledge any source. See R. Hohl Trillini, *Casual Shakespeare. Three Centuries of Verbal Echoes*, Oxford, Routledge, 2018, Kindle book, location 140.

coexist. Such a biography is split into as many fragments as the forces struggling to hegemonise the country, Europe and the world. Calvo's analysis of posters and books celebrating Shakespeare and the British Great War's heroes helps us identify words that disseminated the idea of an idealised Britannia, which stood for virtue, courage and comradeship.⁵ Poems from the anti-war poets perform the deconstruction of this flattering portrayal, showing how the epochal event triggered meditation on the actual motivations leading to the massacre. These poems will be quoted to clarify the strategies enacted by the novelists, in order to reconstruct a collective rendition of the nightmare of war.

Intertextuality favours the juxtaposition of discourses, which coexist in the space of the pages as they coexisted in early twentieth-century culture. Joseph Frank defined modernist works 'spatial', insofar as they present us with a mythical simultaneity of events, meeting the disapproval of those who objected to his use of the term as metaphorical.⁶ My use of the word is literal, as I refer to the arrangement of fragments on the same page, conveying the chaos of ever-changing culture more than envisaging anti-temporal reconstructions of reality. The intertextual combination of words and texts is a key feature in many modernist novels, and such is the incomplete work of Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway*, as I will show.

As Italo Calvino demonstrated, taking the cue from structuralist theories, literature results from combining narrative units borrowed from

⁵ See C. Calvo, *Fighting over Shakespeare: Commemorating the 1916 Tercentenary in Wartime*, in "Critical Survey", XXIV, 2012, pp. 48-72; Ead., *Shakespeare in Khaki*, in *English and American Studies in Spain: New Developments and Trends*, edited by A. L. Lafuente and M. D. Porto Requejo, Alcalá, Universidad de Alcalá, 2015, pp. 12-30. See also: T. Hoenselaars, *Shakespeare, Shipwrecks and the Great War: Shakespeare's Reception in Wartime and Post-War Britain*, in "Shakespeare", X, 2014, pp. 245-260.

⁶ See J. Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1963.

other stories.⁷ The arrangement of these units is always provisional, unstable, and, if subverted, will tell another tale. Woolf shows us how a reader-writer dismantles a text, be it Shakespeare or life, and then tries to assemble it again. In line with Septimus' method, Manning uses epigraphs from Shakespeare, which are rephrased throughout his novel. The final output is an elegy for the nation that ruled the world but discovered the flaws of imperial England.

2. *Shakespeare as the catalyser of meditation on Englishness in "Mrs Dalloway"*

The war was a defining moment in the lives of soldiers and private citizens, as the memorialisation effort in the post-war years attests. Like Othello in Shakespeare's tragedy (*Othello*, V, 2, 349-365), individuals involved in the collective drama wanted to convey their story in their own words. Woolf complies with the urge, on the part of the characters, to self-express in order to make the past bearable, representing the divide in the nation's life through her characters. As she declares in her preface to the New York edition of *Mrs Dalloway*, she initially planned to have only one protagonist, Clarissa.⁸ Then she decided to create Clarissa's double, Septimus. Thus, she dramatised the polarity between the perception that civilians and soldiers had of the devastation of the war. Both were tormented by memories of it and sought to repress recollections of cruel events. Their tales are composed of contradictory fragments, permeated by the striving for the meaning of their own lives, histories and country.

⁷ See I. Calvino, *Cibernetica e fantasmi (Appunti sulla narrativa come processo combinatorio)*, in *Una pietra sopra. Discorsi di letteratura e società*, Torino, Einaudi, 1980, pp. 164-181.

⁸ See V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, New York, The Modern Library, 1922 [*sic*], p. vi.

Woolf conflated Brooke's truncated life and Sassoon's revolt against the establishment in her biographical sketch of Septimus. Echoing the ideal Rupert Brooke that was painted in public eulogies following the poet's death,⁹ Septimus had enlisted to shelter his country and the people he cared for, such as Miss Pole, the teacher who had made him love Shakespeare. He could not distinguish between the conflicting views urging him to volunteer. On the one side, poetry, beauty, and idealised love; on the other, his boss Mr Brewer's ideology, duties, masculine virtues and strength. In truth, since the quotations from Shakespeare's plays are decontextualised, they reinforce both visions of the world and of the young men's place in it: during the war years, it was clear that they were mental constructs at odds with each other. Septimus would have liked to be a new Keats, improving himself by reading and writing. When he volunteered, he became a man, the one Mr Brewer wished for, and undertook a successful military career by reining in his extreme sensitivity and becoming tough, as an Englishman should.¹⁰

The clash between these two 'Englishnesses' becomes evident when other characters brutally silence Shakespeare. Mr Dalloway, Dr Holmes, and Lady Bruton purposely avoid reading his works. Mr Dalloway is embarrassed by the exposure of his private affairs and emotions;¹¹ Dr Holmes thinks that poetry leads to mentally damaging introspection.¹² Lady Bruton emerges as the most vigorous representative of the brave Shakespearean heroes exploited by war propaganda. Although she proudly affirms she is not a reader of Shakespeare, she is at one with the aggressive, imperialistic Englishness attributed to him because of her family history,

⁹ See V. Woolf, *The New Crusade*, and *Rupert Brooke*, in "Times Literary Supplement", 27 December 1917 and 8 August 1918.

¹⁰ V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, cit., pp. 129-130.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, p. 113.

¹² See *ibid.*, p. 138.

jealously preserved in her memory and revived in her dreams. There is a casual quotation in the narrator's rendering of her mental attitude that must not pass unnoticed, "For she never spoke of England, but this isle of men, this dear, dear land, was in her blood (without reading Shakespeare), and if ever a woman could have worn the helmet and shot the arrow, could have led troops to attack, ruled with indomitable justice barbarian hordes [...] that woman was Millicent Bruton".¹³ The half-line embedded in the passage ("this dear dear land") is part of John of Gaunt's dying speech (*Richard II*, II, 1, 57). Decontextualised, it celebrates a glorious vanquisher England, which Lady Bruton believes will last forever. In the full text, John of Gaunt contrasts it with the shameful England of his times, defeated, deprived of its lands and nursing internecine conflicts: "That England that was wont to conquer others / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself" (II, 1, 65-66). The eulogy of England turns into an elegy, mourning the past. This meaning reverberates back to Lady Bruton's musings, telling the reader how blind she is to the present.

In Brooke's *The Soldier*, the soldier's death does not mean England's defeat but symbolises colonisation as it expands the English cultural matrix: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England. There shall be / In that rich earth a richer dust concealed".¹⁴ Personal annihilation becomes the paradoxical survival of the nation. On his part, Gaunt does not envisage the glory of a staying power, but self-destruction, aggression turned against itself. But in *Mrs Dalloway* the narrator uses a partial quote from Gaunt's speech, one closer to Lady Bruton's gut emotions. In so doing, she silences Gaunt's criticism of England's present. Shakespearean works had been used in

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

¹⁴ R. Brooke, *1914 and Other Poems*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1915, p. 15, ll. 1-4.

anthologies to predict the future and gloss the war reports.¹⁵ As Woolf suggests, they could not do that if mutilated.

3. *Art and deceit of the fragment in "Mrs Dalloway"*

In her article *Rupert Brooke*, Woolf notes how incomplete the poet's life was.¹⁶ In *Mrs Dalloway*, she allows him double sufficient time to change his view about the war. Like Siegfried Sassoon, Septimus perceives the perversion of the rhetoric of war. A poet, a survivor, worn out by a sense of guilt and by his nation's responsibility in the slaughter, Septimus shares Sassoon's disillusionment when back home. He rereads Shakespeare's plays and other writers he used to love, but they lead him to a bleak vision of the world: "That boy's business of the intoxication of language – Antony and Cleopatra – had shrivelled utterly [...]. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair".¹⁷ In other words, Septimus grasps the message hidden under a flourishing style. In light of Woolf's essays on reading, it can be stated that Septimus reacts to the plays differently because of his devastating war experiences. He asks new questions of the texts and gets new answers.¹⁸

In a passage from *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1925), Woolf hints at past readers who will always influence present readings of a text. To define those readers, she uses the term 'ghosts',¹⁹ which might

¹⁵ See C. Calvo, *Fighting Over Shakespeare: Commemorating the 1916 Tercentenary in Wartime*, cit., p. 62.

¹⁶ See V. Woolf, *Rupert Brooke*, cit.

¹⁷ V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, cit., pp. 133-134.

¹⁸ See K. Flint, *Reading Uncommonly: Virginia Woolf and the Practice of Reading*, in "The Yearbook of English Studies", XXVI, 1996, pp. 187-198.

¹⁹ V. Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 5: 1929-1932*, edited by S. N. Clarke, London, Random House, Kindle version, location 6052.

apply both to Shakespearean scholars, expert readers who have constructed him as the patriot-Bard, and to Shakespeare himself, the shadow who looks on English history.²⁰ In *Mrs Dalloway*, the intertextual dialogue between reader and text is enacted by a distressed man, Septimus, who first plays the eulogist and then the accuser of his nation. His new readings of Shakespeare's works unveil the national biography as unstable, bound to be incessantly rewritten.

In the end, Septimus deconstructs the war rhetoric, discovering the real message behind the propaganda superimposed upon Shakespeare's plays.²¹ As a writer, he produces fragmentary, apparently unrelated texts, and already deconstructed:

“The table drawer was full of those writings; about war; about Shakespeare; about great discoveries; how there is no death.”²²

“Now for his writings; how the dead sing behind rhododendron bushes; odes to Time; conversations with Shakespeare; Evans, Evans, Evans – his messages from the dead; do not cut down trees; tell the Prime Minister. Universal love: the meaning of the world. Burn them! he cried.”²³

In the first excerpt, Septimus' writings are jumbled in his table drawer, contiguous in space but thematically distant. The random list of contents further emphasises the fragmentariness and heterogeneity of the veteran's works. In his youth, art had been complete in its form and beauty

²⁰ See K. Flint, *Reading Uncommonly*, cit., p. 189.

²¹ A cultural text spatialises culture: see J. M. Lotman, *The Place of Art: among other Modelling Systems*, in “Sign Systems Studies”, XXXIX, 2011 [1967], pp. 251-270. A literary text can, however, put together diverse perspectives by using polysemantic words and inserting ambiguous quotations. It is also open to various interpretations. J. Lotman, *Different Cultures, Different Codes*, in “Times Literary Supplement”, 12 October 1973, pp. 1213-1215.

²² V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, cit., p. 221.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

(he composed poems, he might have written “a masterpiece”).²⁴ It is now a juxtaposition of incomplete sentences and dialogues, which somehow promise to find their meaning by accumulation. Septimus’ drawer reproduces an intertextual game, which writer and readers can decipher/play. It is also an example of *ars combinatoria*.

Septimus develops into a modernist writer by way of the nightmare of the war, alienation, and a frantic search for the meaning of all things. Fragmentary writing proves the most effective way to express the contradictions of the conflict, as it removes words from any given ideological frame and unveils their arbitrariness. More remarkably, Septimus’ topics are defined by their elegiac mode, such as the celebration of the dead, the conversation with the dead, the hope in the afterlife, and reconciliation. The speech acts used are appeals to the political authorities, urging them to stop destroying life. Fragmentary writing, which is always in the process of becoming something else, seems the most appropriate tool to celebrate the separation and discontinuity of the past, and to prepare for the future.

Septimus lives between death and life, close to his ghosts, Shakespeare included. He is willing to listen to them and transfer their message to his contemporaries, even when he plans suicide. Septimus performs the dismemberment of his body as a piece of art. Indeed, he conceives it as a tragedy,²⁵ a message initially aimed at Dr Holmes but that will find its way into the hearts of sensitive people. His mangled body reminds readers of the corpses on the battlefields and the lost unity of a cultural matrix, precisely like his disordered table. Fragments are the most appropriate way to sing an elegy for a lost world, clearing room for the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 235.

new. Abruptly interrupted sentences and decontextualised quotations, reproduce an in-between space that is neither past nor future, a broken matrix waiting for restoration.²⁶

4. “*Her Privates We*”: *Fragmenta Shakespeareana in a linguistic pot*

Her Privates We is a mosaic of both marginalised and hegemonic fragments of the post-war revision of Englishness. In tune with this trait, Manning did not claim his authorship on the 1929 cover page, figuring as Private 19022, his military registration number. Bourne, the main character, is a fictionalised Manning who deliberately decides to merge his voice into a chorus of sounds and words from every region of Great Britain. Manning, known as an old-fashioned aesthete, reproduces here the crude language of the trenches, strikingly different from the poised, solemn turns of phrase of the poems, speeches, and posters that urged British men to fight for their country. However, it would be wrong to expect him to make a harsh critique of the war. In his novel, the celebration of the war mingles with the denunciation of the propaganda lies, juxtaposing pro-war and anti-war sentiments.

Writing almost ten years after the truce and in the third person, Manning tried to distance himself from his memories. However, a dominant consciousness, embodied by Bourne, pervades the text. Like Manning, Bourne is well educated, reserved, canny, sometimes fatalistic, and alienated from the British privates and officials. He dies in the last pages, adding mourning to mourning, depriving the reader of his sceptical guidance, and giving the veteran Manning what he could not have on the

²⁶ See G. L. Bruns, *Interruptions. The Fragmentary Aesthetic in Modern Literature*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2018, p. 15.

battlefield – control over his fate. Death, its ineluctability and its unpredictability are recurrent topics in the novel.²⁷

Manning's effort to detach himself from the tragedy of the war is also evident in his 1929 preface, in which he recognised his authorship, signing with his full name, and outlined his strategies to control and set free his memories. These strategies combine reality and fiction, which gives his readers an authentic description of events enacted by fictitious characters. However, Manning writes that he had heard the characters' voices in the camp, and that they still resound in his mind. Possible consequences of the experienced trauma, these ghostly voices provide us with a key to the novel. Indeed, *Her Privates We* is a recording of the words heard daily in the camp and on the battlefield, mingling actual speeches with sentences from the letters received by the soldiers and conversations with French civilians. In his attempt to reproduce these voices, Manning creates an amalgam of the diverse regional and social varieties of English, along with inserts of Latin, French, and Shakespearean quotations. The interplay of languages highlights one of the most familiar topics discussed in the Great War narratives, the intense conflict between recruits and officers.²⁸ They do not even speak the same language. It is also a powerful description of England, not as a gorgeous poster-Goddess, but as a hodge-podge of diverse cultures. Like Shakespeare, Manning writes a linguistic chorography of England.

Throughout the novel, soldiers send letters to their relatives, informing them about their health and daily routines or comforting widows and bereaved mothers. They also receive letters and read them cursorily

²⁷ “The problem which confronted them all equally, though some were unable or unwilling to define it, did not concern death so much as the affirmation of their own will in the face of death”. See F. Manning, *Her Privates We*, cit., p. 184.

²⁸ See R. Hampson, “*Excursion into a foreign tongue*”: *Frederic Manning and Ford Madox Ford*, in *Languages and the First World War*, cit., p. 129.

and privately, trying to control their emotions. Their families' letters detail the community they have left behind. Thus, rarely inserted but alluded to, letters are bridges between the two pieces of their broken lives. As part of the intertextual game, the narrator's tale absorbs these texts so that their style and words contaminate the narrative, making the voices of the civilians heard in the text. Those of the soldiers harmonise or bitterly clash with them. Intertextuality serves a reassuring function, as anything that reminds troops in the trenches of familiar habits²⁹ suggests a well-known and predictable story. Juxtaposed to it, however, are fragments of diverse discourses on war, which attribute new meanings to the present experience.

Manning does not attribute quotations from the plays to his characters but to Shakespeare himself. In the novel, he appears as one of the shadows (soldiers are appropriately defined as such) emerging from the darkness, ordering, bitterly meditating on or cursing their destiny. Indeed, Shakespeare plays a leading role among the authors of the past. His lines are prefixed to every chapter; besides, the enigmatic titles of both the original and the expurgated editions are fragments from *Hamlet*, II, 2: respectively, *The Middle Fortune* and *Her Privates We*. The first edition matches the title with a more extended excerpt from the same play, act and scene, while the second adds a few of Falstaff's lines from *1 Henry IV*, V, 3 as epigraphs to the entire novel. The two titles captivate the readers and immediately engage them in a search for meaning. 'Privates' alludes to the novel's protagonist, Bourne, who dislikes promotion to higher ranks. The perspective chosen is easily detectable from the start, and it becomes transparent if the reader contextualises the fragment from Shakespeare. In *Hamlet* II, 2, vv. 230-238, Hamlet meets his false friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When Guildenstern says they are not at the top of their

²⁹ See M. Helmers, *Out of the Trenches*, cit., p. 70.

Fortune, Hamlet playfully locates them “in the middle part” of the ancient Goddess. Guildenstern resolves the ambiguity by explaining that they are ‘privates’, soldiers of the lower ranks, but, insisting on the pun on ‘privates’ as one’s genitals, Hamlet concludes that they must certainly be in “the secret parts of Fortune” because she is a strumpet.

In the first edition of the novel, the epigraph completes the enigmatic title: “‘On fortune’s cap we are not the very button’ [...] ‘Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favour?’ [...] ‘Faith, her privates we’” (II, 2, 231-236). On the contrary, a different excerpt from *I Henry IV*, V, 3, 35-38 serves as an epigraph to *Her Privates We*: “I have led my ragamuffins where they are peppered; there’s not three of my hundred and fifty left alive, and they are for the town’s end, to beg during life”. Falstaff’s lines are a bitter denunciation of the fate of the soldiers (they have been led to die) and the veterans (they have become beggars).

In *Middle Fortune*, the author chose part of the epigraph as his title. In *Her Privates We*, he combines two Shakespearean fragments taken from different plays to serve the same function of orienting the reader. In other words, he splits up Shakespeare’s works, giving voice to the working classes. In doing so, Manning defines his perspective on the Great War, which reverberates back to the past. Like Septimus, he has understood what Shakespeare has told him, an old story of men deprived of their will and acted on by some abstract and faceless agency, call it Fortune or blind army authorities. The quotation from *Hamlet*, II, 2 is recomposed in chapter 18, prefixed by: “Fortune? O, most true; she is a strumpet”. By putting together these disordered fragments, the reader reconstructs a scattered narration. It happens appropriately in the last chapter when Bourne dies without

obtaining his promised promotion, fortune denying him the full prize of military honours.³⁰

The partial restoration of the broken quotation is significant. It voices the search for meaning in a dismembered civilisation or the latent homology between Bourne and Hamlet. In Calvo's words, "*Hamlet* is an intertext throughout the novel, as it is present in the title and in the family resemblance between the prince of Denmark and Bourne, the main character".³¹ The suggested link between the sceptical crown prince, who renounces being king,³² and the private, who desires promotion but avoids it, challenges the identification of the hesitant Hamlet with Wilhelm II in British and French propaganda.³³ In my view, Bourne, an Australian soldier who fights for Britain, shares a mind wandering on the edge of an existential abyss with the German Emperor. The war rhetoric linked Hamlet to diverse nationalities, its target being the irresoluteness of the rulers. In the post-war years, Hamlet became the representative of those European intellectuals who meditated on the eternal dichotomy between lies and truths. Like Hamlet in Paul Valéry's *Crisis of the European Mind*,³⁴ Bourne is an intellectual constantly on the verge of acting but mostly brooding over life and death.

The fragmentariness of Manning's report reproduces the alternation of action and apathy. The excerpt below significantly indicates the

³⁰ C. Calvo, *Shakespeare in Khaki*, cit., p. 23, observes that Fortune controls the three main characters' lives.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³² I refer to the progressive *kenosis*, self-emptying of Hamlet throughout the play, the renunciation of his royal status and his rational power. See E. P. Levy, *Hamlet and the Rethinking of Man*, Cranbury, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008, pp. 187-192.

³³ See T. Hoenselaars, *Great War Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 8-10.

³⁴ See P. Valéry, *Letters from France, I: The Spiritual Crisis*, in "The Athenaeum", 1919, pp. 365-368.

infectious power of excitement, which urges the soldiers to shape their experiences into heroic tragedies or metaphysical struggles:

“In the last couple of days their whole psychological condition had changed: they had behind them no longer the moral impetus which thrust them into action, which carried them forward on a wave of emotional excitement, transfiguring all the circumstances of their life so that these could only be expressed in the terms of heroic tragedy, of some superhuman or even divine conflict with the powers of evil; all that tempest of excitement was spent, and they were now mere derelicts in a wrecked and dilapidated world.”³⁵

Multiple perspectives, intertextuality, and the swing from euphoria to dysphoria give this war novel a peculiar inconsistency, expressed by utilising a disrupted dictionary, uncertain about the stable referents of the lemmas. In the flow of words, the narrator does not even try to order diverse discourses about the war, which is either a sinful butcher of youth or what makes them men. The narrator often uses ‘action’ to define a military attack, and it seems that a man realises his potential through action. However, he also defines the soldiers’ movements and answers as mechanical, as if a faceless agency acted on them. Mechanical acting deprives the war of its moral purpose and goal. Two diverse discourses on war clash. The narrator attributes them to different ranks: “When one was in the ranks, one lived in a world of men, full of flexible movement and human interest: when one became an officer, one became part of an inflexible and inhuman machine”.³⁶ The narrator does not select and adjust events into a heroic tragedy. The other epigraphs from Shakespeare are consistently lines uttered by the lower ranks, the main protagonists of comedy. Through the lens of the minor characters, the narrator tests the

³⁵ F. Manning, *Her Privates We*, cit., p. 39.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

rhetoric of war, offering new and conflicting perspectives,³⁷ precisely like the Bard of his epigraphs.

The epigraphs are taken from a small Shakespearean corpus: besides *Hamlet*, 1 and 2 *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like it*, *Julius Caesar*. The most quoted ones are *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, representing a mischievous and rebellious hero who has turned into his country's defender. Prince Hal offers another key character to the reader, as by turns he coincides with and diverges from the reluctant and critical Bourne. Indeed, the narrator demonstrates that Shakespeare speaks to the soldiers and on their behalf because he provides them with nuanced feelings and situations, which can match every moment in the chaotic experience of war. Based on the occasion and their diverse ranks in the army, Shakespeare is summoned to express the soldiers' thoughts and their changing attitudes towards the war.

Manning has taken more than one epigraph from *Henry V*, IV, 1. In so doing, he has reconstructed the verbal exchange between characters from the lower ranks, almost respecting the sequence of lines but cutting off the King's commentaries:

“FLUELLEN So! In the name of Jesu Christ, speak fewer. It is the greatest admiration in the universal world, when the true and ancient prerogatives and laws of the wars is not kept. If you would take the pains but to examine the wars of Pompey the Great, you shall find, I warrant you, that there is no tiddle-taddle nor pibble-babble in Pompey's camp. I warrant you, you shall find the ceremonies of the wars, and the cares of it, and the forms of it, and the sobriety of it, and the modesty of it, to be otherwise.” (IV, 1, 66-75; epigraph to chapter 6).

“BATES He may show what outward courage he will; but I believe, as cold a night as 'tis, he could wish himself in Thames up to the neck. And so I would he were, and I by him, at all adventures, so we were quit here.” (IV, 1, 113-116; epigraph to chapter 15).

³⁷ See C. Calvo, *Shakespeare in Khaki*, cit., p. 24.

“WILLIAMS We see yonder the beginning of day, but I think we shall never see the end of it [...] I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle.” (IV,1, 89-90, 140-141; epigraph to chapter 16).

This scene opens with Henry’s address to his nobles, triggering their virtue and courage by praising their fortitude in the present misery. After dispatching his princely companions, who must inform and hearten their peers, he begs to be left to his thoughts. Then, he meets the characters quoted above, but without unveiling his identity. Close to them, as he has been to Falstaff in his youth, the king apprehends what the privates think of the war and his role, counteracting their lines with his commentaries, agreeing with them or offering a new perspective. The point at issue in the lines quoted is whether the chivalric code is still applicable to this war or not. Fluellen extolls the Roman heroes’ poise in every moment of the war, while Bates doubts the king’s courage. Williams broods over their impending death, bound as they are to die in the battle. The perspective of the lower ranks on the war reverberates backwards on Shakespeare’s *Henry V* and forward on the body of Manning’s chapters, enlivening the debate about the just war.

John S. Mebane states that Shakespeare’s *Henry V* distinguishes between the myth of warfare, which ennobles men, and the definition of war as always impious. Counteracting previous readings of the history play, he asserts that “If we read *Henry V* [...] as a reflection of cultural conflicts, we fail to appreciate Shakespeare’s artistic deflation of the rationalisations for warfare that [...] have masked the self-interest of those whose purpose in going to war is to maintain their own power and prestige”.³⁸ Showing again mastery of the *ars combinatoria*, Manning singles out and enhances the ironic deconstruction of the myth of ennobling

³⁸ J. S. Mebane, “*Impious War*”: *Religion and the Ideology of Warfare in Henry V*, in “*Studies in Philology*”, CIV, 2007, p. 266.

competition between individuals and countries. However, as the next section will demonstrate, the long debate has not ended, since conflict is still considered a stimulus to inward improvement.

5. *Renaming war: Shakespeare's words and a soldier's memories*

In his 1929 preface to his novel, Manning puts forward his thoughts about war, “a crime but also a punishment”, whose definition raises moral issues and implies the renaming of the main actors in it, “men, not [...] beasts or gods”. Notwithstanding the fact that the “present age is disinclined” to ponder on this “moral question”,³⁹ he will do so throughout *Her Privates We*. The interplay of Shakespearean quotations, the situation in which they have been uttered, narrative echoes, and metatextual commentaries will help the reader to historicise diverse definitions of war.

Two passages in *Her Privates We* alert the reader and orient his/her interpretation of the mix of epigraphs and body of the chapters. When commenting on eavesdropped words, the narrator says that “[t]o overhear one-half of a conversation is always a little mystifying”.⁴⁰ A few pages earlier, he had meditated on how the war was testing slogans, stereotyped sentences, and, I add, Shakespeare's mutilated quotations:

“War, which tested and had wrecked already so many conventions, tested not so much the general truth of a proposition, as its truth in relation to each and every individual case; and Bourne thought of many men, even men of rank, with military antecedents, whose honour, as the war increased its scope, had become a fugitive and cloistered virtue, though it would probably renew its lustre again in more costermonger times.”⁴¹

³⁹ F. Manning, “Prefatory Notes” to *Her Privates We*, cit.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Shakespeare's (and, in this case, also Milton's) fragments are puzzling and find their meanings in the new context, keeping their semantic aura⁴² for the alert reader. The process enacted through the novel tests the sense of propaganda words and Shakespeare's demystifying lines in diverse situations and for each individual. In doing so, the narrative doubles what war has done, denouncing the divorce between coded words (honour, courage, and comradeship) and actions, multiplying the range of referents and phrases that have connoted this human activity. The clash between the Shakespearean and the new collocation of these words reveals that the aim of deconstructing ideologies superimposed on human experiences underlies Manning's work.

Chapter 2 opens with a quotation from *Henry V*, a play much pillaged by patriotic and nationalistic writings in the years leading up to and during the war. In act IV, scene 6, the king surveys his army, counting and mourning the losses in battle. Exeter sums up York's dying speech, proclaiming his love and loyalty to the king. Before dying, York had kissed his dead friend Suffolk. Remembering this poignant moment, Exeter says: "But I had not so much of man in me / And all my mother came into mine eyes / And gave me up to tears" (IV, 6, 30-32). *Henry V* shows the rise of a new king, who must act while the chivalric code is still alive. The aristocratic figures involved in the exchange refer to loyalty, friendship, heroic death, and Exeter weeps, moved by their manifestation of such values. The propaganda summed up the portrait of the ideal soldier in these keywords; only one element is at odds with it because the English warrior

⁴² I am slightly adapting the general definition of 'semantic aura' which describes the recurrence of words or strings of words in given texts with bad, good or neutral connotation. B. Louw, *Irony in the Text or Insincerity in the Writer? The Diagnostic Potential of Semantic Prosodies*, in *Text and Technology: In Honour of John Sinclair*, edited by M. Baker, G. Francis and T. Tognini-Bonelli, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1993, pp. 157-176.

should stand poised.⁴³ In a binary system of meanings, women are sensitive, men unemotional. In the first decades of the twentieth century, this system governed not only the propaganda messages but also literature, where characters enlist to prove their manliness.⁴⁴ However, Manning chooses only the above mentioned, poignant lines and cuts off the entire exchange, which emerges here and there in the chapter. In doing so, he purposely highlights qualities that soldiers were trained to repress. I do not maintain that he contrasts the old with a new masculine martial model, but that he acknowledges that a man can be bold or sympathetic on different occasions.

Like the scene in Shakespeare, chapter 2 describes what happens in the camp when the battle is over. Unlike the Shakespearean fragment, it focuses mainly on caring for others, the comradeship celebrated by martial authorities. It is a moderate version of love, which allows the army to achieve its goals and comes from “a tacit understanding between” the soldiers.⁴⁵ The most poignant feelings are kept in check. Consistently with the British warrior’s ideal portrayal, these men have seen death and have survived, passing from enthusiasm and excitement to danger and apathy, easily mistaken for the celebrated English self-control.⁴⁶ It is left to Pritchard, a member of the lower ranks, to express his sorrow for his chum’s death, especially for the words he could not say to him. Every sentence he uttered was inadequate to comfort his friend in his last moments, and equally ineffective are the comments used by his comrades

⁴³ “The definitions of heroism as efficiency, coolness and cheerfulness would be echoed in ex-servicemen’s postwar constructions of themselves as heroes”. J. Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 89.

⁴⁴ See K. J. Phillips, *Manipulating Masculinity. War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 41.

⁴⁵ See F. Manning, *Her Privates We*, cit., p. 12.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 13.

to soothe his distress. The uneasiness of both officers and soldiers with Pritchard's outpouring of emotions is symptomatic of the inability to cope with the survivor's PTSD. Replying to Corporal Tozer's sympathetic words, Pritchard uses the rhetoric of war, mentioning the values of comradeship, but defies the worthiness of war itself if life is only senseless slaughter. Dissolution is preferable for him⁴⁷ as it was for Woolf's Septimus.

We can perceive the limitation of early twentieth-century culture in the conflict between a scene in Shakespeare, which could have been taken from a chivalric romance, and this passage, whose main protagonist is a private. Indeed, the army authorities tried to superimpose a grid of behaviours, ignoring any inconsistency. However, Shakespeare gives Manning a more nuanced colour palette to describe war: action and rest, alertness and boredom, enjoyable adventure and nostalgia for familiar places. As Manning's narrator says in a previously quoted passage, soldiers shape their lives into heroic tragedies when they believe in a metaphysical conflict between good and evil, but then they find themselves deluded in their hopes and convictions. In the space between two battles, they are the pale shadow of the heroes they play-acted. The Shakespeare epigraph in chapter 4 hints at this: "And now their pride and mettle is asleep" (*1 Henry IV*, IV, 3, 24).

Comradeship, heroism, and honour overlap in the soldiers' letters and diaries from the front, as if these young men were discovering that experience sharpens their vocabulary. Manning, for instance, rereads heroism in light of a new definition of comradeship: "At one moment a particular man may be nothing at all to you, and the next minute you will go through hell for him. No, it is not friendship. The man doesn't matter so

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 15.

much, it's a kind of impersonal emotion, a kind of enthusiasm, in the old sense of the word".⁴⁸ Later, he describes this "kind of enthusiasm, quiet and restrained because aware of all it hazarded";⁴⁹ however, enthusiasm is contagious and makes a whole of single individualities. Etymologically the term 'enthusiasm' reminds us of religious discourse, in its meaning of "inspiration, frenzy, to be inspired by God", not of the war propaganda ideals of service and patriotic defence.⁵⁰ In *Her Privates We*, there is no symbolic exaggeration of a military virtue in the meaning attached to comradeship, which is close to its exact opposite, solitude: "self-reliance lies at the very heart of comradeship. In so far as Mr Rhys had something of the same character, they respected him; but when he spoke to them of patriotism, sacrifice, and duty, he merely clouded and confused their vision".⁵¹

All in all, epigraphs and chapters convey an awareness of the decay of the chivalric code of war. A case in point is Fluellen's already cited lines prefixed to chapter 6, which praise the solemnity of Roman soldiers in speech and tone of voice, as opposed to the present coarse language in the British camps. The epigraph to chapter 3, from *Othello* (II, 3), refers to drinking, a vice which is said to be proper of English soldiers, and in Shakespeare's tragedy marks the dishonour of Cassio, who embodies a dying chivalric model. Significantly, Bourne's comrades feel that "duty and honour were merely the pretexts on which they were being deprived of their most elementary rights".⁵² Moreover, the epigraph to chapter 8,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵⁰ See T. Kühne, *Comradeship*, in *Brill's Digital Library of World War I*, 2015, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2352-3786_dlws1_beww1_en_0135.

⁵¹ F. Manning, *Her Privates We*, cit., pp. 149-150.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

“Ambition, the soldier’s virtue” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III, 1, 22-24) exposes Bourne to the officers’ envy.

To insert an instance from an anti-war poet, the same dissatisfaction with the chivalric rendition of war appears in Sassoon’s *Glory of Women*.⁵³ In the first part of the poem, women, confined to their homes, shape men into heroes, and their retreat, murders and death on the battlefields into chivalric romances. Their vision collides with the accurate report offered by the poet and offsets the epigraph from *2 Henry IV* (III, 2, 232-236) prefixed to chapter 1 of Manning’s novel: “By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once. We owe God a death [...] And let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next”. This fatalistic acceptance of human fate corresponded to the soldiers’ feelings much more than their wish to die for their country. British soldiers and officers used these lines to comfort themselves and the allies, as Manning’s translation of them into contemporary English testifies to: “we’ll keep moving out of one bloody misery into another, until we break, see, until we break”.⁵⁴

A mythical idea of England endures, however, in the soldiers’ memories. The narrator poignantly describes some of them evading the thought of nine of their group sacrificed by the higher ranks: “We sit here and think of England, as a lot of men might sit and think of their childhood. It is all past and irrecoverable, but we sit and think of it to forget the present”.⁵⁵ The myth of a happy England is reassuring, as it was for Lady Bruton and Rupert Brooke. Here it soothes the soldiers’ grief. However, there is a breach that cannot be mended between past and present. Their trust in the military authorities has gone. The myth is irretrievable. Comradeship was never there, nor glory, nor chivalric romance.

⁵³ See S. Sassoon, *The War Poems*, New York, Dover, 2004, p. 65.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

6. *Conclusions*

Looking at the interplay of Shakespeare's lines in two twentieth-century novels as *ars combinatoria* has allowed us to unveil the uses of intertextuality to explore and deconstruct the fabricated national biography of England, made up of the forged lives of heroes. Taking Shakespeare's plays as foundational texts, Woolf reveals to us how they can be exploited to promote an arrogant policy under the guise of nationalistic values by decontextualising them, cutting them into pieces. In her novel, she also has a reader, Septimus, who can discover this use of Shakespeare by highlighting the many hidden meanings in his plays, which result from the combination of conflicting discourses. Septimus' readings inspire a mosaic of fragmentary writing, in which sentences have been juxtaposed at random. A chaotic work that lacks any orderly arrangement of words and paragraphs has the effect of reproducing the process of deconstruction of familiar texts. It is left to the readers to find their meaning in it, as they move from fragment to fragment.

Her Privates We pursues the same goal through the dismemberment of Shakespeare's plays, whose excerpts are prefixed to each chapter. The epigraphs interact with the text, shedding light on characters fighting in France. The mere juxtaposition of quotations from Shakespeare's plays with Manning's war descriptions helps to articulate the message put forward by privates and repressed by propaganda. Breaking the plays into pieces and recording their echoes in the routine of the trenches provide multiple plots of the war enterprise, the heroic and the comic. There are at least two ways in which the national adventure in the Great War can be represented. When the reader puts together the series of epigraphs, he/she understands that the quotations from Shakespeare mainly counterpoint the pomposity of British self-representation, whether they sing poignant

elegies, mourning the death of the dream-like chivalric world, or highlight the stoic acceptance of a hapless fate by the lower ranks, stubbornly unreceptive to war propaganda.



ALESSANDRA PETRINA

**“WE’VE HAD QUITE A SHAKESPEAREAN
EVENING, HAVEN’T WE?”:
SHAKESPEARE AND DOROTHY SAYERS**

“Detective stories contain a dream of justice. They project a vision of a world in which wrongs are righted, and villains are betrayed by clues they did not know they were leaving. A world in which murderers are caught and hanged, and innocent victims are avenged, and future murder is deterred”.¹

This idealistic view of crime fiction comes from a curiously hybrid novel, published in 1998 under the joint names of Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957), the celebrated English detective writer, playwright, poet and translator, and Jill Paton Walsh (1937-2020). The latter, when already an established novelist, had received an invitation to complete a book Sayers had left unfinished; and the result is as much a homage to Sayers as a nostalgic tribute to crime writing in the 1920s and 30s, the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction. Such writing is often celebrated in these terms: its reordering of the small world in which the crime is committed

¹ D. L. Sayers and J. Paton Walsh, *Thrones, Dominations. The New Lord Peter Wimsey Novel*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1998, p. 173.

does not simply entail the identification of the murderer, but also a setting to rights of a number of issues. Misunderstandings, disharmony and the jarring of conflicting impulses are finally resolved in a harmonious stability, which implicitly guarantees future peace.

Within this perspective, Shakespeare occasionally finds a place as a tutelar deity, and his construction of the characters in his plays is taken as a model against which fictional detectives measure their evaluation of the suspects, turning the act of quotation into an assessment and even a providing of clues – sometimes, as has been noticed, with chilling effects.² This is most noticeable in the detective novels of Ngaio Marsh (1895-1982), Sayers' contemporary and another member of the foursome of "Golden Age Queens" which includes also Agatha Christie and Margery Allingham. Marsh, herself an actress and a Shakespeare devotee, often set her plots in the theatrical world; in one famous case, *Light Thickens* (1982), she devoted far more pages and more interest to the rehearsal of a fabulously flawless production of *Macbeth* than to the actual crime and its detection. In her novels, Shakespeare is a reassuring guide, sometimes in a very literal sense: in *A Surfeit of Lampreys* (1941), it is a chance remark by a constable who quotes from *Macbeth* with uncanny accuracy that sets the detective on the right trail. The Jove edition of the novel could therefore write in its blurb that "with a 'sidekick' named Shakespeare, Inspector Alleyn singles out a killer from a glittering array of suspects".³ To the New-Zealand-born Marsh, who would be made Dame of the British Empire for her literary merits, Shakespeare is the pinnacle of all things British to which she turns with loving devotion, from the splendid countryside to the

² S. Baker, *Shakespearean Authority in the Classic Detective Story*, in "Shakespeare Quarterly", XLVI, 1995, pp. 424-448.

³ Quoted in M. S. Weinkauff, *Murder Most Poetic: The Mystery Novels of Ngaio Marsh*, San Bernardino, Brownstone Books, 1996, p. 95.

impeccably mannered nobility. Her detective, the aristocratic Inspector Alleyn, never omits to tip his witnesses generously when they happen to belong to the lower classes, while her murderers are often people who have failed to adjust to the rigidly hierarchical class system. It is thus appropriate for Shakespeare, in the form of quotations from the plays that become axioms of unassailable truth, to represent the ultimate court of appeal in the dream of justice that Marsh celebrates; underlying all her novels is a utopia of social order, within which the investigated crime represents only a temporary and deplorable aberration. In this, Marsh is simply developing an attitude that seems common to Golden Age detective writers, to the point that the scholar Susan Baker could posit that "the classic detective story offers an ethical gloss on the logical grounds of Shakespearean critical practice".⁴

In the case of Dorothy Sayers, the relation with Shakespeare is more controversial. Of the four Queens, Sayers was perhaps the one with the greatest literary ambitions; although her most famous work remains the series of crime thrillers (eleven novels and twenty-one short stories) featuring Lord Peter Wimsey, amateur detective, her literary output included a number of religious treatises, poems, plays, and a translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* which she considered her best work. In some of her novels, notably *The Documents in the Case* and *Gaudy Night*, she also showed her awareness of contemporary literary debate and of some of the conventions of modernist fiction. This has earned her some critical scorn – in his classic survey of British and American crime fiction, Julian Symons is rather *tranchant* in classifying her books in the category he calls "don's delight", alluding to the purely academic pleasure one might derive from

⁴ S. Baker, *Shakespearean Authority in the Classic Detective Story*, cit., p. 425.

them;⁵ Q. D. Leavis used her review of two of Sayers's novels to exercise her devastating intellectual snobbery, saying of writers like her that "like the Ouidas and Marie Corellis and Baron Corvos of the past they are really subjects for other kinds of specialist than the literary critic, but unlike those writers these are to some extent undoubtedly conscious of what they are doing"; she also called her work stale, second-hand, hollow, nauseating.⁶ It is, however, important to reflect on Sayers' literary background, not only because it formed the setting of some of her most notable novels (in *Gaudy Night* most of the action takes place within an Oxford women's college bearing striking similarities to Sayers' own Somerville College), but also because it helped her develop, in the course of her writing career, a model of crime writing that moved away from Agatha Christie's mechanical interaction of puppet-like characters and towards a literary ideal.⁷ This effort works both in the direction of character delineation and in the attention to stylistic devices: her careful working of formal details is shown by the way she notes, by means of transliterations, not only the vagaries of lower-class speech (a conventional comic trait of much detective fiction at the time), but also the sloppy pronunciation of the aristocracy.⁸

⁵ J. Symons, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, New York, The Mysterious Press, 1992², p. 133.

⁶ Q. D. Leavis, *The Case of Miss Dorothy Sayers*, in "Scrutiny", 1937, pp. 334-340.

⁷ On this point, Michael Holquist notes that, in common with a number of contemporary detective writers, in the latter part of her career Sayers "sought to write novels not detective novels as such" (M. Holquist, *Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction*, in *Two Centuries of Detective Fiction: A New Comparative Approach*, edited by M. Ascari, Bologna, Cotepra, 2000, p. 167). In this, Holquist is echoing Sayers herself, who in an essay shortly following her publication of *Gaudy Night* declared that she had meant to write something "less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel" (quoted in L. Young, *Dorothy L. Sayers and the New Woman Detective Novel*, in "Clues. A Journal of Detection", XXIII, 2005, p. 39).

⁸ M. McGlynn, *Parma Violets and Pince-Nez: Dorothy Sayers's Meritocracy*, in "Clues. A Journal of Detection", XXXVII, 2019, pp. 71-82.

Sayers' detective fiction is dominated by Lord Peter Wimsey, the amateur detective who is also an elegant man-about-town in interwar London, a connoisseur of fine wines and of early printed books, and a quasi-professional pianist who says things like, "I feel rather like the Italian Concerto this evening. It's better on the harpsichord, but I haven't got one here. I find Bach good for the brain".⁹ For this character, at least in the early stages of his development, culture is fodder for his frivolous snobbishness. It is also, of course, a marker of class and wealth. At the same time, this effete aristocrat is, as proudly noted in a fictional page of Debrett's Peerage, the author of two monographs, "Notes on the Collecting of Incunabula" and "The Murderer's Vade-Mecum" (winking slyly at Sherlock Holmes' numerous monographs upon the tracing of footsteps and suchlike). He is also an alumnus of Eton and Oxford; in the latter institution he concluded his academic career with first class honours in the School of Modern History, an adequate introduction to his work in the Foreign Office. Wimsey is equally contrasted to fellow aristocrats who waste their money at cards or on drugs, and with members of the lower classes whose intellectual efforts, even when well meant, lack the suavity and nonchalance of the man for whom culture is a way of life. Rather improbably, his closest friend and future brother-in-law is an earnest policeman, Charles Parker, who in his spare time reads the Church Fathers, with a predilection for Origen: if a dedicated middle-class policeman may read for moral improvement, Wimsey can afford to read for purely aesthetic pleasure. Some of his literary references could also allude to Sayers' academic training, yet turn out to be disappointingly obscure: it is difficult to imagine what the contemporary reading public would have made of a Wimsey who, in *Whose Body?*, rushes to an auction to acquire a

⁹ D. L. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1977, p. 124.

copy of the Caxton folio of *The Four Sons of Aymon* – thoughtfully adding, “It’s the 1489 folio and unique”.¹⁰ A love for incunabula might be fascinating for book historians, but risks alienating the general reader.

Such a reader would be far more struck by Wimsey’s love of good food and wine, and by his occasionally inane witticisms. In the early novels Lord Peter Wimsey, especially in his relationship with his manservant Bunter, suggests a closeness not to the grand masters of modernism but to a contemporary, no less famous character, and a champion of fatuousness: Bertie Wooster. The influence of P. G. Wodehouse’s supremely comic creation was not overlooked by Julian Symons, who tartly observed that “Wimsey is Bertie Wooster endowed with intelligence but still ridiculous”.¹¹ Sayers herself sensed that the relationship between Wimsey and his manservant Bunter could be read as a version of the relationship between Bertie Wooster and Jeeves, and hinted at it. In *Strong Poison*, the novel that marks a decided shift from this early mode, Wimsey shows some restlessness at his manservant’s urbane omniscience, and when the master asks his valet to check for a further clue in the mystery, the following exchange ensues:

“Pardon me, my lord, the possibility had already presented itself to my mind”.
 “It had?”
 “Yes, my lord.”
 “Do you never overlook anything, Bunter?”
 “I endeavour to give satisfaction, my lord.”
 “Well, then, don’t talk like Jeeves. It irritates me”.¹²

¹⁰ D. L. Sayers, *Whose Body?*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1968, p. 12. This reference is followed by a lengthy authorial footnote in which the rarity of this and other early editions is fully explained.

¹¹ J. Symons, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, cit., p. 158.

¹² D. L. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, cit., p. 204.

The influence of Wodehouse on the early Wimsey novels is especially noticeable in the treatment of Shakespearean quotations. In the Wooster-and-Jeeves books, Shakespeare is the stuff of public-school-boys' nightmares, a farrago of imperfectly remembered phrases that lend authority to any utterance, irrespective of their actual sense; their being set in contexts of supreme irrelevance acts as an interrogation of the very authority they embody. Wodehouse's parody of authority consists in pushing the irrelevance to its extreme limit; if we consider the concept of *casual quotation*, defined as the occurrence in which the act of quotation is foregrounded at the expense of intertextual meaning,¹³ we may find instances such as the following, in which Shakespeare is jumbled with Victorian half-forgotten lines and schoolboy's lore:

"Beneath the thingummies of what-d'you-call-it, his head, wind and weather permitting, is as a rule bloody but unbowed, and if the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune want to crush his proud spirit, they have to pull their socks up and make a special effort".¹⁴

This passage is taken from a Wodehouse novel first published in 1954. A striking anticipation of this mode of quoting is present in *Strong Poison*, the first of Sayers' novels in which quotations begin to take a metaliterary role. Here, the reference to Shakespeare cloaks Wimsey's

¹³ R. Hohl Trillini, *Casual Shakespeare. Three Centuries of Verbal Echoes*, New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 1: "Casual quotations often obscure the identity of the quoted text and reduce its impact by modifications of the original wording and by cross-quoting other sources in the immediate vicinity".

¹⁴ P. G. Wodehouse, *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*, New York, Scribner, 2000, p. 219. The observations on Wodehouse (and the choice of the quotation) are indebted to D. Pollack-Pelzner, *Quoting Shakespeare in the British Novel*, in *Shakespeare and Quotation*, edited by J. Maxwell and K. Rumbold, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 136-155. In Pollack-Pelzner's felicitous definition, in the Wooster novels Shakespeare reverts to his Victorian function: "the embodiment of wisdom, captured in iterable phrases" (p. 150).

delicate reticence on the subject of the death of a very old and a very rich woman:

“If he had any expectation from Mrs Wrayburn, and the old girl – I mean, the poor old lady – was so near shuffling off this mortal thingummy, why, then, don’t you know, he would have waited, or raised the wind on the strength of a post-obit or something or the other”.¹⁵

Strong Poison is also notable in that it marks the appearance of the love interest, a character who progressively takes centre-stage and has noteworthy autobiographical traits. A closer look at this character allows us to see how Sayers uses Shakespearean quotations also to further a reflection on the relationship between the sexes. When first we see Harriet Vane, she is on trial, accused of having murdered the man she lived with and refused to marry; a crime writer of some success, Vane is also an Oxford graduate (Sayers herself was among the first women in England to receive a university degree, in 1920). After she is triumphantly acquitted at the end of the book, Vane goes on to share the limelight with Wimsey in three further novels, *Have his Carcase* (1932), *Gaudy Night* (1936) and *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1937), as well as in shorter writings. Wimsey and Vane’s relationship, based on conflict and intellectual antagonism, highlights the issue of the educated woman and her role in society between the two Wars, and shines into detective fiction some light of realism through the urgency of its debate.

The woman question had in fact informed Sayers’ early novels as well, and the writer had attempted different forms of poetic justice, even if in a more frivolous vein. In *Unnatural Death* (1927), a novel written before Vane’s appearance, the writer had introduced Miss Alexandra Katherine Climpson, a middle-aged spinster who quietly and efficiently ran an

¹⁵ D. L. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, cit. p. 102.

investigating bureau employing only unmarried women. The chapter introducing Climpson is in fact sarcastically titled "A Use for Spinters", and adorned with an epigraph taken from the right-wing novelist Gilbert Frankau: "There are two million more females than males in England and Wales: And this is an awe-inspiring circumstance".¹⁶ In this investigating bureau, unmarried women with no perspective in the world can have a job and some form of safety, and in this novel, as well as in *Strong Poison*, Miss Climpson's role is central to the solution of the mystery and to the identification of the culprit. However, established authority maintains its role: although run by and employing only women, the detective bureau is subsidised by Wimsey, who uses it as a sort of private warehouse, where he can pick and choose the ideal helpers for his cases. The role of Climpson and her associates is explained by Wimsey in mockingly self-conscious tones:

"Miss Climpson," said Lord Peter, "is a manifestation of the wasteful way in which this country is run. Look at electricity. Look at water-power. Look at the tides. Look at the sun. Millions of power units being given off into space every minute. Thousands of old maids, simply bursting with useful energy, forced by our stupid social system into hydros and hotels and communities and hostels and posts as companions, where their magnificent gossip-powers and units of inquisitiveness are allowed to dissipate themselves or even become harmful to the community, while the ratepayers' money is spent on getting work for which these women are providentially fitted, inefficiently carried out by ill-equipped policemen like you. My god! it's enough to make a man write to *John Bull*. And then bright young men write nasty little patronising books called "Elderly Women," and "On the Edge of the Explosion" – and the drunkards make songs upon 'em, poor things".¹⁷

While conscious of the feminist question, the passage evades any serious discussion, and the women belonging to the detective bureau all fall into the stereotype of the elderly, useful, fundamentally sympathetic

¹⁶ D. L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1977, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

secretary, secretly in love with her male employer. In the case of Wimsey's relationship with Harriet Vane, instead, the writer is striving to find a different intellectual and emotional premise. *Busman's Honeymoon*, which sees Wimsey's and Vane's relationship culminate with their marriage, proposes another, more conventional happy ending to the woman question: the New Woman finds a man who miraculously both loves her and respects her intellect, and the two establish "the marriage of true minds".

In spite of their vastly different social class and wealth, Wimsey and Vane are shown to share a level playing field on the basis of their academic achievement. The novels that charter their relationship see their antagonism gradually develop into partnership not simply on the basis of love, but also of a common intellectual terrain. The shorthand for this intellectual bond is their shared love of quotations: as Wimsey tells Vane in one of their first meetings, "And if you can quote *Kai Lung*, we should certainly get on together".¹⁸ Vane is also the only other character who can twist and adapt a Shakespearean quotation, and use it, Wodehouse-like, with irreverent nonchalance, even while she is in prison, threatened by execution: "You've got a family and traditions, you know. Caesar's wife and that sort of things".¹⁹ The four Wimsey-Vane novels offer a development in the use of literary quotations that mirrors the development of the novels themselves, and becomes the backbone on which Sayers builds her effort to turn her crime thrillers into 'serious' literature. *Gaudy Night*, the third novel of the series and the one most directly involved with the feminist question, has been often discussed as belonging to the New Woman literary movement, one of the very few novels written by a woman in which "a female protagonist's negotiation of gender is of equal importance and often bound

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44. The reference is to Ernest Bramah's *Kai Lung's Golden Hours* (1922).

¹⁹ D. L. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, cit., p. 210.

up with the mystery".²⁰ In spite of this commitment, the writer cannot renounce some of her academic affectation: the mystery here revolves around a quotation from Virgil (*Aeneid* III.280-284, the passage describing the harpies appearing at Aeneas' table) which is offered in Latin but not translated: after all, Wimsey observes, it is the kind of passage "to which any school child might easily have access".²¹

In *Gaudy Night* Wimsey and Vane, both Oxford educated, often use poetry, playing a never-ending and occasionally obscure quotation game, as a weapon in their amorous rivalry – and so does the narrator, inserting literary epigraphs at the beginning of the chapters that require more than casual attention. Early modern English literature has pride of place: though the range is fairly wide, the writer generally offers an alternative to the literary status quo by proposing quotations not so much from Shakespeare (although the playwright does appear occasionally), but from minor Jacobean dramatists and metaphysical poets, from Michael Drayton to Robert Herrick; these poets at the time were being re-discovered by the London literary intelligentsia thanks to T. S. Eliot's celebrated essays, and by the more general reader thanks to the shift in the school and university curricula.²² In a novel in which literature holds centre stage, being the main occupation of its female protagonist and one of the keys to the detective mystery, and in which the courtship between Wimsey and Vane at one point takes the convoluted form of a Petrarchan sonnet written in tandem, the tutelary deity appears to be John Donne, who is also given pride of place in the epigraph opening the volume.

²⁰ L. Young, *Dorothy L. Sayers and the New Woman Detective Novel*, cit., p. 42.

²¹ D. L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1970, p. 418.

²² J. Gorak, *From Prodigality to Economy: T. S. Eliot on the "Minor Elizabethans"*, in "The Modern Language Review", CVIII, 2013, pp. 1064-1085.

At the end of *Gaudy Night*, Wimsey proposes (yet again) to Vane and is finally accepted. The compromise between intellectual independence and heterosexual love is achieved by having Wimsey acknowledge the intellectual equality of the woman, a move symbolised by the form his last, and finally successful, bid for marriage takes. On Magdalen Bridge, with the two protagonists in cap and gown, the little exchange is phrased in (once more untranslated) Latin:

“With a gesture of submission he bared his head and stood gravely, the square cap dangling in his hand.

‘*Placetne, magistra?*’

‘*Placet.*’²³

The use of the word *magistra* underlines Vane’s role as a scholar: Oxford, which preceded Cambridge by twenty-eight years in the decision of conferring degrees upon women, can provide the equality between the sexes that society at large still withdraws. In narrative terms, Sayers marks her choice by having Wimsey as the successful sleuth, but Vane as the character whose point of view is highlighted throughout by way of interior monologue;²⁴ a choice that will be made also in the case of *Busman’s Honeymoon*.

As we have seen, literary quotation is a game Sayers brings to new and sometimes arcane heights. Even the titles of the novels in which Wimsey and Vane appear are allusions to former literary works, and in this case Shakespeare begins to make a more authoritative appearance: if in the case of *Strong Poison* the title is simply a vague echo from *2 Henry VI*, which might, if recognised, mislead the reader as to the vital clue of the

²³ D. L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, cit., p. 440.

²⁴ On this point see J. Armstrong, *The Strange Case of Harriet Vane: Dorothy L. Sayers Anticipating Poststructuralism in the 1930s*, in “Clues. A Journal of Detection”, XXXIII, 2015, pp. 112-122, especially pp. 117-118.

mystery ("Give me some drink, and bid the apothecary / Bring the strong poison that I bought of him", III, 3, 17-18),²⁵ the subsequent novel, *Have his Carcase*, alludes to the famous mispronouncing of the legal phrase *habeas corpus* on the part of Sam Weller in Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*. In the case of *Gaudy Night*, the expression, which refers to an Oxford College celebration, appears in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, when Anthony casts his lot with the Egyptian queen once and for all and calls, "Come, / Let's have one other gaudy night" (III, 13, 184-185).

This double allusion contained in the quotation resurfaces in the last title of our series. *Busman's Honeymoon* appears simply to play with a homely phrase, "busman's holiday", but in fact hides a complicated net of references. In a previous novel, *Strong Poison*, Wimsey, already in love with Vane and fearing to be unable to save her from the gallows, is discovered by his sister in a glum mood during the Christmas holiday. Asked about his state, he says: "Too much plum-pudding [...] and too much country. I'm a martyr, that's what I am – burning in brandy to make a family holiday".²⁶ The last phrase, in its turn, plays on a line from Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, "Butcher'd to make a Roman holiday".²⁷ In *Busman's Honeymoon* all these references interlock when Wimsey, after the 'butchered' body of the victim has been discovered in their honeymoon house, asks the 'real' detective of the story, Superintendent Kirk, whether he and his wife should go away and leave the police to do their job:

²⁵ All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

²⁶ D. L. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, cit., p. 119.

²⁷ Canto IV, stanza 141. The edition used is *Byron. Poetical Works*, edited by F. Page and J. Jump, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970.

“That’s as you like, my lord. I’d be glad enough if you’d stay; you might give me a bit of help, seeing as you know the ropes, so to speak. Not but what it’ll be a kind of busman’s holiday for you,’ he finished up, rather dubiously.

‘That’s what I was thinking,’ said Harriet. ‘A busman’s honeymoon. Butchered to make a—’

‘Lord Byron!’ cried Mr. Kirk, a little too promptly. ‘Butchered to make a busman’s—no, that don’t seem right somehow.’

‘Try Roman,’ said Peter. ‘All right, we’ll do our best’”²⁸

This little exchange introduces a variation of the quotation game, which for the first time involves, beside Wimsey and Vane, also a policeman. As in the case of the already mentioned Charles Parker, policemen, however worthy, are normally not sophisticated enough to participate in the game. Rather, inadequate policemen, like Inspector Umpelty in *Have his Carcase*, would try to participate in it with disastrous result, attributing the Congrevian phrase “no fury like a woman scorned” to the Bible.²⁹ Kirk is allowed in: his entrance modifies the game, and by implication the role of the authorities who are being quoted. Rather than being little asides for the cognoscenti, quotations are now patient steps to self-improvement.

The change in tactics in the choice of the title appears indicative of the strategy Sayers adopts for this last novel, and it may also be due to the singular genesis of this work, whose subtitle is, revealingly, *A Love Story with Detective Interruptions*. *Busman’s Honeymoon* first saw the light as a play; written in collaboration with Muriel St. Clare Byrne, it premiered at the Comedy Theatre in London in 1936. As such, it was obviously capitalising on the success of the Peter Wimsey novels; there is evidence

²⁸ D. L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon. A Love Story with Detective Interruptions*, London, Gollancz, 1937, pp. 164-165.

²⁹ M. McGlynn, *Parma Violets and Pince-Nez: Dorothy Sayers’s Meritocracy*, cit., p. 76.

that Byrne "suggested and encouraged" the composition of the play,³⁰ and in any case a piece written for performance would need to reduce quotations to a minimum. Sayers then worked at the transformation of the play into a novel while the two friends were waiting for a producer, and it is possible that the consciousness that the novel would be a derivative product, and be deprived of its novelty value as a whodunnit, allowed the writer to experiment with a different construction. Almost luxuriating in the freedom the space of the novel would give her, Sayers built a system of frames around her story: on the one hand, she added a Prothalamion and an Epithalamion, partly to highlight the celebration of the marriage that underlies the story, partly to re-connect it with Elizabethan literature (though interestingly there is no mention of Edmund Spenser: the epithalamion that is invoked is John Donne's *Epithalamion of the Lady Elizabeth and the Count Palatine*). On the other hand, as happens in some (not all) of the other Wimsey novels, she constructed a complex system of epigraphs, inserting one for each chapter. As usual, in these cases Sayers draws mostly from early modern literature; but while in the earlier novels she showed a marked preference for minor Jacobean writers, in this volume pride of place is given to Shakespeare, who is the author of the main epigraph set at the beginning of the volume, as well as of a number of epigraphs to individual chapters. Shakespearean epigraphs are a staple of nineteenth-century literature, and here, too, the playwright performs the function of "affable familiar ghost".³¹ This is shown already in the opening quotation, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

³⁰ C. Downing, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 57.

³¹ The quotation (from Shakespeare's Sonnet 86) and the analysis of epigraphs in nineteenth-century writing derive from F. Ritchie and R. S. White, *Shakespeare Quotation in the Romantic Age*, in *Shakespeare and Quotation*, edited by J. Maxwell and K. Rumbold, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 134-135.

“That will ask some tears in the true performing of it: if I do it, let the audience look to their eyes; I will move storms, I will condole in some measure...I could play Eracles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split... a lover is more condoling”.³²

The passage is originally part of Bottom’s self-presentation when the mechanics starts their rehearsals in the Athenian wood. Set before the dedication (which includes Muriel St. Clare Byrne among the dedicatees), it re-proposes the connection with the play from which the novel derives, and at the same time invites the reader to maintain the spirit of detachment Theseus and his court possess during the mechanics’ entertainment in Shakespeare’s comedy. Subsequent Shakespearean epigraphs provide useful pointers, such as the quotation about the “chimney in my father’s house” (*2 Henry VI*, IV, 2, 149) that we find at the beginning of chapter 4. This quotation, referring to the Jack Cade scene in the original, introduces not only the chimney motif that will be central to the murder, but also the role the working class will play in this mystery. It thus calls the reader’s attention to the new importance that this novel, where Wimsey and Vane fully re-discover their rural roots, attributes to characters hitherto confined to the stereotype of the country rustic. The quotation introduces a theme that will become extremely important in the novel, and that can be exemplified in this passage:

“In London, anybody, at any moment, might do or become anything. But in a village – no matter what village – they were all immutably themselves; parson, organist, sweep, duke’s son and doctor’s daughter, moving like chessmen upon their allotted squares. She was curiously excited. She thought, ‘I have married England’”.³³

³² D. L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, cit., p. 5. I have transcribed the quotation as it appears in the novel; the dots correspond to sections Sayers omitted.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

England identifies with Shakespeare, and the epithalamion celebrates the reconciliation of its inner contradictions.³⁴ The development of the novel from the play might also have influenced its prevailing mode, realising what Susan Rowland calls "the shift from parody to pastoral".³⁵ The Shakespearean quotations, insisting on the worth of rural England through its supreme representative, give authority to this shift. Unsurprisingly, one of the non-Shakespearean epigraphs, in chapter 8, comes from an early modern play that may be considered the epitome of Englishness, *Arden of Feversham*.

Aside from epigraphs, quotations run through the novel in a manner that is reminiscent of the quotation game played by Wimsey and Vane in earlier works. However, their function, and the way in which they are proposed, is radically different, and suits the new mode. Such a change is made clear by Kirk himself, as he prepares to interrogate Wimsey with the help of his constable, Joe Sellon:

"So," said Peter, "Galahad will sit down in Merlin's seat."

Mr. Kirk, on the point of lowering his solid fifteen stone into the chair, jerked up abruptly.

"Alfred," said he, "Lord Tennyson."

"Got it in one," said Peter, mildly surprised. A glow of enthusiasm shone softly in the policeman's ox-like eyes. "You're a bit of a student, aren't you, Superintendent?"

"I like to do a bit o' reading in my off-duty," admitted Mr. Kirk, bashfully. "It mellows the mind." He sat down. "I often think as the rowtine of police dooty may tend to narrow a man and make him a bit hard, if you take my meaning. When I find that happening, I say to myself, what you need, Sam Kirk, is contact with a Great Mind or so, after supper. Reading maketh a full man —"

³⁴ S. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell. British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001, p. 75. Note also what Lisa Hopkins writes of Edmund Crispin's *Love Lies Bleeding* (1948): "Crispin's cosy Middle England, where almost all the characters are engaged in education of one sort or another and in which a boys' and a girls' school are collaborating to stage *Henry V*, is a culture in which Shakespeare's place is utterly secure" (L. Hopkins, *Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction: DCI Shakespeare*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 151).

³⁵ S. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell. British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction*, cit., p. 74.

‘Conference a ready man,’ said Harriet.

‘And writing an exact man,’ said the Superintendent. ‘Mind that, Joe Sellon, and see you let me have them notes so as they can be read to make sense.’

‘Francis Bacon,’ said Peter, a trifle belatedly. ‘Mr. Kirk, you’re a man after my own heart’³⁶.

In this passage, which blithely equates Alfred Tennyson and Francis Bacon and gives them the same authority, the new rules of the game are established: quotations can only come from the most canonical and recognizable writers, since it would be cruelly snobbish to taunt Kirk with quotations from Michael Drayton or Robert Burton; each quotation is carefully traced back to its author; and their purpose is either to offer actual help towards solving the murder, or to “mellow the mind”, which means improving it, giving it a moral compass, recalling it back from the narrowness of the present investigation and elevating it. The novel appears to suggest that the practice of quotation, far from providing a moment of aesthetic pleasure, should rather become a discipline, a spiritual exercise. The impression is reinforced by the reiterated appeals on the part of Kirk to his constable that he should make a note of a particularly apt quotation: Kirk is thus passing on to this subordinate the useful lesson, in a didactic process that mirrors what the novelist is proposing to its readers.

In this new order, John Donne, beloved of Peter Wimsey in the previous novel, must also find a new place. There are two important quotations from Donne: one is the already mentioned epigraph taken from the *Epithalamion of the Lady Elizabeth and the Count Palatine*; the other serves as a conclusion to the novel, and is taken from *Eclogue for the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*. In both cases, we abandon the metaphysical poet and approach Donne as a figure of the establishment, a court poet and divine conferring his benediction on the unions of the great.

³⁶ D. L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, cit., pp. 153-154.

Donne makes another, unexpected appearance at the beginning of the novel: part of the preparations for the wedding consists in finding a suitable gift for the bride on the part of the bridegroom and viceversa. While Wimsey gives Vane a quill originally belonging to Sheridan Le Fanu (Vane's, and Sayers', avowed model among detective writers), Vane gives Wimsey a seventeenth century autograph manuscript. As described by Wimsey's mother, it is "a very beautiful letter from D. to a parishioner – Lady Somebody – about Divine and human love".³⁷ The artefact evokes the poet beloved of Wimsey while once again confining Donne to the more acceptable role of priestly advisor, rather than of erotic poet or apologist for suicide. Besides, the letter alludes to the conventions of crime fiction, since it may be read as a parodic allusion to a device occasionally to be found in Golden Age detective stories of the "don's delight" kind which feature a "material Shakespeare", normally a relic in the form of a Shakespeare manuscript.³⁸ While in those cases the relic is essential to the detective story, and very often the ultimate reason for the murder, the John Donne letter is incidental to *Busman's Honeymoon*, and rather points at the nature of the sentimental relationship between Wimsey and Vane. Besides, its monetary value is great, but not such as to be compared with the Shakespearean relics that haunt other detective novels. Harriet Vane can buy it at an auction, with the proceedings of her own published short stories: as she specifies, "three five-thousand-word shorts at forty guineas each for the *Thrill Magazine*".³⁹ While popular entertainment ("where did you get hold of that exceedingly low-class rag?")⁴⁰ finances delicate

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁸ S. Baker, *Shakespearean Authority in the Classic Detective Story*, cit., p. 429. See also L. Hopkins, *Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction: DCI Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 149-179.

³⁹ D. L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, cit., p. 297.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

aesthetic enjoyment, writerly authority becomes commodified in a market in which literature has its place, both among the goods and the currency. Sayers thus demythologises the idea of the authoritative writer of the past as either a creator who stands outside the system of market exchange or a provider of priceless relics – both tags, inevitably, associated with Shakespeare. Besides, the literary relic does not prompt speculation or debate, as is often the case in the genre tradition: rather, it is a given, a token of unassailable truth.

The episode, while reiterating the value of literature for the two protagonists, introduces a recurring theme in the novel: literary authority and its association with detective ability. In the detective stories that conventionally and lavishly make use of Shakespearean quotations, these are often the clue to the crime, or to the identity of the culprit – the quotation game is one the detective needs to win in order to complete his (or sometimes her) job.⁴¹ In this novel, the strategic placing of the literary allusions suggests also something different. Sayers is aware of treading a delicate path between two conventions – on the one hand, Shakespeare as the detective's sidekick, the oracle providing useful *sortes* to solve the murder, in the best Ngaio Marsh tradition; on the other, Wodehouse's happy misuse of Shakespeare as a familiar and slightly comic house deity: "It's like Shakespeare. Sounds well, but doesn't mean anything".⁴² Sayers chooses a different road: literary quotations in her novels are used to provide an extra layer of meaning, "to underscore the issue of interpretation".⁴³ Shakespeare is used to make us reflect on what we are reading, on the fact that even crime fiction can have an underlying moral

⁴¹ S. Baker, *Shakespearean Authority in the Classic Detective Story*, cit., pp. 437-438.

⁴² P. G. Wodehouse, *Joy in the Morning*, London, Penguin, 1999, p. 136.

⁴³ C. Downing, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers*, cit., p. 58.

message. In order to achieve this, the novelist firmly highlights the fundamental role of education – a theme that had already been glanced at in *Gaudy Night*, and that here becomes predominant. If Oxford was the pinnacle of academic training and achievement, those privileged enough to benefit of its atmosphere have then a duty towards society at large, and especially towards the epitome of English society as exemplified in the country village. In this respect, rather than the serious and lovable but fundamentally individualistic Charles Parker, what is required is a figure of authority embodying also the voice of the community: wise, sagacious and stolid Superintendent Kirk, who turns Shakespeare into a familiar companion for convivial meetings (as Wimsey says at the end of one such meeting, “we’ve had quite a Shakespearean evening, haven’t we?”).⁴⁴ Kirk uses Shakespeare as an infallible compass in the detection not so much of crime, but of the principle of right and wrong. If it is true, as noted above, that detective stories contain a dream of justice, such a dream seems to be spelled out for the little-educated in terms of Shakespearean quotations. The novel charts this progress quite clearly, as we go from an early allusion, in which Wimsey’s mother defers to Shakespeare’s authority while noting in her diary a conversation she had with her prospective daughter-in-law:

“Said to her, ‘Well, my dear, tell Peter what you feel, but do remember he’s just as vain and foolish as most men and not a chameleon to smell any sweeter for being trodden on.’ On consideration, think I meant ‘camomile’ (Shakespeare? Must ask Peter)”.⁴⁵

to the end of the novel, when Wimsey and Vane have come to a full understanding of the meaning of their union and can now discard the

⁴⁴ D. L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, cit., p. 360.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

Shakespearean authority, leaving it in the hands of the less educated: “We can’t possess one another. We can only give and hazard all we have – Shakespeare, as Kirk would say...”⁴⁶

The use of quotations goes beyond the allocation of cultural capital for social ranking, and offers the reader a wider perspective on the themes discussed in the novel. Shakespeare performs a metaliterary function, alerting the reader to what is going to happen before the characters are aware of it: arriving at their honeymoon house, Wimsey and Vane find it dark, and apparently uninhabited, since the former owner, who should be there to welcome them, does not answer their summons. Their servant, who has used the door knocker in vain, is invited to try again at the back door: “Wake Duncan with thy knocking”, Wimsey calls out blithely.⁴⁷ Inevitably, the man is in fact lying in the cellar, murdered. Anagnorisis is performed by means of the supremely authoritative medium, William Shakespeare. Thereafter, the allusions to *Macbeth* throughout the book serve as a reminder that the murder mystery may be connected with issues of family and inheritance.⁴⁸ By the same token, the numerous references to *Hamlet* highlight not only the melancholy, introspective nature of the main character, but also the possibility that the English idyll outlined in the novel may be ephemeral, as Kirk begins to understand when he realises that his sergeant was blackmailed by the murdered victim:

“I wouldn’t have believed it.’

‘There are more things in heaven and earth,’ said Peter, with a kind of melancholy amusement.

‘That’s so, my lord. There’s a lot of truth in *Hamlet*.’

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ L. Hopkins, *Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction: DCI Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 28-29.

'Hamlet?' Peter's bark of harsh laughter astonished the Superintendent. 'By God, you're right. Village or hamlet of this merry land. Stir up the mud of the village pond and the stink will surprise you'".⁴⁹

Perhaps most offensive for modern sensibilities is the quotation from *Twelfth Night* justifying the inherent disapproval of a woman who has had the temerity of falling in love with a younger man:

"'Twelfth Night!' cried Mr. Kirk, exultantly. 'Orsino, that's it! "Too old, by heaven, Let still the woman take An elder than herself" – I knew there was something in Shakespeare'".⁵⁰

As can be seen, on most of these cases Kirk is called upon to clarify the reference for the reader, indicating the exact source of the quotation, and to bring its truth resoundingly home. The Shakesperean allusion takes a multifarious role in the novel: it indicates the search for a more popular audience; it is proposed as an indisputable authority; it asserts the never-wavering rightfulness of the detective, only occasionally hinting at self-righteousness.

An especially controversial passage occurs at the end of the novel. Having detected and helped convict the murderer, Peter Wimsey must now face the fact that he has indirectly condemned a man to death. Frantically pacing the chamber on the eve of the execution, he appeals to his attentive wife:

"'My gracious silence – who called his wife that?'
'Coriolanus.'
'Another tormented devil ... I'm grateful, Harriet – No, that's not right; you're not being kind, you're being yourself'".⁵¹

⁴⁹ D. L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, cit., p. 206. The HyperHamlet database identifies no less than eight allusions to the play in *Busman's Honeymoon* (<http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch/index.php/hyperhamlet/hh2>).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

We are struck by the condescending tones of an exchange in which the wife has the role of sympathetic listener, ministering to the husband's neurosis, or, at best, supplying literary references. But there is another level at which the passage can be interrogated: Coriolanus may be truly said to be the least sympathetic character in Shakespeare, a bloodthirsty proto-Fascist. For somebody like Wimsey, who has evoked analogies with Hamlet throughout the novel, the shift is startling. In this sense, the allusion takes sinister overtones. There is evidence, throughout the Wimsey novels, that capital punishment was an object of debate in Sayers' mind, as it infringed the fundamental liberty of the human being to sin. In the case of other Golden Age novelists, the issue is more clearly established – Agatha Christie has her Miss Marple decidedly in favour of it, while Ngaio Marsh's Inspector Alleyn is equally decidedly against. Sayers does not face the matter directly, but lets her aristocratic, fastidious, sensitive detective react to the capital punishment he has caused with a manifestation of the symptoms of shell shock he suffered from in the early novels. The Shakespearean allusion prompts the remembrance of the debate between right and might, a debate Coriolanus fails disastrously.⁵²

Rather than an immovable pillar of wisdom, Shakespeare is here the measure of all debates, the gauge against which different characters, according to their different sensibilities, assess their knowledge, their reactions, their emotions, their ethical stances; the reader is invited to join in what is no longer a parlour game, but rather a spiritual exercise. Such an attitude singles out Sayers from the convention of the genre and sets up a

⁵² S. Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000. Detection, Death, Diversity*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 88: "Sayers is rare in making her detective in *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937) recognise with some pain that in identifying a murderer he too has sent someone to his death".

model later writers imitated. In its opening section, this article alluded to Jill Paton Walsh, the author of some successful *pastiches* of the Wimsey-Vane brand. Paton Walsh also wrote a number of detective novels set in contemporary Cambridge. In one of them, centred on the so-called Bad Quarto of *Hamlet*, there is even a latter-day scholar challenging the centrality of the Bard:

"The idea that there was any particular merit in the works of Shakespeare, was, according to the prevailing school of thought, an artificial creation, put up by British imperialists, white supremacists and male chauvinists, because it privileged the culture of the 'master-race' over all others, and underpinned the imperialist agenda. If Shakespeare was the greatest writer of all time, then he could justify the forced teaching of English all over the empire, and by implication the subordination of authentic native cultures everywhere. Since Shakespeare was a man, and feminist orthodoxy ordained that no man could understand a woman or represent any female character truthfully and fairly, it followed that the worship of Shakespeare was also part of a conspiracy to justify the marginalisation of women and the rejection of women writers from the canon of English studies. The word 'bardolatry' was liberally sprinkled throughout such expressions of opinion".⁵³

The academic who spouts these notions is found dead in a small alley, having fallen from a great height. Shakesporean intertextuality brings its own dream of justice.

⁵³ J. Paton Walsh, *The Bad Quarto. An Imogen Quy Mystery*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2007, p. 150.



ANDREA PEGHINELLI

“IT MUST BE BY HIS DEATH”.
“I, CINNA (THE POET)” AND THE
APPROPRIATION OF
SHAKESPEARE’S GHOSTLY VOICE

1. *Introduction*

When in 2012 Tim Crouch received a commission from the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) for the World Shakespeare Festival, he wrote the fifth play of his *I, Shakespeare* series: *I, Cinna (The Poet)*. The title does indicate a structural relationship with William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, but it also denotes a stand-alone product that raises at once a question of identity concerning the authority of the source play. The use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ may suggest an account of that character told by that same character, or it could also point to the intention to personalise the treatment of that Shakespearean character, the possibility to use it as a source of individual inspiration – as, for instance, it is similarly suggested by the ‘I’ added to ubiquitous portable and mobile devices designed by

Apple.¹ Moreover, it may refer to an extreme process of character self-identification. As a matter of fact, the transformational power in the relation between text and audience originates an intense moment of mutuality, “it acts on me as I act on it”, in a dialectic engagement that is true for every act of artistic creation during which ‘I’ “confronts with a form that wants to become a work through him”.² Therefore, every time a spectator or a reader has experience of, or goes through, a Shakespearean play s/he inevitably adapts its words and appropriates them: “reheard, translated into a private lexicon, authorial property becomes, in Michel Garneau’s apt phrase, ‘tradapted’ – as it meets the mind’s ‘I’”.³ The public, then, becomes a medium through which the Shakespearean (trad)adaptation communicates with its literary past, as repository for cultural memory. This phenomenon seems to be part of a dramatic duplication or, possibly, even a multiplication: a new text stands in for an old text, a playwright stands in for another and the body of the actor stands in, somehow, for both dramatic texts.⁴ The actor’s body interacting with the audience is, therefore, a surrogate for the Shakespearean text(s)⁵ and his/her performance is “the

¹ The ‘I’ was first introduced in 1998 with the launch of the iMac, and initially it was intended to stand for several catchwords: internet, individual, instruct, inform, inspire. Almost every product since then has been branded with the same letter losing its shin only in recent years in new issues, as Apple Watch or MacBook, but keeping it for the most used devices such as the iPad and the iPhone, the most personal dialogue one can have with a digital device. See <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/iphone-apple-name-imac-i-internet-phone-handset-a6881701.html>.

² M. Buber, *I and Thou*, New York, Touchstone-Simon & Schuster, 1970, p. 60.

³ See B. Hogdon, *Afterword*, in *World-wide Shakespeares. Local Appropriations in Film and Performance*, edited by S. Massai, London, Routledge, 2005, digital edition.

⁴ See S. Freeman Loftis, *Shakespeare’s Surrogates. Rewriting Renaissance Drama*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. xii.

⁵ Taking as an example John Milton’s poem *On Shakespeare*, one of the first examples of ‘surrogation’ according to Sonya Freeman Loftis, she remarks that “Milton’s speaker suggests that readers and audience keep Shakespeare alive not just as an effigy but as an effigy of flesh”. As a consequence, “although Milton is really commenting on Shakespeare’s canon”, he makes that comment by reference to the

enactment of cultural memory by substitution".⁶ Displacing Shakespeare, then, could have the function to reconfigure those *timeless values* and *ethics* that are regularly attributed to him within a traditional frame of reference, but, as I will show, this is not exactly the case with *I, Cinna (The Poet)*.

The plays in *I, Shakespeare (I, Caliban, I, Peaseblossom, I, Banquo and I, Malvolio)* were written, directed and performed by Crouch between 2003 and 2011, and first collected in a tetralogy – even though they were not initially conceived as a series. They were principally addressed to young audiences to retell some of Shakespeare's most famous plays from the point of view of one of their minor or secondary characters.⁷ As John Retallack remarked, "[Crouch's] plays speak for the under-represented – the minor character, the young person, the audience. He refutes the 'great man' version of history and finds a thrilling formal release by speaking on behalf of the underdog".⁸ Crouch's mission is to tell the story of the play which hosts the characters, to offer their version for a public of children and teenagers who are possibly unfamiliar with those stories, "but also to make a piece of performance that has integrity in and of itself".⁹ *I, Cinna (The Poet)* was first performed at the Swan Theatre in Stratford in June 2012, and for the first time in the *I, Shakespeare* series Crouch just directed

human body as a symbol of the literary text, or, I would suggest, as a living quotation of it. See S. Freeman, *Shakespeare's Surrogates. Rewriting Renaissance Drama*, cit., pp. xii-xiii.

⁶ J. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 80.

⁷ For the use of 'secondary' or 'minor' in this context see: S. Soncini, "This is you": *Encountering Shakespeare with Tim Crouch*, in *Will Forever Young! Shakespeare & Contemporary Culture*, in "Altre Modernità", XI, 2017, pp. 22-35.

⁸ J. Retallack, *Introduction*, in Tim Crouch, *I, Shakespeare*, London, Oberon, 2011, p. 9.

⁹ T. Crouch, "I, Malvolio": *Bringing Shakespeare to Life for Young Audiences*, in "The Guardian", 16-08-2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/aug/16/i-malvolio-shakespeare-young-audiences>.

it, since the main (and only) role was interpreted by Jude Owusu.¹⁰ What is also interesting in this peculiar case of Shakespearean appropriation¹¹ is the fact that the link with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* was mediated through Gregory Doran's Royal Shakespeare Company staged version, relocated in contemporary Africa. Doran's choice an African setting was inspired by various elements.¹² One of them was the so-called Robben Island Bible, a copy of the complete works of Shakespeare which Nelson Mandela and his fellow inmates read and annotated while they were imprisoned under apartheid in South Africa. Mandela famously signed his name next to the following lines from *Julius Caesar*: "Cowards die many times before their deaths; / The valiant never taste of death but once" (II, 2, 32-33). The same actor – Owusu – who played Cinna the poet in Doran's production, became the protagonist of Crouch's play so as to have a performing duplication as well as a dramatic one. We could then take it as a good example of the dialogic quality of the appropriation, with one version pairing the other.¹³

¹⁰ Tim Crouch subsequently took the role when *I, Cinna (The Poet)* was staged at the Unicorn Theatre in 2020, directed by Naomi Wirthner. The show was also experimentally broadcast live via Zoom in the summer of 2020 in an attempt to bring theatre to life online for young audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. See <https://www.teamlondonbridge.co.uk/love-london-bridge/2020/7/2/i-cinna-the-poet-unicorn-digital-theatre>.

¹¹ Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer define 'appropriation' an exchange with bi-directional effects. *Introduction*, in *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, edited by C. Desmet and R. Sawyer, London-New York, Routledge, 1999. Douglas Lanier suggests that "unlike adaptation, appropriation operates not merely on the Shakespearean text but also on the cultural authority attached to that text". D. Lanier, *Shakespearean Rhizomatics*, in *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, edited by A. Huang and E. Rivlin, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 24. For a thorough discussion of the terms, see also J. Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, London, Routledge, 2016².

¹² See <https://www.rsc.org.uk/julius-caesar/past-productions/gregory-doran-production-2012>.

¹³ On the website of the RSC dedicated to educational resources for *Julius Caesar*, one may watch a film closely based on the RSC stage production of *I, Cinna (The Poet)*. It is advertised as a "stimulus to explore *Julius Caesar* in much more depth" (<https://www.rsc.org.uk/julius-caesar/education>). Owusu's presence as Cinna in Crouch's play might even be considered a casual quotation from Doran's stage version of *Julius Caesar*, since, apart from an interest from the RSC in creating a direct link

2. "I, Cinna (The Poet)" and the nature of adaptation

In this article, I would like to show how *I, Cinna (The Poet)* works on multiple levels of agency: as it challenges the relationship between performer and audience, it also undercuts the hierarchical relationship between author and spectator. As he questions the authority of performance, Crouch exploits, at the same time, the authority of Shakespeare. Although just a few fragments of Shakespeare's text remain visible in the retelling, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is still *the text* from which the protagonist quotes – and sometimes misquotes – at topical moments, thus preserving its authority as a model and its iconic power. *I, Cinna (The Poet)* offers a good example of the double nature of adaptation/appropriation in which the conservative factor is still significantly evident. For instance, Crouch, through the appropriation of Shakespeare's themes and topics, offers his audience the opportunity to consider if and when the use of violence in pursuit of political justice is ever right. This is an unsolvable problem also at the heart of *Julius Caesar*. Moreover, the transposition of Cinna the poet in a major key does not alter his condition: as he fares so badly in convincing the plebeians not to kill him in *Julius Caesar*, so he fails to have an impact on his environment and presents himself as a poet deprived of authority in *I, Cinna (The Poet)*.

between the two performances, so as to integrate productions for grown-ups with works aimed at young audiences, there are no other direct links. For instance, Owusu/Cinna does not speak with the thick African accent Doran chose for his cast of black British actors, nor is there any other scene element to suggest a connection with that staging. "Playfully asking whether the contemporary United Kingdom might in fact be less progressive than classical Rome", as Stephen Bottoms remarked, "Crouch eschews the geographic and cultural distancing inherent in Doran's decision to set *Julius Caesar* in Africa" (S. Bottoms, *The Emancipated Shakespeare: Or, What You Will*, in *Twenty-First Century Drama. What Happens Now*, edited by S. Adiseshiah and L. LePage, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 68).

Therefore, in Crouch's version Cinna serves to tackle the same crucial questions as in Shakespeare about the importance of determining identity, about the capacity of persuasion and the function of oratory. In his retelling, Crouch manages to make those issues personally relevant to spectators¹⁴ without making the character a form of counter-authority because he just shows, as Shakespeare did, the poet's failure at composing and delivering persuasive oratory. By showing the ineffectiveness of a 'prosaic' poet, Crouch seems to reinforce Shakespeare's assertion that Cinna deserves to die¹⁵ and uses his story as a moral admonition for the audience. What will emerge from this article is that *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, far from denoting opposition, makes use of the conservative quality of adaptation through which it legitimates Shakespeare's cultural power and therefore gives his established authority remarkable stability.

I, Cinna (The Poet) could be defined as a recognizable repetition with innovative modifications: every successful adaptation inevitably implies difference as well as repetition, since "to focus on repetition alone [...] is to suggest only the potentially conservative element in the audience response to adaptation".¹⁶ Therefore, if the recognition of the story is necessary for an adaptation/appropriation to be perceived as such, for its success in the cultural context where it is adapted it must also prove dynamic and innovative. In the final chapter of her seminal work, and possibly as a hint for further investigation, Linda Hutcheon points to the cultural parallel with Darwin's biological theory first introduced by Richard Dawkins: "Cultural transmission is analogous to genetic

¹⁴ See S. Bottoms, *The Emancipated Shakespeare: Or, What You Will*, cit., p. 70.

¹⁵ See L. Sansonetti, *Poetic Authority in "Julius Caesar": The Triumph of the Poet-Playwright-Actor*, in *Shakespeare and Authority. Citations, Conceptions and Constructions*, edited by K. Halsey and A. Vine, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 231-248.

¹⁶ L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 115.

transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution".¹⁷ The story propagates and, as is transmitted, it evolves and innovates,¹⁸ but at least a minimum unity of replication will always refer to its matrix, that is the unit of cultural replication Dawkins famously named *meme*. Theatre can be a vehicle for propagation: through the 'adaptive play' a minor character such as Cinna (who can be perceived as a quotation from the source play) expands his own narrative, but constantly refers to the originating background. In contrast with the dismembered Shakespearean quotations with which Samuel Beckett purposely tries to wear out the literary past, Crouch's use of quotations in his appropriation is a symbolic repetition, a reoccurrence of the (literary) past, a sort of revenant, with the power to reinvigorate (it in) the present.

I, Cinna (The Poet) is an interactive play as it demands its audience to respond to the action on stage by writing during the performance. Spectators are prompted by the protagonist to think carefully about the power of words to define and determine reality, about the constant threat to free speech, and to question their role in contemporary society. Cinna makes clear, through the example of his own story, that when ordinary people feel they don't have the power to influence political decisions in their society, they can always try to reverse their marginal role and regain their voice as citizens through an effective and persuasive use of language. That is why, as the performance proceeds, Cinna asks the spectators to exercise themselves in writing, picking up on those issues and, eventually, to write their own version of his story. The aim is to prompt them to assume agency: through such a metatheatrical approach, they are supposed

¹⁷ R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006 [1976], p. 189.

¹⁸ Not necessarily following a hierarchical succession as in Darwinian genealogy.

to produce a newly-fashioned account that, however, will inevitably still take advantage of Shakespeare's influential authority to spread its message.

The originality of the self has been variously challenged and appropriating a text is also a question of showing the power to perform identities: it would be as if "identity itself became defined as a performance within a larger network of cultural citations – we perform ourselves by 'citing' others".¹⁹ If in *King Lear* Lear's discarding of his clothes is part of a profound search for identity, in *I, Cinna (The Poet)* the character appears in a different attire from the Shakespearean text and invites the audience to *put on his clothes*, to write their version of his story and to retell it in a sort of *mise en abîme* in order to define his (but also their) social identity as a poet. Since one is constituted by someone else's discourse, this interpellation "requires the recognition of an authority at the same time that it confers identity through successfully compelling that recognition".²⁰ If then the lines on which the empowering discourse is founded are mainly a quotation from Shakespeare, directly or as a paraphrase, it follows that Cinna's voice can acquire an imposing resonance, as an echo of established power. "The quotation creates authority by its very nature and form", as Marjorie Garber noted, "it instates an authority elsewhere, and, at the same time, it imparts that authority, temporarily, to the speaker or the writer".²¹ In some ways, quotation is a kind of cultural ventriloquism, and the present

¹⁹ S. Freeman Loftis, *Shakespeare's Surrogates. Rewriting Renaissance Drama*, cit., p. xvii.

²⁰ J. Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 33. Butler refers to Althusser's notion of 'interpellation', the constitutive process where individuals recognise themselves as subjects through ideology (L. Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp. 170-186). For a fuller account of Butler's interpretation of Althusser's theory of interpellation, see also J. Butler, *Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All*, in "Yale French Studies", LXXXVIII, 1995, pp. 6-26.

²¹ M. Garber, *Quotation Marks*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 2.

speaker appropriates and virtually incorporates the distinguishing features that characterise the figure being quoted especially when its authority is well recognizable. It would not be possible to address Cinna as a poet outside the frame of the Shakespearean text, since that would mean to assign him a function that does not preexist him as it is clearly intended from the title. The purpose of 'interpellation', then, is "to indicate and establish a subject in subjection, to produce its social contours in space and time" adds Judith Butler, "its reiterative operation has the effect of sedimenting its 'positionality' over time".²² In Crouch's play there are multiple acts of quotation and multiple instances of appropriation. After all, the Shakespearean canon has prompted almost countless creative responses: "from the start, Shakespeare's works have activated their audiences and readers to become (re)writers and to participate in the generation of meaning".²³

3. *Scenes from an announced execution*

At the very beginning of the playtext, before the actual scripted text of *I, Cinna (The Poet)* begins, there is a long quotation (or possibly a citation?)²⁴ from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: the whole Act III Scene 3, the only scene in which Cinna the poet appears. There is no comment, nor

²² J. Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*, cit., pp. 33-34.

²³ R. Hohl Trillini, *Casual Shakespeare. Three Centuries of Verbal Echoes*, London, Routledge, 2018, p. 7.

²⁴ As Sanders remarks, "Quotation can be deferential or critical, supportive or questioning; it depends on the context in which the quotation takes place. Citation, however, presumes a more deferential relationship; it is frequently self-authenticating, even reverential, in its reference to the canon of 'authoritative', culturally validated texts". J. Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, cit., p. 6.

any other reference, it just stands there as an epigraph.²⁵ In the following page, however, in a Note, the author specifies some important directions for production, namely that “This play invites the audience to write during its performance”, as I have just mentioned, and that “space and time need to be given to allow an audience to find their authority in relation to this invitation”.²⁶ It seems, then, that the act of writing in response to Cinna’s spoken story, producing a new (short) textual version of it, is a further appropriation of that story that will receive authority from being a sort of quotation, that is “a throwing of the voice that is also an appropriation of authority”.²⁷ To make this practice work, the authority of the quoted figure must be acknowledged, as is the case with the Shakespearean character, so as to pass its qualities to the appropriating writer/speaker,

“who appears in the act of quoting to have virtually incorporated the predecessor [...] as if the speaker were a Russian doll who had somehow swallowed up these articulate authorities and was therefore able to ventriloquize them from within.”²⁸

If we read the epigraph as a sort of prologue, an explicit declaration to stress the derivative status of the play from the Shakespearean source, then the playtext opens with Cinna’s death, showing thus its self-reflexive nature and the inevitable circularity of the story: if he is the character from that narrative and the story/narration adheres to the source plot, it cannot end but with his death. Is he a ghost, then? Has he forgotten his-story? What story could the audience write if not the story of the death of Cinna?

I, Cinna (The Poet) is a self-standing play whose protagonist just tells the audience a story he borrows from the Shakespearean plot, retold

²⁵ References here are from the published edition of *I, Cinna (The Poet)* and not from its staging.

²⁶ T. Crouch, *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, London, Oberon, 2012, p. 14.

²⁷ M. Garber, *Quotation Marks*, cit., p.16.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 11.

from his point of view.²⁹ There obviously is a re-focalisation of the narrative – since the story is told by just one character – where diegesis gains over mimesis. What we have, in the end, is a transfocalising hypertext or a transfocalised rewriting.³⁰ On the other hand, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* itself is both event and commentary on that event: the moral implications of Caesar's political execution were already a matter of concern in the reception of classical history in early modern England. It is as if the play was aware of the reception of the story it tells, and, therefore, the protagonists of *Julius Caesar* "are subject to a particular form of overdetermined fame – and so the play embodies a kind of double perspective or parallax view. It is both now – present tense – and then – past; it is both a history, meaning the events in the past, and a present retelling of that past".³¹ In *I, Cinna (The Poet)* we have the same angular perspective which shows different time frames: Cinna (re)tells his story in the present while at the same time he makes constant reference to his stage or dramatic past which, as in a dream, he doesn't remember until he meets the tragic fate he is doomed to by his role in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

The examples I selected are intended to show several strategies through which Crouch exploits, and therefore strengthens, Shakespeare's cultural authority. Cinna introduces himself as a writer in his very first line, delivered bursting through a door as he comes back home from getting some food, by telling us he just wrote a poem. He then stresses his

²⁹ "It is only through these characters telling their own story" – as Jan Wozniak observed about the peculiarity of Crouch's *I, Shakespeare* characters to exceed the bounds of the plays they are taken from – "that the plot of the source plays emerges". J. Wozniak, *The Politics of Performing Shakespeare for Young People: Standing Up to Shakespeare*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 61.

³⁰ See G. Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, translated by C. Newman and C. Doubinsky, foreword by G. Prince, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1997 [1982], p. 292.

³¹ E. Smith, *This is Shakespeare. How to Read the World's Greatest Playwright*, London, Pelican Books, 2019, p. 148.

parenthetical relationship with the world: he feels he is excluded from the events of ordinary life, he watches them but he “is not quite part” of them, he is in “brackets to real life”. In a direct address to the audience, he adds: “Do you understand? Brackets. Brackets contain material that can be removed. Without destroying the meaning of the sentence. That’s me. I’m a poet”.³² In stressing his incidental role as a poet in life, he also prompts the audience to think about the actual non-essential or marginal role he has in Shakespeare’s play by the mirroring effect implicit in intertextuality. He seems as well to point to the irrelevance of poetry, and by extension of art, in the world we live in if it is not supported by effectiveness: indirectly, he wants to encourage the audience to be more than mere observers and to engage in public life, developing an awareness of the power of language. In spite of the fact that his feeling of being enclosed marks a separation from a determined context, Cinna’s position can also point to an explanatory or accessory function he can have as a poet within those marks of separation.

He confesses his audience a secret: he has lost his voice as a poet, possibly because the brackets have softened it. He encourages his audience to take part in various exercises in writing while he indicates them specifically what to write – we should not forget *I, Cinna (The Poet)* is mainly addressed to a young audience.³³ He also writes on his notebook trying as well to find words to respond to the alarming situation in his outside world of political unrest and risk of civil war.³⁴ “Let’s write

³² T. Crouch, *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, cit., p. 15.

³³ Even though in the playtext there is no indication of age suitability, Crouch’s personal site suggests that the play is mainly addressed to kids aged in between 11 and 14: see <http://www.timcrouchtheatre.co.uk/show-on-front-page/i-cinna-the-poet-2>.

³⁴ In his depiction of what is happening in the streets of the city outside, he also inserts a few quotes from *Julius Caesar*: “but the police are waiting by the school gates with their guns, daring us to step outside. ‘This is not a holiday’, they shout, ‘go back indoors’”. The two tribunes from *Julius Caesar* are here represented as policemen. It should also be noted that *I, Cinna* opened almost a year after London was ravaged by

together, you and me. We'll write until we know what to write".³⁵ At one point he invites the audience to write the word 'REPUBLIC' and then asks: "Is this a republic, in here, in this place? Are we equal here? I want us to be equal! Here and now. You and me".³⁶ The collective act of writing is also an attempt to establish equality between the performer and the spectators and to stimulate their active participation. He encourages them to write the words he dictates and even spells them to make the writing easier. While he shares his thoughts on the meaning and the implications of words such as 'FREE' or 'CONSPIRACY', he asks the audience to write on the bottom left corner of the sheet of paper that they have been given one word at a time. He starts asking to write the word 'IT' and after a few lines he asks to write 'MUST' next to 'IT', and so on in a similar fashion with the words 'BE', 'BY', 'HIS' and eventually 'DEATH'. The (death) sentence composed by this 'skipped dictation' is the well-known quote from the opening of Brutus' meditation that would spur his thoughts to action (II, 1, 10-12), and Cinna manages to bring it forth without even pronouncing the line as a whole, but just having it casually written down by, supposedly, each member of the audience. At this point he is rather shaken up by the sentence they have in front of their eyes and suggests to just "read it under your breath"³⁷ so as not to be heard by anyone, thus implying the ominous import of such a phrase. It is a weird way of quoting Shakespeare during a performance, but effective in provoking a feeling of suspense and a good

the notorious riots in the summer of 2011. Images on videos show urban riots, protesters, rallying crowds with banners, and then police with riot shields and scenes of violent confrontations, all of them marking the presence of the present. In his direct address to the audience, Cinna shows he inhabits the same world where his audience lives. This is particularly evident when he prompts the spectators to consider the role of 'political' words and the weight they have: "What is free? You are free! Words are free. There is nothing that cannot be done or undone with words".

³⁵ T. Crouch, *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, p. 17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

exercise in appropriation. In this worried state of mind, Cinna starts his account of what he experienced on that same day: his story functions as a prelude, or possibly a prequel, to his only scene in *Julius Caesar*. He tells the audience how he would have liked to speak up to the policemen that stopped him when he got out looking for bread, but chose instead to remain silent and scared. “But I say nothing. I am a coward. Cinna the coward. I hide behind my words. I die many times before my death”.³⁸ When he delivers those lines (mis)quoting *Julius Caesar* (II, 2, 32-33), he is not just using that Shakespearean passage to provide wisdom for an educational function, but he is also quoting one of the ‘sources’ of Doran’s production. Therefore, that quotation could also be interpreted as a move that seeks to acknowledge Shakespeare’s global influence and, to some extent, to re-appropriate it in order to bolster his cultural prestige.

Dreams in *I, Cinna (The Poet)* are central, as they are in *Julius Caesar*, especially for what they tell us about the dreamers and the way they misinterpret their imagery. Both Caesar and Cinna might have avoided their tragic destiny, had they rightly interpreted their omens:

“How will our poem start?

He ‘sees’ the audience.

No way! I dreamt of this! That I was here and you were there. You, there! I dreamt this! [...] Sometimes a dream is what will happen in future, do you agree? In my dream, what then, I talked to you and what then?”³⁹

At this point of the play, Cinna introduces the audience to the interpretation of his dream as if it were a *déjà vu*. In a metatheatrical turn he refers to his stage life and to what happens every night he is represented on the stage but, paradoxically, like other illustrious predecessors such as

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard's celebrated play, he does not remember his *dramatic future*: he has momentarily forgotten Shakespeare. At every performance, then, he is doomed to recollect his story, to give substance to his premonitory dream. This peculiar device of the dream will come back as a refrain in the course of the play until he – inevitably – sightly misquotes from the source play: "Another dream. I dreamt just now that I did feast with Caesar".⁴⁰ To feast, here, means to share the same fate as Caesar; still, Cinna is unable to understand this premonition of danger exactly as it happens in *Julius Caesar*: "The scene of Cinna the poet is in many ways the most symbolically instructive of the whole play: it demonstrates in action the same theme of misinterpretation with which we have been so much concerned".⁴¹ Only when he meets his tragic fate, he realises that it is the end of his dream: "*This* is how my dream ends".⁴² As what happens to Cinna is emblematic for the entire meaning of *Julius Caesar*, so *I, Cinna (The Poet)* restates what we know about Caesar and Cinna (as a miniature, in the source play) and recycles the story on a different stage, showing the potential of quotation as appropriation.

Various quotations from *Julius Caesar* are camouflaged as titles and excerpts from articles in a daily newspaper Cinna skims through: the title is *The Citizen*, and the date is March 15. They appear either as an account of the events that affect the citizens of Rome, or as reported speech in interviews or statements from the protagonists of those events.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴¹ M. Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare. From Metaphor to Metamorphosis*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2013 [1974], digital edition.

⁴² T. Crouch, *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, cit., p. 44.

“Nor heaven nor earth have been at peace tonight ... Graves have yawned and opened up their dead ... Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan ...’ [...] ‘Is this the end of the Republic? See pages 3, 4, 5, & 6. Brutus Comments page 27’.

‘Brutus says: The abuse of greatness ... Crown Caesar, and then, I grant, we put a sting in him...’⁴³

They are not casual quotations because, even though they “may not mean much yet they indisputably are”⁴⁴ – that is, they still take the audience back to a Shakespearean context to evoke an intertextual meaning. This narrative strategy shows how the presence of Shakespeare’s verbal trace, the *Shakespearean gene*, can mutate and adapt when reproduced in subsequent replicators as it could happen, for instance, when members of the audience are asked to write their own version of the story.

In this regard, I believe that it is also useful to take into consideration what Douglas Lanier suggested when he adapted the concept of the ‘rhizome’, as theorised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,⁴⁵ to reconceptualise Shakespearean adaptations as a process of endless becoming. “A rhizomatic conception of Shakespeare situates ‘his’ cultural authority not in the Shakespearean text at all”, Lanier remarked, “but in the accrued power of Shakespearean adaptation, the multiple, changing lines of force that have been created by and which respond to historical contingencies”.⁴⁶ It is worthwhile, then, to observe how the story of Cinna can be transmitted in different narratives and how it will change over time following multiple lineages of descent. It will thus show that Shakespeare’s text is not the only prototype of that narrative, even though it is the ‘strongest’, from which most of the analogies are taken. This stimulating

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴⁴ R. Hohl Trillini, *Casual Shakespeare. Three Centuries of Verbal Echoes*, cit., p. 3.

⁴⁵ See G. Deleuze et F. Guattari, *Milles Plateaux*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1980.

⁴⁶ D. Lanier, *Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value*, cit., p. 29.

suggestion stresses the adaptational nature of the text in a root system which does not necessarily have a rigid vertical structure of transmission. Such a move will let us recognise the status of the adapted text as derivative of previous narratives as well as its power to ever differentiate itself transforming into something forever new in an 'adaptational chain'. Clearly, the incidence of certain quotations – whether intentional, casual, or disembodied – emphasises the conservative authority of the Shakespearean text and therefore its capacity to provide iconic models of symbolic or political signification, but the choices operated in the proliferation of derivative roots can also throw light on other issues of the source narrative. Hohl Trillini seems to point to the same process when she suggests that we should start reading the many borrowings from Shakespeare not as a line of filial descent, but as an often casual series of replications: "We will understand better how such borrowings work if we put aside family metaphors", she writes, "they distract unduly from the continued life of quoted phrases"⁴⁷ that have found other means in which to prosper. Indeed, certain stories are being told and retold and the retelling itself implies that the same narrative will be spoken in different voices. After all, "a story can be thought as a fundamental unit of cultural transmission".⁴⁸ We could think of a narrative as a replicator which needs a vehicle – an organism – to breed. Sometimes a new vehicle is necessary to propagate the story. As Linda Hutcheon and Gary Bortolotti argue, using biological concepts in a heuristic manner, cultural selection is both conservative and dynamic, and

⁴⁷ R. Hohl Trillini, *Casual Shakespeare. Three Centuries of Verbal Echoes*, cit., p. 5.

⁴⁸ L. Hutcheon and G. R. Bortolotti, *On the Origins of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and 'Success' – Biologically*, in "New Literary History", XXXVIII, 2007, p. 447.

the evaluation blueprint for the success of a narrative and for its power to be dominant is measured by its persistence in the long term.

Cinna watches the coverage on the assassination of Caesar on television. He says it is being broadcast on every channel, probably on those all-news channels presenting the same scene over and over: “Caesar is dead. Caesar is dead. I dreamt of this. Caesar’s death. This was also in my dream. I watch it over and over again. On every channel. They play it over and over. Watch it a hundred times now. Can’t take my eyes off it”.⁴⁹ He stresses the repetition of the same scene which is being broadcast (probably with different perspectives from various camera angles) also in the following lines. He is (re)narrating Shakespeare’s story interspersing it not only with quotations, but with comments, impressions, and a few details that Cinna adds in order to adapt the hypotext to the topical context. Then, probably the most quoted line by the historical Julius Caesar – words that he probably never pronounced – comes as a news ticker that Cinna reports for the audience: “Breaking news: Caesar’s last words reported: ‘Et tu, Brute? Then fall Caesar’”.⁵⁰ He does not simply quote Shakespeare here, but refers to the reception of classical tradition in our past and present civilisation; after all, Shakespeare himself apparently echoed in that line the words that Suetonius attributed to Caesar.⁵¹

The account of Caesar’s funeral gives us the opportunity to reflect on another kind of quotation used by Crouch. Cinna presents the audience with a live commentary of the funeral orations as if they were a re-enactment of the events from the source play, updated for a contemporary world. In his narration, the quotations from Shakespeare are reported in an

⁴⁹ T. Crouch, *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, cit., pp. 33-34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵¹ Julius Caesar pronounces a similar version of this sentence in Greek in Suetonius’ *De vita Caesarum*. See S. Gillespie, *Shakespeare’s Books. A Dictionary of Shakespeare Sources*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016², p. 380.

act of ventriloquism: "He [Brutus] steps up to the microphone. 'Had you rather Caesar were living and die all slaves', he says, 'than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men?'"⁵² At first, Cinna is strengthened in his opinions by Brutus' words and, when Antony speaks, he believes that his words are just some political spin; therefore, he doubts Antony can alter the course of action simply with a statement: "And Brutus lets Antony speak at Caesar's funeral. Listen to him. Lend him your ears! What can words do?"⁵³ In this line he even appropriates Antony's words in what could be a case of transvocalisation:⁵⁴

"The noble Brutus hath told you that Caesar was ambitious' he says. Yes. Duh! 'When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept. Is this ambition?' well, yes! He was a politician. That was his job, to kiss babies and weep for the poor."⁵⁵

It is evident, once more, that Crouch plays with well-known quotations from *Julius Caesar* thus enforcing its cultural power. By the comments Cinna adds to the reported speech, he is clearly trying to influence the audience to follow and agree with his point of view in supporting the conspirators. However, as happens with the Plebeians, he changes his mind and takes sides with Antony when he hears his speech. The trigger for the change in his opinion is the poetic power of Antony's funeral oration:

"I come not, friends, to steal away your hearts ...'
 What language is this that Antony speaks?
 'I tell you that which you yourselves do know,
 Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,
 And bid them speak for me'.
 These are words. This is POETRY! [...]"

⁵² T. Crouch, *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, cit., p. 38.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁴ See G. Genette, *Palimpsests*, cit., p. 290.

⁵⁵ T. Crouch, *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, cit., p. 39.

Mark Antony's words change history. [...] Breaking news: Poetry beats Prose."⁵⁶

An audience well versed in Shakespeare's play would pick up these lines immediately. The fragments of direct speech that Cinna repeats are clearly a quotation from *Julius Caesar*, and once again through the convention of the quotation marks not only does he indicate a sign of origin, but also that "this is the real thing, not a paraphrase".⁵⁷ They are well identifiable as a direct citation – even when spoken – because Cinna, and with him Crouch, need Shakespeare's authority to affirm the power of poetry, even though Antony's words in this context are used with a slightly different function than in the source. "This is the poem you will write. And its title, write its title at the top. Its title: THE DEATH OF CINNA".⁵⁸

When Cinna realises his own fate, he eventually remembers his story and inevitably accepts his dramatic destiny. He announces his own death as it is happening: soon after pronouncing the previous lines, he re-enacts his scene quoting Shakespeare's lines, presenting them to the audience as the subject of the poem they are going to write. He is retelling in the present what happened in his dramatic past and indicates how he wants it to be perpetuated in the future. Cinna's fate is assigned him by the Shakespearean hypotext and Cinna becomes aware of it when it is already too late to save his life – it could not be otherwise, since Crouch does not want a different ending for him. Cinna, by prompting the audience to write their own version of the story, questions the authoritarianism of the authority of Shakespeare, but he still makes use and inevitably refers to Shakespeare's cultural and political power. Indeed, he leaves the audience with a well-defined task and an opportunity: his story can serve as a

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵⁷ M. Garber, *Quotation Marks*, cit., p. 27.

⁵⁸ T. Crouch, *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, p. 43.

cautionary example to illustrate how the failure of language to effect action can lead to a condition of powerlessness. Paradoxically, his tale also shows the immediate effects, and the relative risks, a persuasive rhetoric can have on people.

"This is how my dream ends!"⁵⁹

"You have three minutes. Bring my death to life with your words."⁶⁰

"Tell my story. Write your poems. Send them out. Words work but only if you work words. Remember Cinna, your words will say. Remember the poet."⁶¹

He is now the ghost of himself and could be defined as "both a duplication and an attenuation of the original: in effect a shadowy revenant, a ghost".⁶² As in the best tradition of Shakespearean ghosts, Cinna asks to be remembered. The illustrious precedent, the ghost of King Hamlet, orders his son on parting: "Adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me" (I, 5, 90).⁶³ Whether Hamlet literally takes down on his notebook the last words of the ghost of his father, or just impresses them in his memory, nonetheless he repeats them as a quotation, and actually misquotes them since he misses one "adieu" in his repetition (I, 5, 110). The ghost repeats his "adieu" three times only in the Quarto editions of *Hamlet* (Q1 and Q2) and just

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶² C. Desmet, *Recognizing Shakespeare, Rethinking Fidelity*, in *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, edited by A. Huang and E. Rivlin, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 45.

⁶³ For the quotation of the ghost, I refer to the text of *Hamlet* edited by John Jowett for The New Oxford Shakespeare (*The Complete Works*, edited by G. Taylor, J. Jowett, T. Bourus, and G. Egan, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, vol. I), which is mainly based on the Second Quarto (see Jowett's introduction to *Hamlet*). The transmission of the text of *Hamlet* has been a source of debate in editorial history that is still evident in the different approaches to the editorial choices adopted in recent editions. See, for instance, *Hamlet. A Critical Reader*, edited by A. Thompson and N. Taylor, London, Bloomsbury, 2016.

twice in the Folio. Therefore, Hamlet doesn't misquote the ghost of his father in the Folio. This apparently trivial textual issue could be taken as an example of how a misquote in Shakespeare can also show that editors, or scholars, are often doomed to 'misquote Shakespeare' when they have to decide how to reproduce a line if there are various texts available. However, Hamlet's "response to the ghost's final command [...] is to turn to playwriting"⁶⁴ by writing the interpolations to *The Murder of Gonzago*, and so does Cinna when he asks the audience to re-member him by writing a 'body of work' for his story that, in turn, will generate interest in the Shakespearean text. This appropriative model can be taken to illustrate the conservative factor implicit in adaptation; since it tends to reify the cultural authority it draws from, the rhizomatic structure I mentioned before shows how Shakespearean narratives can recombine in ever differentiating particulars constituting a network of connections that adds up to Shakespeare as a 'living embodiment' of cultural life at a given historical moment. This version of "Shakespeare-as-model" does not question its cultural power, instead it "complicates the notion of cultural domination" and "problematizes the model of Shakespearean appropriation".⁶⁵

4. *The afterlife of the character*

The verbal reproduction of the words of a previous speaker implies the incorporation of two into one and possibly, according to a post-structuralist argumentation, the 'death' of the predecessor's authorial voice: "Either the present speaker channels an alien voice with alien intentions [...] or the authority being quoted is swallowed up by the present

⁶⁴ S. Freeman Loftis, *Shakespeare's Surrogates. Rewriting Renaissance Drama*, cit., p. 106.

⁶⁵ D. Lanier, *Shakespearean Rhizomatics*, cit., p. 36.

speaker".⁶⁶ In his 'I' plays, Crouch underlines the importance of the telling – and re-telling, as in *I, Cinna (The Poet)* – of stories in a pure theatrical sense, as usually happens in theatre where stories take shape and are constantly repeated with variations.⁶⁷ Should his spectators ignore the actual plot of *Julius Caesar*, they nevertheless bring with them the story of Cinna to thrive in their fantasy and to further on in virtually infinite possibilities. Roland Barthes famously argued that "Language knows a 'subject' not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it".⁶⁸ To paraphrase his argument, I would say that the 'I' in Crouch's 'I' series denotes a subject not a person, and I would add that it is also an interchangeable, plural subject.

What determines Cinna's fate, both in Shakespeare and in Crouch, is not a simple misreading/mishearing of his name – the poet for the conspirator – but it is a deliberate act on the part of the plebeians that do not recognise his role in society. If in *Julius Caesar* Cinna the poet dies and with him Shakespeare dramatises an attack on poetry, in Crouch not only does he live on as a ghost, but he also asks his audience to retell his story, to become functional poets (unlike him) in the name of Shakespeare – thus, the final authority remains bestowed on Shakespeare's text. The author therefore is not dead but lives as his cultural authority does in the rewritings of the spectators. His story propagates in variants that still bring with them the genes of Shakespeare: they are there to praise Shakespeare's established cultural power, not to bury it.

⁶⁶ C. Desmet, *Recognizing Shakespeare, Rethinking Fidelity*, cit., p. 45.

⁶⁷ See J. Wozniak, *The Politics of Performing Shakespeare for Young People: Standing Up to Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 70-79.

⁶⁸ R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, in Id., *Image Music Text*, Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath, London, Fontana Press, 1977, p. 145.



IOLANDA PLESCIA

SHAKESPEARE, THE FATHER OF ENGLISH? A REVIEW OF THE VOCABULARY QUESTION

1. Introduction

Among the many ways in which Shakespeare has been considered a ‘father’ of English culture, the idea that he had a material creative impact on the very fabric of his country’s language, contributing a vast number of neologisms and idiomatic expressions to it, is one of the hardest to debunk. Such an idea, which David Crystal was one of the first to call a myth¹ – and which comprises two separate myths, one related to Shakespeare’s lexical inventiveness and the other to the size of his vocabulary – may have been encouraged and enhanced by the proliferation of citations around Shakespearean texts, which have lent special authority even to his most trivial utterances. This mythical account of Shakespeare’s language is alive and well in the digital age, appearing time and time again especially online, but also in some important scholarly sources: it seems to serve specific

¹ D. Crystal, *Think On My Words. Exploring Shakespeare’s Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 2-10.

cultural purposes which the present review article aims to discuss, taking into account a small but representative selection of influential books on Shakespeare's language that have maintained the exceptionality of the playwright's vocabulary in quantitative terms. The examples are all the more significant since the quality of their scholarship is undoubted, which is not always the case with the more popular sources.

A quick Google search on the query "Shakespeare and language" will return the reassuring information that Shakespeare is not only the father of English literature (with a handful of dissenters arguing in favour of Chaucer), but the actual progenitor and producer of the English language as we know it. Scores of popular websites will report some version of this story:²

"His impact endures not only in the way we express ourselves, but how we experience and process the world around us. Had Shakespeare not given us the words, would we truly feel 'bedazzled' (*The Taming of the Shrew*)? Had he not taught us the word 'gloomy' (*Titus Andronicus*), would it be a feeling we recognised in ourselves?"³

The eternal chicken-or-egg question – does the concept pre-exist language or is it language itself that produces the word and the concept? – is here roundly answered in favour of language: in this commentator's view, Shakespeare has given us words so powerful that they allow us to conceive, and therefore feel, emotions we would not have been able to identify otherwise. Another paragraph of the article quoted above, a BBC feature written in the year of Shakespeare's 450th birthday, is entitled

² On 'clickbait websites' reporting the story, but also serious academic articles on the subject, see J. Hope, *Who Invented Gloomy? Lies People Want to Believe About Shakespeare*, in *The Shape of a Language*, edited by I. Plescia, "Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies", III, 2016, pp. 21-45 (in particular p. 22, notes 3 and 4).

³ H. Anderson, *How Shakespeare Influences the Way We Speak Now*, "BBC CULTURE", 21/10/2014 (<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20140527-say-what-shakespeares-words>).

“Famous phrases”, and uses quotations from a number of Shakespeare plays to argue in favour of his influence over our everyday use of language. Among other often cited expressions, the common phrase “to be in a pickle”, indicating a difficult predicament, is attributed to *The Tempest*, without any further indication of the location of the citation. It is true, as a quick online search will show, that Alonso asks Trinculo “How camest thou in this pickle?”, at 5.1.282, and receives this answer: “I have been in such a pickle since I saw you last” (l. 283). Yet an equally easy search in the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives at least three similar uses in Heywood, Tusser, and Foxe before Shakespeare.⁴ It is as if the mere mention of a Shakespeare quote, even one lacking any precise coordinates, must be taken by the reader on its own authority, with no further questions asked.

Such claims are even more striking when one considers that the author of the article is better informed than most. In fact, she goes on to concede that, yes, digital humanities scholars and linguists have recently corrected some of the ideas that have been held about Shakespeare’s language over time:

“Scholars have argued back and forth over just how many of these words and phrases Shakespeare actually coined, and how many he merely popularised by bedding them down in a memorable plot. In the past few years, quantitative analysis and digital databases have allowed computers to simultaneously search thousands of texts, leading scholars to believe that we may have overestimated his contribution to the English language. According to a 2011 paper by Ward EY Elliott and Robert J. Valenza [...], new words attributed to Shakespeare have probably been over-counted by a factor of at least two. The *OED* is coming to reflect this: in the 1950s, Shakespeare’s tally of first-use citations stood at 3,200. Today, it’s around 2,000”.⁵

⁴ W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, edited by V. Mason Vaughan and A. T. Vaughan, in *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, edited by R. Proudfoot, A. Thompson, and D. Scott Kastan, London, Thomson Learning, 2010. *OED*. “pickle, n., II 4 a”, *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2022, *sub voce*.

⁵ H. Anderson, *How Shakespeare Influences the Way We Speak Now*, cit.

However, the feature misses the point of the new inquiries, happy to settle for 2,000 first-used words rather than 3,200 (“Not that 2,000 is bad going, especially when so many of those words saturate our everyday speech”). The point being that, as quantitative investigations progress thanks to the ever-increasing masses of searchable text provided, for example, by *Early English Books Online*,⁶ discovering antedatings of words previously, and joyously, attributed to Shakespeare, that number is destined to keep shrinking. And what will we be left with then? If we persist in explaining even part of Shakespeare’s greatness with his creative contribution to the language in terms of word-coining, is his cultural standing not destined to diminish in the future? This, I suggest, is one of the reasons why mainstream media outlets and some scholarly works are equally reluctant to accept the idea that Shakespeare’s ability to pull words out of his artistic hat has been blown out of proportion. The fact that a major British media outlet such as the BBC website should publish such a piece is significant in this respect: it parallels other patriotic celebrations of the greatest English writer of all time which can be found splashed all over the Internet.

I would like to suggest here that the appearance of Shakespeare as a demiurgical wordsmith at the peak of the English Renaissance, when the language was reaching its modern shape from a structural point of view and responding to a national cultural project of enrichment and search for linguistic prestige, serves to fuel a larger myth of creation of the English language, termed by Richard J. Watts as “the myth of greatness”.⁷ Watts has argued persuasively that many apparently factual accounts of the history of English adopt a teleological perspective which looks at the

⁶ See <https://www.english-corpora.org/eebo>.

⁷ R. J. Watts, *Language Myths and the History of English*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 139-141.

development of the language through lens tainted by an ideology of greatness, giving rise to a number of misrepresentations which all serve to bolster the overarching myth of a supposed “superiority of English”. One of the examples to which he points is the widespread choice to preface a number of changes in vowel pronunciation which began in the 15th century with the adjective ‘great’ – the Great Vowel Shift – which he sees as an attempt to portray the phenomenon as unitary and sweeping, ushering in the modern age. A convenient description for a complex linguistic issue which, he contends, must be studied at a more local level. In much the same way, using a few unsubstantiated quotations to cast ‘Shakespeare the neologiser’ as the main character of a (hi)story in which great weight is placed on the specific period of early modernity provides a convenient explanation for what is perceived as the ‘peak’ of English language development – the climax of the story, so to speak.

It might seem unfair to scrutinise the generalist position of a celebratory BBC article so closely, but the attitude described is prevalent in other outlets that are dedicated to the appreciation and cultivation of Shakespeare’s work. For example, the very first hit in the Google search mentioned above brings us to the website of the Royal Shakespeare Company, which states that

“[...] the early modern English language was less than 100 years old in 1590 when Shakespeare was writing. No dictionaries had yet been written and most documents were still written in Latin. He contributed 1,700 words to the English language because he was the first author to write them down”.⁸

Here the figure has dropped further and sounds more plausible – 1,700, a number still endorsed by David Crystal in 2008⁹ – and the position

⁸ See <https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare/language>

⁹ D. Crystal, *Think On My Words. Exploring Shakespeare’s Language*, cit., p. 9.

is articulated more clearly: Shakespeare is defined not as a coiner of words but merely as the first to have set them down in writing. The idea that an author can contribute to a language by being the first to set words down – or rather, by being the first to be able to claim a recorded entry, surviving in time – is a more reasonable way of thinking about linguistic innovation, since it will never be possible to be sure about who the first person to utter an expression was. Here too, however, imprecise quotations are floated around to support the grand claim that Shakespeare “invent[ed] completely new words” and “was the first person to use” a number of words, such as “unfriended”, which is found in *Twelfth Night* supposedly for the first time, in Antonio’s speech at 3.3.5-11:

“I could not stay behind you: my desire,
More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth:
And not all love to see you (though so much
As might have drawn one to a longer voyage)
But jealousy what might befall your travel,
Being skillless in these parts: which to a stranger,
Unguided and unfriended, often prove
Rough and inhospitable.”¹⁰

Again, no effort to provide the exact quote is made, nor are any additional sources used to fact-check: in this particular case, *OED* gives two occurrences of ‘unfriended’ used in the same sense before Shakespeare (“Not provided with friends; friendless”), one by Thomas More in his *History of Richard III*, and one by Roger Ascham.¹¹ Linguists and historians of English have been challenging the number and scope of this kind of contributions for some time now, with persuasive arguments.

¹⁰ *Twelfth Night*, edited by J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, in *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, edited by R. Proudfoot, A. Thompson, and D. Scott Kastan, London, Thomson Learning, 2010.

¹¹ “unfriended, adj.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, *sub voce*.

This article, then, proposes a reflection upon the reasons why we apparently prefer to believe linguistic myths about Shakespeare, supported by randomly quoted passages, than to ask more cogently where exactly his linguistic creativity lies. In order to do this, it firstly provides a brief review of studies that have presented rational evidence for not believing the Shakespearean vocabulary myth. I understand such studies as an attempt to deconstruct the all-encompassing, tidy, unifying – in Watts’s sense – idea of Shakespeare as creator of a vast number of individual words. The article then moves on to consider persisting depictions of Shakespeare’s vocabulary as exceptional, asking why this disproven theory is perpetuated even in intelligent and influential works of the past two decades. This is work by scholars who provide fine, linguistically-informed readings and pay attention to social and political contexts, who display impeccable philological acumen in other respects, but for whom renouncing the underlying vocabulary myth seems impossible. While most scholars, audiences and readers will probably agree that gauging the impact and importance of Shakespeare’s language entails much more than counting words, the debate on his linguistic inventiveness has, surprisingly, largely hinged on repeated truisms rather than on a re-examination of other areas of creativity which do not necessarily involve introducing new lexicon into English.

2. *Sizing up Shakespeare’s vocabulary*

For almost two decades now, the myth of Shakespeare as creator and possessor of an unequalled vocabulary has been disputed by a small but growing number of scholars dedicated to what Jonathan Hope has called “zombie killing”, that is, correcting mistaken ideas about the size and composition of the playwright’s vocabulary which keep resurrecting,

especially in online sources: a ‘zombie idea’ is defined by Hope as one “that people cling to, or which sporadically reappears, despite refutation”.¹² Besides Crystal, I focus here in particular on three relatively recent studies, by Jonathan Hope (2016), Hugh Craig (2011), and Ward Elliott and R. J. Valenza (2011), which can be taken as vantage points, since the authors have reviewed the previous existing positions and carried out new digital analyses, to which the reader may turn to find information on earlier skeptics of the ‘enormous vocabulary theory’ (including perhaps the most famous among them, Jespersen), who seem to have gone largely unheeded.¹³

Most recently, developing a previous argument on the notion of Shakespeare as creative genius deriving from a Romantic understanding of what an author must be, Hope set out in a 2016 article – aptly titled *Who Invented Gloomy?*¹⁴ – to deflate the myth of invention attached to a number of words attributed to Shakespeare in a variety of sources:

“It is a curious fact of the great Shakespeare vocabulary myth that many of the sites spreading it, and even some academic articles, are aware of the problems with taking OED first citations as evidence. Nonetheless, a few sentences after they acknowledge the problems, most revert to the zombie language, defaulting to a position where Shakespeare is still a coiner or inventor of new words (or phrases). People are desperate to ‘save’ his position as a creative genius despite the known problems with the ‘evidence’ they cite. So why won’t the idea die? In this case, the one zombie which escapes the purge is Romanticism. Our model of poetic genius stems from a Romantic view of the writer (one rather alien to Renaissance notions of writing) which stresses

¹² J. Hope, *Who Invented Gloomy? Lies People Want to Believe About Shakespeare*, cit., p. 23.

¹³ A concise but exhaustive recap of historical attitudes to the size and inventiveness of Shakespeare’s vocabulary is found in K. Johnson, *Shakespeare’s Language: Perspectives Past and Present*, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2019, pp. 71-79. On Otto Jespersen’s position, see W. E. Y. Elliott and R. J. Valenza, *Shakespeare’s Vocabulary: Did It Dwarf All Others?*, in *Stylistics and Shakespeare’s Language: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by J. Culpeper and M. Ravassat, London, Continuum, 2011, pp. 34-54 (especially pp. 36-37).

¹⁴ J. Hope, *Who Invented Gloomy? Lies People Want to Believe About Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 21-45.

originality, and ‘newness’. What could better confirm our sense of Shakespeare’s superiority to other writers than the notion that he ‘creates’, in some substantial way, modern English?”¹⁵

Some of the misattributed words are in very common use today: *eyeball*, *fashionable*, *gloomy*, *laughable*, *generous*. Hope thus proceeds to describe a simple, empirical process that anyone can follow to antedate such words and thus re-attribute them. In some cases, it is sufficient to revisit the entry for the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as I have done to fact-check the quotations given in the BBC and RSC articles discussed above, for some Shakespearean first citations have already been corrected in its own, subsequent revisions: this is the case of the word *eyeball*, for example, recently reattributed to William Patten, author of *The Calendar of Scripture* (1675).¹⁶ In others, Hope points to repositories of digitised texts such as the *Early Print*, *JISC Historical Texts* and *EEBO-TCP*¹⁷ which, if searched properly, will turn up, in some cases, dozens of antedatings (antedatings which, as mentioned, are increasingly being taken into account in the *OED* itself). Hope’s invitation is that students and researchers begin to check all the words currently attributed to Shakespeare as first uses, or first recordings, if not inventions.

The novelty of the resources Hope indicates, and the speed and accuracy with which they can now be searched, is such that even David Crystal’s 2008 exposé of the “invention myth” now appears outdated.¹⁸ As we have seen, Crystal then upheld the view that about 1,700 out of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

¹⁶ “Eyeball, n., 1.a”, *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2021, *sub voce*.

¹⁷ *Early Print – Curating and Exploring Early Printed English*, a collaborative project of Northwestern University and Washington University in St. Louis, <https://earlyprint.org>; *Historical Texts*, <https://historicaltexts.jisc.ac.uk>; Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup>.

¹⁸ D. Crystal, *Think On My Words. Exploring Shakespeare’s Language*, cit., pp. 8-10.

OED first citations attributed to Shakespeare might plausibly be his inventions¹⁹ – a number that Hope invites us to question. However, the merits of Crystal’s argument against invention lie not in this particular estimate, certainly destined to shrink as progress is made in antedating, but rather in the historical contextualisation he provides, stressing how lexical creativity, mostly achieved through affixation and suffixation of Greek and Latin borrowings imported by the thousands especially thanks to translation, was a feature of the entire early modern age, and not of Shakespeare’s work alone.

Along with the invention myth, Crystal also proceeded to demolish the “quantity myth”²⁰ – the idea, that is, that Shakespeare possessed a vocabulary unsurpassed by any other author before or after him – by pointing out that while he did have a large vocabulary when compared to his peers, the English language has expanded considerably over the centuries after Shakespeare’s death, so that it becomes logically impossible to defend the claim that his vocabulary was vaster than any writer’s. The clarity, and common sense, of such an observation is such that one wonders how it is still possible to find this very claim in otherwise trustworthy sources such as histories of English and serious treatments of Shakespeare’s language. There may be, in this case, some degree of confusion between actual invention of words and Shakespeare’s acceptance of foreign words into the language, his welcoming, multilingual stance, in tune with the Elizabethan translation movement that enriched the language in size and scope, but which was looked upon with suspicion by an opposing party of purists. While such new words must of course be

¹⁹ In the meantime, many words have been antedated, and Jonathan Culpeper has since adjusted the figure to 1,502, a number which seems destined to shrink considerably, as discussed below.

²⁰ D. Crystal, *Think On My Words. Exploring Shakespeare’s Language*, cit., pp. 2-7.

distinguished from coinages, they are part of the same drive towards renovating the English language and testify to the multilingual environment in which Shakespeare worked.

Other studies have tackled the issue of size, especially with the aid of digital tools, since Crystal's book. In 2011, Hugh Craig compared Shakespeare's vocabulary, which he estimated to be around 20,000 different words, to that of his contemporaries, by quantitatively analyzing a corpus comprising twenty-eight plays generally accepted as Shakespearean against about a hundred plays by other writers. While the results confirmed that Shakespeare's vocabulary was larger than that of his peers, he emphasised that more of his plays survive than those of any other contemporary playwright: he was possibly more productive than everyone else, but the larger available sample proves only that "he had more opportunity to use different words".²¹ Furthermore, by standardising the samples under scrutiny, so that segments of the same length (the first 10,000 words of plays) are analysed and "playwrights with large or small canons are neither at an advantage or a disadvantage",²² Craig concludes that Shakespeare is actually quite typical in the average number of different words he uses:

"For the secrets of Shakespeare's undoubted greatness, it seems we must look elsewhere than in a prodigiously rich vocabulary in the particular terms we have been examining – that is, the number of different words he uses and the number of new words in a given work. Jespersen and Crystal were right to be skeptical about the myth about Shakespeare's vocabulary, but they did not make comparisons with Shakespeare's peers and so attributed Shakespeare's large vocabulary to an exceptional range and variety of situations in his drama. The truth is much simpler: Shakespeare has a larger vocabulary because he has a larger canon".²³

²¹ H. Craig, *Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Myth and Reality*, in "Shakespeare Quarterly", LXII, 2011, p. 60.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

The claim – bolstered by other experiments in the second part of Craig’s article – that Shakespeare’s language is “an extraordinary achievement with the regular resources of the English of his day rather than a linguistic aberration”²⁴ is based on the kind of numerical data that scholars are now in a position to analyse quickly and efficiently. Yet the idea that Shakespeare had the largest vocabulary of all time stubbornly persists.

A study that carried out various vocabulary tests to explore the same research question was the one produced by Elliott and Valenza in the same year, 2011, mentioned in the BBC piece quoted at the beginning of this article. The study was undertaken at roughly the same time as Craig’s and independently came to similar conclusions, arguing that “much of Shakespeare’s pre-eminence over others is due to the greater accessibility to his writing. He wrote more than others and was better recorded, catalogued and anthologised. The people who wrote the *Oxford English Dictionary* could get to him like they could not get to other writers”.²⁵ Elliott and Valenza conducted tests thanks to a program, *Intellex*, which they developed in order to measure verbal “richness” in three different ways,²⁶ looking at large blocks of 40,000 words from Shakespeare, eight of his contemporaries, and Milton. Their results show that “once you remove the gross biases of corpus size from the calculations, it becomes clear that, if anyone’s vocabulary dwarfed others in size, it was Milton’s, and maybe Spenser’s, and not Shakespeare’s”.²⁷ They also addressed the invention myth, discussing different ways of counting coinages that may have contributed to it, and showing how the increasing pace of digitisation of other writers’ texts, as well as advances in attribution studies, will cause

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁵ W. E. Y. Elliott and R. J. Valenza, *Shakespeare’s Vocabulary*, cit., p. 37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-45.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

previous estimates of Shakespeare coinages to shrink progressively. The task of going through all the words not yet disproven as neologisms has very recently (2019) been taken up by the team of the *Encyclopedia of Shakespeare's Language Project*, an AHRC-funded project currently underway at Lancaster University and led by Jonathan Culpeper, which has produced the freely accessible *Enhanced Shakespeare Corpus*. A 'spin-off' project funded by the British Academy, with Jonathan Hope as advisor, will carefully scrutinise each instance by using both the *ESC* and *EEBO*.²⁸ In an online PhD seminar given at Sapienza University in February 2021, Culpeper estimated that fewer than a quarter of the 1,502 words remaining as first citations in the *OED* can reasonably be considered Shakespeare's, and that this number will also continue to shrink once special cases such as nonce words are excluded.

3. *What we want to believe*

It is understandable, if far from accurate, that websites dedicated to providing introductions to Shakespeare should employ language with a triumphant ring to it, and some simplification for the general public is to be expected. However, while it may be necessary to distinguish Shakespeare as a popular icon in the culture of the worldwide web from his standing in academia, many reputable scholarly sources have also tended to subscribe to the myth of exceptionality in vocabulary. It may be that since these sources were still holding outdated positions around the turn of the millennium, those ideas have trickled down in time and have firmly attached themselves to popular websites today, but also to some types of

²⁸ For more information on *The Encyclopedia of Shakespeare's Language Project*, see <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/shakespearelang>.

academic writing. An extremely successful manual by Albert Baugh and Thomas Cable, for example, used by generations of students of the history of English and which has been updated several times over the years, has kept a rather ambiguous passage about Shakespeare's language through successive editions up to the latest, its sixth, published in 2013:

“It is a well-known fact that, except for a man like the Elizabethan translator Philemon Holland, Shakespeare had the largest vocabulary of any English writer. This is due not only to his daring and resourceful use of words but also in part to his ready acceptance of new words of every kind [...]. Some of the words Shakespeare uses must have been very new indeed, because the earliest instance in which we find them at all is only a year or two before he uses them (e.g., *exist*, *initiate*, *jovial*), and in a number of cases his is the earliest occurrence of the word in English (*accommodation*, *apostrophe*, *assassination* [...]).”²⁹

This position is more nuanced, as is to be expected since the authors of the book are experts in the history of English, aware that language cannot spring suddenly out of the skill of a single creator, however gifted. Shakespeare is not credited here as the inventor of words, but as an open-minded selector who has picked up on what are supposed to be very new items in the language. In this sense, he is interestingly compared to a prolific translator such as Philemon Holland, possibly generating some confusion on the difference between coinage and borrowing, but also usefully highlighting that Shakespeare's was an age in which foreign words circulated and were largely being adopted into English. Still, the quantity myth as defined by Crystal lives on in this paragraph, since the phrase “the largest vocabulary of any English writer”, though it possibly was meant to refer to the period under examination in the chapter on the Renaissance in which it appears, can easily be taken, as it stands, for a comprehensive statement involving the entire history of English literature. This is, as

²⁹ A. C. Baugh and T. Cable, *A History of the English Language*, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2013, pp. 230-231.

Crystal has noted, a simply untenable position, by virtue of the mere fact that the vocabulary of English has continued to expand after Shakespeare's time. The claim that Shakespeare's use of certain words is the 'earliest occurrence' is also questionable, as we have seen in the previous section – notice here the mention of the pet word *assassination*, nearly infallibly quoted in pieces considering Shakespeare as a neologiser – but it is that initial mis-phrasing on the size of his vocabulary that can be particularly confusing, to students in particular. In this case as well, citations of individual words are not contextualized or related to their source, but given as data to be accepted on its own merit.

If one of the best-known histories of English has consistently represented the quantity myth, it will perhaps not be surprising to find the legend of Shakespeare's exceptionally large vocabulary reverberating at different times even in scholarly sources. It is, however, particularly interesting to find the myth perpetuated in some of the comparatively few books (as opposed to the copious strictly literary inquiries available) that have devoted extensive space to Shakespeare's linguistic world. In the present section I comment again upon three chosen examples, to illustrate the role Shakespeare's words play in narratives about the development of English. The books from which they are taken are different in nature and scope, but all are highly enjoyable and essential reading for anyone interested in Shakespeare's language. One, by Russ McDonald,³⁰ is the work of an acute and distinguished literary scholar with a keen interest in linguistic effects, produced at the turn of the millennium, when arguments against exceptionality in size were still scarce; the second is Seth Lerer's

³⁰ R. McDonald, *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

account of the “invention” of English, published in 2007,³¹ just before Crystal’s 2008 book but after his 2004 glossary, *Shakespeare’s Words*,³² at a time, that is, when systematic inquiries on vocabulary were being undertaken. In both cases, to be fair, it is too early to expect conclusions on Shakespearean vocabulary to run completely counter to the prevalent ones, but they are examples of how even authors who problematise the issue of vocabulary seem less interested in actual numbers than in a general celebration of linguistic inventiveness which fits into a neat narrative of ‘greatness’: choosing to view the early modern period not as one characterised by specific formal changes and challenges (as are all periods in the history of a language), but in a teleological perspective, as *the* period in which English ‘came into its own’, implies a need for an agent, a primary cause of change. In the third case, however, Paula Blank’s *Shakesplish* (2018),³³ it is interesting to see how the acquisitions of the 2010s studies described in paragraph 2 seem not to have been taken into account in what is in many cases a brilliant, and far from bardolatric, discussion of the relevance of Shakespeare’s language today.

The certainty with which Shakespeare is considered to have had an exceptionally large vocabulary, to which he added invented words by the hundreds or thousands, reappears in McDonald’s influential *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language* (2001), which offers a more balanced than most, but still partial account of Shakespeare’s linguistic creativity. While recognising and even stressing the importance of historicisation in looking at an author’s use of language, McDonald sets out to discuss Shakespeare’s

³¹ S. Lerer, *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007.

³² D. Crystal and B. Crystal, *Shakespeare’s Words. A Glossary and Language Companion*, London, Penguin, 2004.

³³ P. Blank, *Shakesplish*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2018.

“remarkable role in expanding the English vocabulary”.³⁴ It is important not to draw hasty conclusions about the extent of this book’s research: McDonald is of course fully knowledgeable about his subject matter. He usefully recaps the status of the Shakespearean vocabulary debate in history up to the beginning of the 2000s: critics and readers in pre-digital ages believed in a personal and conspicuous contribution of Shakespeare to the language quite early on, as testified by Francis Meres, who noted in *Palladis Tamia* (1598) that a handful of authors, among whom he cites Shakespeare, had ‘mightily enriched’ the English tongue.³⁵ They then shifted, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to skepticism towards Shakespeare’s role in the expansion of English vocabulary, a skepticism McDonald considers “inaccurate”, but with no further explanation. Celebrations of his word-making skills resurfaced at the beginning of the twentieth century, until finally, McDonald concludes, “recent scholarship has proposed a more judicious estimate of Shakespeare’s neologisms”, which he limits to Latinate derivations – around 600 words deriving from Latin according to Bryan Gardner.³⁶ Clearly, the scope of the contribution is greatly reduced, but the main argument stands. This is an example of well-informed scholarship in the context of an extraordinarily rich and useful book; but it is also an illustration of how linguistic myths serve a purpose. Indeed, ‘Shakespeare as neologiser’ is a character that here features within a larger narrative about the greatness that the English language was seeking to achieve in the early modern period: “Shakespeare was born at the right time. In a fortunate intersection of individual talent and cultural context, his unmatched sensitivity to words combines with the range and plasticity of the English language at this moment in its

³⁴ R. McDonald, *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language*, cit., p. 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

development”.³⁷ ‘Unmatched’ is a word that recurs in accounts of Shakespeare’s contribution to early modern English. I do not think that we should deny that the early modern period was a fundamental chapter in the ‘story’ of English, as long as we are aware of the symbolic potential of watershed dates, exceptional characters, emblematic objects (such as the First Folio or the King James Bible), which however powerful simply cannot, on their own, claim definitive influence on the language, which is a collective enterprise of speech communities subject to constant change.

It is precisely to this narrative quality of most accounts of the history of English, perhaps, that we can turn to explain the continued belief in Shakespeare’s exceptionality in vocabulary. If the adventure of early modern English as a language is told as a story, it needs its heroes: this, to my mind, is the most basic explanation for this recurring ‘zombie idea’. The significance of the ‘Shakespeare as neologiser’ character is evidenced in a beautiful chapter by Seth Lerer in his book *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language*.³⁸ Lerer shows he is perfectly aware of the centrality of the character as he opens his chapter with these words: “Shakespeare. The very name evokes the *acme* of the English language” (my emphasis).³⁹ Lerer discusses Shakespeare’s ability as a selector of old and new vocabulary who was not afraid to introduce his audience to lexis that was unfamiliar either because it was already obsolete, or because it had yet to gain currency. At the same time Lerer, like McDonald, is not shy in affirming that “Shakespeare was a master of the grand vocabulary. Acutely sensitive to learned Latinate formations, but at the same time alert to the Anglo-saxon roots of English, he coined words and phrases at a rate

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³⁸ S. Lerer, *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language*, cit.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

unmatched by any previous or subsequent author” (my emphasis).⁴⁰ The claim is not qualified in any way, nor are any studies on the ‘rate’ with which words were coined in the early modern period referenced in a note. While Lerer’s discussion of chosen examples of Shakespeare’s verbal prowess – his use of the modal verbs *will* and *do*, for example, or of the pronoun *thou* – is fascinating, and the chapter is a wonderful example of critical sensitivity to language, the statement quoted above remains categorical, a truism which merits no closer scrutiny. The comprehensive declaration that Shakespeare’s skill and speed in coining words was unparalleled “by any previous or subsequent author” seems to complement Baugh and Cable’s assertion of the playwright’s superiority in terms of vocabulary to the entire roster of writers in the English language, including those that came after him. A remarkable, but linguistically improbable, feat: “Shakespeare coins a word and, in the process, leads us into English literary and linguistic history”⁴¹ – this is a contention that could easily be upheld if instead of ‘coinage’ we were thinking in terms of ‘picking up on’, ‘popularising’, or ‘foregrounding’, especially since the ‘first use’ myth is so difficult to validate.

One such word, considered a neologism by Lerer and which recurs in many other online and scholarly sources, is the previously mentioned *assassination*, taken from a celebrated passage of *Macbeth* (I, 7, 1-3): “If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well / It were done quickly. If th’assassination / Could trammel up the consequence [...]”. This seems to be a constant example, of which commentators, including Crystal, are particularly fond. But if one checks the recently updated entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, before the 1623 Folio mention of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

‘assassination’ the word pops up in the title of a 1610 translation from the French – “A lamentable discourse, vpon the paricide and bloody assasination: committed on the person of Henry the Fourth”.⁴² This entry was not present in the previous version, *OED2* (1989). Determinations of this sort – the word might have been floating around in the first decades of the 17th century, but who was the first to put pen to paper and record it for posterity, and can that be considered ‘invention’? – are contingent upon external factors such as dating issues. Our verdict will in fact depend on whether we believe *Macbeth* was actually written around 1606-7, before the translation, and whether we believe the 1606 version did contain that particular word, but in the absence of a 1606 text, and with only the Folio to go by, it is impossible to be sure which came first. Be that as it may, I want to suggest that much more important than establishing whether or not Shakespeare was the very first to use the word is Lerer’s observation that this relatively new, Latinate lexical item is placed by Shakespeare within a mostly Germanic lexical context, and is thus effectively foregrounded:⁴³ it is not surprising, however, that the catchier, alluring idea of Shakespeare as an inventor should take hold on popular consciousness, much more than fine readings of his use of different roots and lexical sources can. In fact, the need for a linguistic champion becomes all the more clear in Lerer’s conclusion that “if Shakespeare has been seen as the apex of linguistic usage, then it is Hamlet that remains the exemplar of modern character”.⁴⁴ This striking parallel with the epoch-defining Hamlet seems to me to support the idea that in such a linguistic narrative Shakespeare is evoked mainly as a symbolic figure. The point is especially important since so

⁴² “Assassination, n.”, *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2021, *sub voce*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

much of linguistic history is woven precisely around symbolic, watershed moments and characters, as mentioned, but also on new beginnings and ‘firsts’: the role of Alfred the Great in the Old English period as the ‘first’ translator, or fosterer of translation; the Norman invasion as the conventional start of Middle English; the arrival of the printing press inaugurating the early modern period; and yes, the birth of Shakespeare, the ‘first’ to use new words.

There is no real harm in such narrations, of course, provided that we recognise them as such. But even more recent books on Shakespeare’s language, written after the advent of digital resources used for antedating, such as Paula Blank’s thought-provoking *Shakesplish* (2018), stick firmly to the idea that Shakespeare did invent words, while conceding a lower figure – here limited to 600, mostly identified with first occurrences reported in the *OED*. Blank is exemplary in that her entire book is in a sense concerned with contemporary myth-making and misunderstandings associated to Shakespeare, and she is interested in those processes of identification which make us (‘us’ to her is the contemporary American public, I should stress) badly want to recognise Shakespeare’s language as our own despite the difficulty and foreignness it sometimes exhibits. She is acutely aware throughout her discussion that “Shakespeare’s linguistic originality has always been at the center of our appreciation of the playwright’s intelligence”.⁴⁵ She does discuss Jonathan Hope’s argument that Shakespeare “inventing words and wielding a gargantuan vocabulary” is a myth, probably derived from notions of genius and originality we have inherited from the Romantics, quoting his conclusion that it is “our own, historically conditioned, aesthetic values that lead us to assume that Shakespeare must have exceeded his contemporaries in linguistic invention

⁴⁵ P. Blank, *Shakesplish*, cit., p. 147.

and potential”.⁴⁶ Yet, while appreciating this awareness of historicity, Blank simply cannot accept the demise of the neologising Shakespeare character and offers this dubious objection: “until we actually discover alternative sources for words currently attributed to Shakespeare, Hope’s argument remains fallacious. The fallacy, as Shakespeare would have known it, is *ad ignorantiam* – the claim that not knowing if something is true is taken as proof that it’s false. If we concede that many entries in the *OED* may be wrong we must also concede, barring evidence to the contrary, that they may also be right”.⁴⁷ A tenuous defence at best, in an otherwise extremely informative, rich and brilliant discussion of what Shakespeare’s language means to modern audiences. It would be unjust, as I have written in a review of this book,⁴⁸ to reproach Blank for not being able to see Hope’s 2016 article on antedatings, which does in fact provide evidence of where to find the words previously attributed to Shakespeare, since she prematurely passed away that year.⁴⁹ But perhaps it is an interesting testament to her love of Shakespeare’s words that she cannot completely let go of the vocabulary myth, when she is perfectly aware of its pitfalls, which she discusses at the end of her book when dealing with idiomatic expressions (“What’s remarkable about these lists [in trade books and internet sites] is how often they attribute idioms to Shakespeare that he

⁴⁶ The assertion is Hope’s (J. Hope, *Shakespeare and the English Language*, in *English in the World: History, Diversity, Change*, edited by P. Seargeant and J. Swann, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 68), quoted in P. Blank, *Shakesplish*, cit., p. 148. On the over-representation of Shakespeare in the *OED*, see J. Schäfer, *Documentation in the O.E.D.: Shakespeare and Nashe as Test Cases*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁴⁸ I. Plescia, review of P. Blank, *Shakesplish*, cit., in “Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies”, VII, 2020, pp. 241-247.

⁴⁹ Her book was edited and prepared for publication by her friends and colleagues Erin Minear, Erin Webster, and Elizabeth Barnes.

didn't actually invent").⁵⁰ So much so that she considers the interest in invented idioms as an inherently American obsession:

“The overenthusiasm of people who make these ascriptions is based on a shared Modern American desire: wanting Shakespeare to have invented as much of our language as possible. We love it when we think we've been talking Shakespeare all our lives, just as he's been talking us”.⁵¹

4. *Coda. Where to look for Shakespeare's creativity?*

The selection I have discussed of influential books on Shakespeare's language which from the turn of millennium on have maintained the exceptionality of the playwright's vocabulary in terms of size and inventiveness has illustrated the motives which may have hindered the spread of more accurate estimates of the phenomenon; motives which, as stated, have to do with upholding and cultivating a story of the development of English that moves progressively towards 'greatness' – until global status is achieved. The key player, the hero of this story is Shakespeare, and evidence to the contrary must be dismissed, albeit in good faith. Admittedly, far from being able to uncover all instances of perpetuation of the myth, this review piece has limited itself to selecting works and passages that particularly exemplify such biases, but it may be a starting point for further inquiry into contemporary language attitudes and ideologies in connection with Shakespeare.

At the same time, it must be said that the dismantling of Shakespearean linguistic myths, while useful and necessary if we are concerned with the truth, has more often than not been limited to a *pars destruens* thus far, and the question remains as to where Shakespeare's

⁵⁰ P. Blank, *Shakesplish*, cit., p. 190.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

creativity actually lies. Crystal has argued that is it the unusual, unexpected way that Shakespeare has of using the words available to him – for example employing functional shift and attaching new meanings to words – that has induced awe in readers and audiences; so much so that we should treat his language as a foreign one that needs to be learned on its own terms, and which requires familiarising with rhetorical and poetical structures.⁵² Hope has written extensively on Shakespeare’s use of syntax, and on his striking ability to endow the inanimate with a life of its own.⁵³ More work needs to be done, however, on this *pars construens*: for example looking at the ways in which Shakespeare, far from fixating on the new, also seems to enjoy using words that were already obsolete in his time, dug up from the past, which in a way exert the same kind of fascination of the unfamiliar on us (and presumably on his contemporary audiences). It seems likely, in any case, that the myth of Shakespeare’s colossal command of language will continue to populate websites and even some academic writing for years to come, and I suspect that Paula Blank’s reflections on our need to believe we ‘speak Shakespeare’ should by no means be limited to Americans.

⁵² D. Crystal, *Think On My Words. Exploring Shakespeare’s Language*, cit., p. 15.

⁵³ J. Hope, *Shakespeare and Language. Reason, Eloquence and Artifice in the Renaissance*, London, Methuen, 2010, pp. 138-169.

MATERIALI / MATERIALS



DANIELE CORRADI

**INTRUSION AND PRESENCE OF THE AUTHOR
IN SAMUEL BECKETT’S “THE UNNAMABLE”
AND B. S. JOHNSON’S “ALBERT ANGELO”**

1. *Introduction*

Towards the conclusion of his perhaps best-known novel *Albert Angelo* (1964), the avant-garde British writer Bryan Stanley Johnson (1933-1973) employs a fairly stunning device, consisting in the direct and violent intrusion, as is famously claimed, of the author himself – not his textual projection, not an abstract authorial voice, but the true B.S. Johnson in his historical tangibility – into the narrated world, thus disrupting the novelistic illusion so far sustained of the autonomous identity of the protagonist, Albert, and causing the whole edifice of the novel to collapse. With this “almighty aposiopesis”¹ (defined indeed as an abrupt interruption of the discourse) the author vents out all his frustration at the inadequacy of Albert – an architect *manqué* trying to earn his living as a supply teacher –

¹ B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, London, Picador, 2013, p. 167.

as an objective correlative of what the author really wishes to express, that is admittedly his existential predicament of “being a poet in a world where only poets care anything real about poetry”.²

As a theoretical justification, or inspiration, to such extreme move Johnson appropriates a passage taken from Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* – a text dealing, among other things, with the same issue of the possible presence of the author in his own textual world –, employing it as opening epigraph to *Albert Angelo*. In this passage, the apparently acousmatic voice of the unnamable narrator, constantly searching for its impossible identity, its irretrievable point of origin, briefly but decisively considers the possibility of coinciding with that of the physical person of the external author, which apparently convinces him of the necessity to discard all those false identities, all those figures of textual lieutenants he has been hiding behind up to that moment in order to concentrate exclusively on himself, the author, the true implied subject of all that has been said.

Such passage – taken, to be fair, quite outside a context which is infinitely more complex than this – is apparently assumed by Johnson as a pivotal and authoritative justification in support not only of the major device at the core of his novel, but for a general autobiographical turn, “towards truth and away from storytelling”,³ that he chooses to impress into his own writing from this point onward, a turn which will indelibly associate him with the infamous motto “telling stories is telling lies”.⁴ This latter suggestion, however paraphrased and incorporated into a wider and

² *Ibid.*, p. 168.

³ B. S. Johnson, review of S. Beckett, *How It Is*, in “The Spectator”, 26 June 1964, p. 22.

⁴ The original phrase is taken from *Albert Angelo*, but is then used and paraphrased *ad nauseam* in almost any discussion about Johnson and his work, more often than not by the author himself.

more articulated aesthetical vision, is incidentally present already in Beckett,⁵ and it is not after all a surprise that Johnson should have resorted to Beckett in his search for an ideological backing for his own novelistic practice, given the enormous importance that the Irish master has for Johnson and the almost obsessive admiration he feels for him – Beckett is indeed for Johnson admittedly “the greatest prose stylist and the most original writer living”,⁶ and Beckett’s name crops up inevitably as an omnipresent avatar whenever Johnson sets out explaining his own views on the novel, or when he illustrates the literary lineage he feels part and continuation of.⁷

It is not however necessary to delve much deep into this matter to recognise that the aesthetic exploration of this crucial suggestion implicit in Beckett’s passage – the suggestion, that is, that the external author can possibly substantiate himself without mediation within the textual

⁵ In *The Unnamable*, for instance, the narrating voice dismisses one after the other all the identities that are tentatively imposed on it from the outside, recognising itself as other, and the stories of these impossible biographies as lies. In later works there are similar dynamics, with the term “lies” being alternatively substituted with “balls” (*How It Is*) or “fable” (*Company*). In all these texts, the narration of stories is always seen inevitably to alienate the teller from the ultimate truth about himself, an aspect that lies at the core of Johnson’s writing as well.

⁶ Johnson’s appreciation for Beckett’s work crops up transparently in many of his pronouncements, the most enthusiastic being perhaps a 1967 review of Beckett’s collection *No’s Knife* which appeared in “The New Statesman”: “We it is who, reading him, feel the urge not for interpretation, but for celebration, not exegesis but exultation that anyone can write so well. [...] He is the greatest prose stylist and the most original writer living. [...] To have written as he has [...] is remarkable to the point of impossibility” (B. S. Johnson, review of *No’s Knife* (Calder & Boyars), *Eh Joe and Other Writings* (Faber) and *Beckett at 60: A Festschrift* (Calder & Boyars), in Id., *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson*, edited by J. Coe, P. Tew and J. Jordan, London, Picador, 2013, p. 426).

⁷ In a cover letter addressed to George Greenfield, for instance, who was to become his first literary agent, Johnson presents the manuscript of his novel *Travelling People* as being “in the tradition represented by writers such as Petronius, Apuleius, Rabelais, Cervantes, Nashe, Sterne, and Samuel Beckett” (see B. S. Johnson to G. Greenfield, 18 October 1961, in J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson*, London, Picador, 2004, p. 116).

dimension – yields completely different results in the works of Johnson and Beckett, and that the two novels under examination here, as well as their authors' subsequent production, present in this connection many more divergences than similarities. To be more precise, what appears in Beckett's text to be merely an accidental and precarious suggestion in a continuing chain of contradictory reasoning, a flux of "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later",⁸ is elevated in Johnson to the status of a universal assumption, providing with the sole strength of its truth the foundations of a large aesthetical project, comprising a diverse range of texts written across the years.

The contention of this contribution, in brief, is thus not only that the obvious comparison between Beckett and Johnson can be carried out much more fruitfully with a special view towards their differences, rather than exploring the allegedly common premises their respective novels might seem superficially to stem from, but also, and perhaps more interestingly, that what has become an all-important ideological point of passage in Johnson's writing career would appear to be based on a partial, if not deliberately distorted interpretation of Beckett's message, at least as far as *The Unnamable* is concerned. Far from providing grounds for a condemnation or debasement of Johnson's literary achievements, however, this alleged misinterpretation might actually be regarded, on the contrary, as the very reason why Johnson's work can be said to convey some crucial and groundbreaking new thoughts about the novel, as well as bring to the form an original contribution which would probably not have been of the same validity and interest had Johnson merely followed blindly in the steps of his own master.

⁸ S. Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in Id., *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, New York, Grove Press, 2009, p. 285.

In light of these premises, then, an attentive analysis of this issue of the presence of the author in Johnson's and Beckett's texts is called for: first, it will be necessary to explore the situation of the narrating voice in *The Unnamable*, with particular attention to the relationship between the external author and his various textual intermediaries; another section will then account for the case of *Albert Angelo* and the peculiar position of its author, as well as the nature of his alleged intrusion into the dimension of the novel. Finally, the context of Johnson's personal and problematic appropriation of Beckett's text will be explored, in an attempt to draw a comparison and establish the nature of the discrepancy between these two authors' responses to a similar problem, in the context of these two texts and with a view towards their subsequent works that develop and work on the same idea.

2. *Partitions: The Case of "The Unnamable"*

"When I think, that is to say, no, let it stand, when I think of the time I've wasted with these brain-dips, beginning with Murphy, who wasn't even the first, when I had me, on the premises, within easy reach, tottering under my own skin and bones, real ones, rotting with solitude and neglect, till I doubted my own existence, and even still, today, I have no faith in it, none, so that I have to say, when I speak, Who speaks, and seek, and so on and similarly for all the other things that happen to me and for which someone must be found, for things that happen must have someone to happen to, someone must stop them. But Murphy and the others, and last but not least the two old buffers here present, could not stop them, the things that happened to me, and nothing else either, there is nothing else, let us be lucid for once, nothing else but what happens to me, such as speaking, and such as seeking, and which cannot happen to me, which prowl round me, like bodies in torment, the torment of no abode, no repose, no, like hyenas, screeching and laughing, no, no better, no matter, I've shut my doors against them, I'm not at home to anything, my doors are shut against them, perhaps that's how I'll find silence, and peace at last, by opening my doors and letting myself be devoured, they'll stop howling, they'll start eating, the maws now howling. Open up, open up, you'll be alright, you'll see."⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 384 (also used as epigraph to B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, cit.).

It is undoubtedly no easy task to find a single quotation, within the pages of *The Unnamable*, which would be capable of expressing all the complexities, the contradictions and the paradoxes present in such a text. The one above, anyway, can be certainly said to tackle one of its core problems, namely that of the identity or source of the impalpable narrating voice, for which a possessor is constantly sought throughout the novel – the narration opens indeed with the trilemma “Who now? Where now? When now?”,¹⁰ the exploration of whose consequences will extend to the rest of its pages, after a first tentative answer is given: “I, say I, unbelieving”.¹¹ Thus, from the very beginning, the effervescent bundle of unshaped narrative material that passes itself – with many reserves – for the I of the narration¹² appears engaged in the attempt to solve, solely through the unbroken and unstoppable torrent of words it is traversed by and on which it feeds, the terrible conundrum of its own existence.

The ‘me’ of the passage above appears then to be a matter of some crucial intricacy, one that tends to elude any simple solution. ‘Me’ is after all just another pronoun, and it is the voice itself that recognises the unreliability and messy interchangeability of the pronouns, passing at times some half-ironic remark about their use in language – “But enough of this cursed first person [...]. But what then is the subject? [...] Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it. Matter of habit”,¹³ while dismissing them much more seriously in other circumstances as totally inutilizable and capable only of creating confusion: “it’s the fault of the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

¹² It is indeed admitted, after much hesitation, that “there is I, yes, [...], it’s essential, it’s preferable, [...] so let me hasten to take advantage of being now obliged to say, in a manner of speaking, that there is I”. See *ibid.*, p. 381.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that”.¹⁴

This is however merely one of the manifold paradoxes one encounters when opting to consider the ‘me’ of the ur-quote above, with his “own skin and bones”, in too serious or literal a way. As regards his alleged corporeality, for instance, it is fairly soon manifest that, strictly speaking, a body cannot be said to exist in relation to the ‘protagonist’: he admits indeed more than once that “I don’t feel a mouth on me, I don’t feel the jostle of words in my mouth [...], nor a head, do I feel an ear, frankly now, do I feel an ear, well frankly now I don’t”,¹⁵ lamenting this lack of corporeality as one of the multiple sources of his existential impasse: “if only I could feel something on me, it would be a starting-point, a starting-point”.¹⁶ Whenever the protagonist feels obliged to hypothesize the existence of a body for himself, moreover, or each time he is presented with some “ostensibly independent testimony in support of [his] historical existence”,¹⁷ the prospect sounds – to the reader as well as to the himself – as totally unsatisfactory and unconvincing:

“Evoke at painful junctures, when discouragement threatens to raise its head, the image of a vast cretinous mouth, red, blubber and slobbering, in solitary confinement, [...] the words that obstruct it. [...] Better, ascribe to me a body. Better still, arrogate to me a mind. [...] Take advantage of the brand-new soul and substantiality to abandon, with the only possible abandon, deep down within. And finally, these and other decisions having been taken, carry on as cheerfully as before”.¹⁸

Having thus established the unsustainability of a material body, the protagonist is soon denied even the comfort of a possible coincidence with

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 375-376.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 397-398.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

the acoustic ethereality of the voice itself, which could have been his next logical resort. A separation is indeed assessed between the subjectivity in question and the voice:

“Let me now sum up [...]. There is I, on the one hand, and this noise on the other [...], [and] with regard to the noise, [...] it has not been possible up to date to determine with certainty, or even approximately, what it is, in the way of noise, or how it comes to me, or by what organ it is emitted, or by what perceived, or by what intelligence apprehended, in its main drift.”¹⁹

This voice then, the sole instrument this anti-protagonist can dispose of in this search for his own identity, is somehow always external to him: it does not ultimately belong to him, it exists separately from his subjectivity; it is an acoustic manifestation somehow suffered passively by the subject, who cannot control it and cannot say with any degree of propriety to own it or to be its cause or place of origin:

“This voice that speaks, knowing that it lies [...]. It issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine, I can’t stop it, I can’t prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me. It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, with this voice that is not mine.”²⁰

Having thus realised to be lacking of a body, and being likewise unable to identify with the seemingly omnipresent voice that haunts him, the protagonist reaches some sort of compromise by postulating for himself, in one of the most crucial passages of the entire novel, a liminal position between this voice and the material world:

“Perhaps that’s what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that’s what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 381-382.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either, it's not to me they're talking, it's not of me they're talking."²¹

This idea of in-betweenness, incidentally, of a limbic state or a liminal nature to the protagonist's situation as regards identity, materiality and sense of place, will establish itself as the pivotal leitmotif of the novel, and would appear to remain, as will be seen, the best possible key to the interpretation of *The Unnamable*.

The frail and evanescent nature of his own sense of identity and corporeality, to continue with the list of ailments this untenable 'me' is seen to suffer from, makes this anti-protagonist an easy subject to the manipulations of a whole series of hologrammatic figures of equally uncertain tangibility who would appear to be preying on this heap of inert narrative material in a constant attempt to make a disposable character out of it.²² Their words, more crucially, or better the intentions of these "devils that beset [him]"²³ resound in the very stream of discourse possessing this disembodied protagonist, so that more than a lack of identity it is sometimes an utter confusion of personae what really troubles him. He affirms for instance at one such juncture:

"It's entirely a matter of voices [...]. They've blown me up with their voices, like a balloon, and even as I collapse it's them I hear. [...] I am walled round with their vociferations, none will ever know what I am, none will ever hear me say it, I won't say it, I can't say it, I have no language but theirs. [...] I can't even bring myself to name

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

²² The protagonist laments indeed at one point of being "tired of being matter, matter, pawed and pummelled endlessly in vain [...] They don't know what they want to do with me, they don't know where I am, or what I'm like, I'm like dust, they want to make a man out of dust". See *ibid.*, p. 341.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

them, nor any of the others whose very names I forget, who told me I was they, who I must have tried to be, under duress, or through fear, or to avoid acknowledging me.”²⁴

Or again, on another occasion which sees the protagonist warding off the umpteenth identity these devils have been attempting to impose on him:

“Listen to them, losing heart! That’s to lull me, till I imagine I hear myself saying, myself at last, to myself at last, that it can’t be they, speaking thus, that it can only be I, speaking thus. Oh if I could only find a voice of my own, in all this bubble, it would be the end of their troubles, and of mine.”²⁵

Ultimately, however, no matter how hard these figures try to impose an identity on him, be it that of Mahood, or of Worm, or whatever, it is the protagonist “inaptitude to assume any”²⁶ which always prevails – as happens with Mahood, for instance: “The stories of Mahood are ended. He has realized they could not be about me, he has abandoned, it is I who win, who tried so hard to lose, in order to please him, and be left in peace”,²⁷ and this refrain could be applied in connection with all the other pseudo-characters who have in turn their try and inevitably fail to be this ‘me’, the ‘I’ of the narration.

Owing to this lack of identity, this inability to assume any, the protagonist is thus led at some crucial junctures into pondering the possibility that he could be the sole responsible for the situation he is in, that he could be in fact utterly alone in the dimension he inhabits – “Now there is no one left. [...] It’s I who am doing this to me, I who am talking to me about me”.²⁸ In other words, that the voice that drives him could

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 319-320.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 341-342.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

coincide with that of the external authority behind the whole textual dimension: the author himself, speaking directly through his character.

A few pivotal passages would seem indeed, at least at first sight, to corroborate this supposition, as for instance the one chosen by Johnson as epigraph to *Albert Angelo*, plus other similar ones in which the voice seems to come really close to that of Beckett himself, commenting on his past practices and his apparent decision to dispense from his textual lieutenants, these “sufferers of my pains”,²⁹ in favour of his true self. We have however already widely discussed about the difficulties and contradictions one encounters when trying to assign a definitive and fixed identity, let alone a materiality, to the ‘I’ of the narration in *The Unnamable*; any interpretation, moreover, is further complicated by the very nature of this text, which proceeds programmatically by constant retractations and antitheses, thus causing any single apparent resolution reached at one isolated juncture to be fated, in the long or short run, to be discarded in favour of its opposite, in a spiral that is never really solved.

As if this were not enough to discourage any reader from postulating any facile coincidence of narrating and authorial voice, moreover, there are a number of crucial passages in which this relationship with the ultimate textual authority is explored, and this authority found to be irreconcilable with the narrative dimension, ever excluded from it, irremediably alien and always ultimately a step further from the furthest reachable point. Let us now retrace the main stages of the exploration of this relationship.

The first instance in which the voice refers to the possible existence of one such figure of authority occurs almost in passing, seemingly without giving the issue much thought: “I have spoken for my master, listened for the words of my master never spoken [...]. My master. There is a vein I

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

must not lose sight of”.³⁰ Subsequently, as the narration draws on, this “vein” acquires an increasing importance, as the protagonist goes on attempting to understand who this master might be and what exactly it is he wants from him – “might it not rather be the praise of my master, intoned, in order to obtain his forgiveness?”–,³¹ lamenting on the occasion about the total lack of instructions as to the task he is expected to fulfill in order to be set free – “A little more explicitness on his part, since the initiative belongs to him, might be a help, as well from his point of view as from the one he attributes to me. Let the man explain himself and have done with it”.³²

At this stage, this authority is apparently still sought within the limits of the dimension inhabited by the protagonist, and spoken of as someone tangibly present, however distant and unapproachable in varying degrees. At some juncture, for instance, it is assumed that this master is waiting somewhere for a messenger to report the protagonist’s words so that he could properly assess them – “the words that behoved to say, [...] they have to be ratified by the proper authority, that takes time, he’s far from here”,³³ elsewhere his figure is even observed to overlap partially with those of the protagonist’s tormentors, when the narrator imputes for instance the actions of this evil multitude to an alleged single entity: “My purveyors are more than one, four or five. But it’s more likely the same foul brute all the time, amusing himself pretending to be a many, varying his register, his tone, his accent and his drivel”.³⁴ The observation, however, that for such ubiquitous presence the figure of a sort of God would be needed – for “God alone can fill the rose of the winds, without

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

moving from his place”³⁵ – causes much trouble to the narrator, casting further obscurity on the nature of this sought-for authority. Delving deeper into the mystery of this alleged master’s identity could indeed lead to dangerous outcomes – “The master in any case, we don’t intend, [...] unless absolutely driven to it, to make the mistake of enquiring into him, he’d turn out to be a mere high official, we’d end up needing God, we have lost all sense of decency admittedly”³⁶ –, and the more indeed one attempts to get closer to this ineffable figure, the more this is perceived to shrink away from the narrative space, keeping always out of reach – “Is one to postulate a tertius gaudens? [...] I could employ fifty wretches for this sinister operation and still be short of a fifty-first, to close the circuit”³⁷.

The responsible, in short, it is made progressively more apparent as the narrator goes on enquiring with his machinations, is found to be incompatible with the dimension in which the voice resounds: this voice is ever less likely to coincide with his, and a passage such as: “the everlasting third party, he’s the one to blame, for this state of affairs, the master’s not to blame, neither are they, neither am I, least of all I, we were foolish to accuse one another”³⁸ would seem moreover to draw a definite line between an inside to this narrated world, whose inhabitants are all equal victims of the same situation, and an outside, where the real responsible for this state of affairs resides, irremediably banished from this dimension.

Working from this pivotal recognition of mutual incompatibility – the impossibility, that is, for the external author to be present in his text otherwise than as a textual projection, and for his characters to participate in his material reality –, *The Unnamable* cannot but revel in the impossible

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.350.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p 369.

exploration of this irretrievable distance, this unsolvable difference between the dimension of the narrated world and that of the material reality of the author:

“He seeks me I don’t know why, he calls me, he wants me to come out, he thinks I can come out, he wants me to be he, or another, let us be fair, he wants me to rise up, up into him, or up into another, let us be impartial, he thinks he’s caught me, he feels me in him, then he says I, as if I were he, or in another, let us be just, then he says Murphy, or Molloy, I forget, as if I were Malone, but their day is done, he wants none but himself, for me, he thinks it’s his last chance, he thinks that, they taught him thinking, it’s always he who speaks, Mercier never spoke, Moran never spoke, I never spoke, I seem to speak, that’s because he says I as if he were I, I nearly believed him, do you hear him, as if he were I, I who am far, who can’t move, can’t be found, but neither can he, he can only talk, if that much.”³⁹

And the search is of course mutual, dramatizing the impossibility of any reconciliation on both parts:

“He’s the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, the one to speak, but he can’t speak, then I could stop, I’d be he, I’d be the silence, I’d be back in the silence, we’d be reunited, his story the story to be told, but he has no story, he hasn’t been in story, it’s not certain, he’s in his own story, unimaginable, unspeakable, that doesn’t matter, the attempt must be made, in the old story incomprehensibly mine, to find his, it must be there somewhere, it must have been mine, before being his.”⁴⁰

What Beckett really intends to concentrate on in this novel would appear then to be not much the possibility for the author to speak directly with his own voice in his text, but rather to explore this unsolvable distance between author and textual world, giving new emphasis to an interstitial space that does not even coincide with the narrated world properly. *The Unnamable*’s anti-protagonist is after all not a character: he fails constantly and strenuously to be one, he declares to be the “partition” between these two dimensions, the vibrating “tympanum” traversed by a voice in search

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 396-397.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

of its own place, going back and forth in an undetectable direction, with the space of the page as the common ground on which all these contradictory and antithetical forces leave the trace of their passage in the only form here possible – an immaterial, exclusively verbal one:

“I’m in words, made of words, others’ words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I’m the air, the walls, the walled-in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I’m all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray, I’m all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say.”⁴¹

The text, consequently, ends on the verge of its own beginning, with the narrator feeling himself eventually to be “before the door that opens on [his] story”,⁴² a door that he will never have occasion to traverse, so that he is left on neither one side nor the other, in the only place where he could ever possibly belong.

3. *Disintegrations: The Case of “Albert Angelo” and Johnson’s Individual Appropriation of Beckett*

After such lengthy analysis of the situation of *The Unnamable*, necessary for a thorough comprehension of the wider and more articulated context from which the epigraph for *Albert Angelo* has been isolated, it is now possible to shift the discourse to the peculiarities of Johnson’s text, which in light of the above discussion – and despite the affinities seemingly suggested by the author – would appear to differ considerably, in its

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 379-380.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 407.

intentions and premises, from what Beckett has attempted to achieve with his own novel.

Albert Angelo, as already briefly mentioned, is chiefly about an architect *manqué* who is forced by circumstances to earn his living as a supply teacher, filling in vacancies in various London schools and managing one difficult class after another. Using a kaleidoscopic *Ulysses*-like technique and an impressive variety of technical and narrative devices, Johnson nevertheless creates and sustains, for a good 163 pages, the illusion of an autonomous identity for the protagonist, the namesake Albert Albert – whose own “Albertness” is thus ironically emphasized –,⁴³ until such illusion is abruptly and violently broken, towards the very end of the novel, by an open intrusion of the external author into the textual discourse, to the frustrated cry of “OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!”⁴⁴

Following such unexpected intrusion, a new section named “Disintegration” opens, in which a first heartfelt, breathless explanation is rashly thrown in – or up? – for the reader to digest:

“Fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero though what a useless appellation my first character then im trying to say something about me through him albert an architect when whats the point in covering up covering up covering over pretending pretending i can say anything through him that is anything I would be interested in saying.”⁴⁵

The whole edifice of the novel is thus made to collapse, for the author clearly feels now the urgent need to enter with the “enormous

⁴³ “Albert Albert, to emphasize his Albertness, hisness, itness, uniqueness”. See B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, cit., p. 169.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167. I am here retaining the original form of the text, with its lack of punctuation or upper-case characters, which is all part of the author’s intention to convey the urgency and immediacy of the discourse in this passage.

totality”⁴⁶ of himself into his own novel, not as a fictional projection, not as a textual reflection of himself, but as the true unmediated B. S. Johnson in his own real “skin and bones”, and with the very material surroundings from which he is physically writing, namely his working desk in 34 Claremont Square, London N1, Johnson’s actual address at the time:

“I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality about sitting here writing looking out across Claremont Square trying to say something about the writing.”⁴⁷

This urgent need for truth and immediacy thus obviously clashes with fabulation – for “if I start falsifying in telling stories then I move away from the truth of my truth which is not good”⁴⁸ – and likewise with the use of a textual lieutenant to take the author’s place in what should be his own story. And the author, being a poet, cannot possibly be replaced by the figure of an architect *manqué*, which is doubly distant from the truth he feels compelled to convey:

“Look, I’m trying to tell you something of what I feel about being a poet in a world where only poets care anything real about poetry, through the objective correlative of an architect who has to earn his living as a teacher. this device you cannot have failed to see creaking, ill-fitting in many places, for architects *manqués* can earn livings very nearly connected with their art, and no poet has ever lived by his poetry, and architecture has a functional aspect quite lacking in poetry, and, simply, architecture is just not poetry.”⁴⁹

There is thus frustration, on the one hand, about the growing awareness of the inadequacy of such objective correlative to convey the existential agony of the writer, and a sense of failure almost amounting to

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*

sinful guilt on the other, for having resorted to falsification in trying to give a true account of oneself and one's own experience; all this has accumulated throughout the narration until the point in which the tension created has become simply too much to withhold. The whole project of the novel as it stood has failed: it has to be called off, dismantled. And as a logical, though perhaps rather extreme consequence of this, and in accordance with his absolute need for truth, the author then sets about dismantling almost point-by-point the various accidents of the plot as they have been previously presented, exposing in detail every manipulation each episode of his real life, each person's name or toponym, has undergone in the process of being worked into the narration, with the author scarcely holding himself from the urgency to list every single instance of his "lying": "I could go on and on, through each page, page after page, pointing out the lies, the lies, but it would be so tedious, so tedious".⁵⁰

And finally, after a concluding brief coda – for "even I [...] would not leave such a mess, [...] so many loose ends"⁵¹ –, in which the no-more-servable character of Albert is dispensed with by a somewhat forcible and absurd death,⁵² the novel ends leaving almost a sense of *coitus interruptus* – at least if one were to take plot and characterisation as a novel's *raison d'être*, and one certainly is not, with an author such as B.S. Johnson; besides, what a mightier ejaculation is one expected to find, in *Albert*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁵² A comical death "à la Murphy", Johnson annotates in this respect in his working papers for *Albert Angelo* (see *Albert Angelo Working Papers*, B. S. Johnson Archive, London, British Library, Archives and Manuscripts). Readers will perhaps remember that in Beckett's novel the namesake protagonist Murphy was made to die of a gas leak, and his ashes scattered on a pub's pavement among "the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit" (S. Beckett, *Murphy*, London, Picador, 1973, p. 154).

Angelo or anywhere else, than the “FUCK ALL THIS LYING!” of its almighty aposiopesis?

This is then what happens in *Albert Angelo*, the alleged result of Johnson’s reworking of Beckett’s ideas as expressed in the passage from *The Unnamable*. But what position, it is now apt to enquire, do the texts of Johnson and Beckett really occupy with respect to one another as regards the issue of the textual presence of the author? In the light of the above analysis of *The Unnamable* and *Albert Angelo*, and despite the direct lineage Johnson would seem to establish by employing an epigraph taken from Beckett’s novel, one feels nevertheless obliged to observe that the operations brought forward by the two authors appear significantly to be pointing to two rather different, if not thoroughly opposite directions.

On the one hand, as has been seen, Beckett is exploring the relationship between author and text in all its paradoxical ambivalence and within a logocentric frame of reference: the textual dimension is treated in his writing as an effervescent liminal space equally alien to the material world of the author and to the fixity of the fictional dimension of the work of literature in its traditional form; a space, nonetheless, in which these two dimensions mysteriously meet and reflect one another, seek contact with one another and long for a correspondence that can never be feasible. This because the ‘lying’ is for Beckett implicit in the telling itself, not imputable to the teller, nor necessarily in the telling of stories rather than verifiable facts: it is a lying that has a linguistic origin, to be traced back to the impossibility of language to reflect reality and of words to denote things in the real world.⁵³ The ‘I’ suffers the same destiny, in that the identity of the

⁵³ One might perhaps think of the episode of Mr. Knott’s pots in the novel *Watt* as the passage best illustrating this linguistic predicament, which is however omnipresent in Beckett’s writing. See Id., *Watt*, London, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 67-68.

speaker, by recurring to and masking itself behind the elusive materiality of the pronoun,⁵⁴ is lost in an ocean of likewise empty words a-floating, a “dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing”.⁵⁵ The author is thus ultimately, in Beckett’s view, always necessarily excluded from the world of his own creation, because in the very moment he attempts to convey any form of truth about himself by resorting to the pronoun ‘I’, or to language in general, he has already irremediably distanced himself from the truth he wished to convey; the textual world is indeed a dimension consisting exclusively of discourse, of words that once distanced from the utterer and consigned to the page become something quite different, something other, living a life – or dying a death – of their own.

Johnson’s ‘I’ – and the operation it stands for – is instead something of a completely different nature. Reasoning from a standpoint antithetical to that of Beckett, Johnson aims at reasserting the historical contingency and the ontological reality of this ‘I’, as well as that of the material surroundings from which this ‘I’ is speaking. As Philipp Tew indeed maintains, “Johnson recognizes what a critical language of authenticity divorced from context suppresses. [...] The texture of the writing and its speculative method remind the reader that the ‘I’ or self cannot be formal and is linked to the objectivity of history and the world”.⁵⁶ This ‘I’, in other words, is still capable for Johnson to denote the identity it stands for, to personify it: it *is*, in a sense, B.S. Johnson himself in his own “skin and bones”, in a coincidence with the implied speaker that the I of *The*

⁵⁴ The disastrous consequences of the use of ‘I’ to denote a single, unitary identity through time lies for example at the base of Krapp’s situation in *Krapp’s Last Tape*.

⁵⁵ S. Beckett, *The Unnamable*, cit., p. 380.

⁵⁶ P. Tew, *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001, pp. 100-101.

Unnamable could never possibly hope to achieve. What Johnson then proposes, with his own active and all-inclusive intrusion into the textual world, is the virtual elision of any form of definite separation between the material and the narrated dimension: the very partition for which Beckett's anti-character stands for is thus in Johnson's approach bypassed, if not directly dismantled, in a unifying and unmediated vision of art and life as part of a same continuum. "Inscribed in his thinking", comments indeed Tew in this connection, "is the potential offered by a period before almost everything intellectual was made textual and logocentric, with a conviction in his texts that Johnson speaks directly to and of experience",⁵⁷ and Johnson's own peculiar view of the novel, his various pronouncements on how they should be written and what kind of mission they should accomplish, all express this urgent need for absolute faithfulness to experience and immediacy of communication, in a conviction that the novel can and must be employed as an instrument of truth:

"I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels. [...] The two terms *novel* and *fiction* are not, incidentally, synonymous, as many seem to suppose in the way they use them interchangeably. [...] The novel is a form in the same sense that the sonnet is a form; within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel."⁵⁸

Appreciated in this light, Johnson's and Beckett's respective views appear thus to be rather difficult to conciliate, at least with regard to the narrow context of these two novels under examination. And if one were to explore the consequences of such divergent stances as they have been developed in these two authors' subsequent oeuvre, one would probably

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xii-xiii.

⁵⁸ B. S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, in *Id.*, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson*, edited by J. Coe, P. Tew and J. Jordan, London, Picador, 2013, p. 14.

conclude that their differences in this respect have been confirmed, if not perhaps even widened, across the years, as Johnson and Beckett have attempted, with each successive novel, to test such consequences to further and further extremes, or pushing them towards ever new directions.

On the one hand Beckett, in works such as *Texts for Nothing*, *How it Is* and the later short prose, has indeed explored more and more closely and obsessively this interstitial space separating the author from the textual world, insisting on the irreconcilability of the material and the verbal and aiming implacably towards a literature of silence and non-perception – as Beckett himself has indeed famously declared: “Is there any reason why the terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved, so that through whole passages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence?”⁵⁹ Johnson, on the other hand, has instead given great emphasis on presence and materiality in his own literature, embracing a form in which the transparent and unmediated presence of the author has to be regarded as the *conditio sine qua non* of the narration – “I really discovered what I should be doing with *Albert Angelo* (1964) where I broke through the English disease of the objective correlative to speak truth directly if solipsistically in the novel form, and heard my own small voice”⁶⁰ – and in which constant references are made to a tangible, verifiable reality outside the text, from which the text stems and towards which it is always inevitably addressed: “There exists an insistence”, again in Tew’s terms, “that something objective [...] extends the dialogue between the self and

⁵⁹ S. Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by R. Cohn, New York, Grove Press, 1984, pp. 52-53 (letter to A. Kaun).

⁶⁰ B. S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, cit., p. 22.

the other in the nature of the communicative act of which narrative forms a part”.⁶¹

Johnson’s exploration of the possibilities of the author’s presence in his text, to be more precise, has in fact led him to proceed along two somewhat different paths, two modalities which could appear at times – at least superficially – to be almost antithetical to one another. One of these directions, the most logical and direct consequence of *Albert Angelo’s* “Disintegration” section, is represented by such novels as *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates*, in which Johnson claims, this time transparently and from the very beginning, to be the physical individual standing behind the textual world as well as the one speaking from inside of it – and not, strictly speaking, as a character.⁶² The idea is thus espoused, in such cases, of the possibility of a genuine, faithful and direct transposition of one’s biographical experience into literature – and a true novel, after all, is for Johnson only life in a different form.⁶³

In the novels pertaining to the second modality (*House Mother Normal*, *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* and – partially – *See the Old Lady Decently*), Johnson returns instead, rather paradoxically, to the employment of fictional inventions, the same he didn’t hesitate to dismiss

⁶¹ P. Tew, *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, cit., p. 118.

⁶² It is not by chance, for instance, that *Trawl* opens on the tune of “I · · · always with I · · · one starts from · · one and I share the same character”, varying on the same theme in the closing lines: “I, always with I · · · · · one always starts with I · · · · · And ends with I”. See B. S. Johnson, *Trawl*, London, Picador, 2013, p. 7 and p. 183.

⁶³ And this has at times inevitably caused some debate around the status of Johnson’s writing. The author himself relates, for instance, that “The publisher of *Trawl* wished to classify it as autobiography, not as a novel. It is a novel, I insisted and could prove; what it is not is fiction” (see Id., *Aren’t Your Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, cit., p. 14). Frederic Warburg, of Secker & Warburg, had indeed commented on Johnson’s literary practices in these terms: “Novels often described as fiction are usually fiction, but you are horrified at the idea of incorporating what you call ‘lies’ in your novels which tends to make them equivalent to a slightly unusual form of autobiography”. F. Warburg to B.S. Johnson (18 July 1966), in J. Coe, *Like A Fiery Elephant*, cit., p. 216.

as lies in *Albert Angelo* – and it is the author himself who comments on the first two novels of this phase in terms of “a change (again!) of direction, an elbow joint in the arm, still part of the same but perhaps going another way”.⁶⁴ Such practice, however, is nevertheless incorporated within Johnson’s “paradigm of truth”⁶⁵ and his exploration of the possibilities of the author’s direct action on his text, in that the ‘lies’ employed in such novels are always brought back to, and justified by, the tangible figure of the deviser of the story, that is Johnson himself, not just any abstract, irretrievable authorial presence as is the case with Beckett. This is because “If life and narrative are to interconnect [...], the writer must recognize the distinction between appropriately factual (therefore truthful) and distorting (being unrelated to reality) kinds of narrative”.⁶⁶ Johnson-the-author, indeed, never conceals himself to the reader, and often exercises his right – which he has arrogated to himself decisively since the ‘Disintegration’ of *Albert Angelo* – to intrude within the narrated world at any moment. This can however be done in different ways and for varying reasons, at times for instance to engage in a direct dialogue with his characters, and express through them some formal consideration about the novel or the writing – as in many passages of *Christie Malry*⁶⁷ –, or simply to reassess, on other occasions, the presence of an external author physically writing his story

⁶⁴ B. S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, cit., p. 26. Johnson also justifies here his apparent ideological retro-front with the fact that “the ideas for both *House Mother Normal* (1971) and *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973) came to me whilst writing *Travelling People* [his first novel] [...], but the subsequent three personal novels interposed themselves, demanded to be written first” (see *ibid.*). Drawing here an interesting parallel, one could say that the autobiographical urgency that interrupts the storytelling in *Albert Angelo* has had a similar effect on Johnson’s writing corpus as a whole, causing in a way a rupture in the logical succession in which his novels were intended to be written.

⁶⁵ Id., *Albert Angelo*, cit., p. 170.

⁶⁶ P. Tew, *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, cit., p. 91.

⁶⁷ See for instance B. S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, London, Picador, 2001, pp. 165-6 and pp. 178-180.

from precise and tangible surroundings, to remind the reader at once of the artificial nature of the text and of the existence of a historical reality from which the narration itself originates – as in a scene of *See the Old Lady Decently* in which Johnson's daughter is seen intruding in his study, interrupting his writing.⁶⁸

In spite of the actual recourse to fictional elements and textual mediators in some of Johnson's later texts, it is thus evident how the consequences of the "almighty aposiopesis" of *Albert Angelo* have come to define a pivotal aesthetical turning point in the author's production, establishing a crucial precedent against which all his successive work has been measured in one way or another. To return however to the problem of Beckett's epigraph and the role it possibly played in informing this momentous revelation in Johnson's literary development, some doubt remains as to Johnson's awareness of Beckett's message and the interpretation he gives of the incriminated passage, given the profound differences between the two authors' theoretical standpoints and the result they have produced in their respective texts.

On the one hand, Johnson appears at times to give a literal interpretation to such passages of *The Unnamable* in which the authorial voice deceptively resounds in the words of the protagonist, as he does for example in occasion of a review of a critical study of Beckett by Hugh Kenner:

"Firstly, in his interpretation and discussion of *The Unnamable* Mr. Kenner does not seem to realise, crucially, that it is Beckett himself who, having failed to project himself through various characters, assumes the first person in the latter section of the

⁶⁸ "Where were we? I did actually break off at a full stop above, [...] since that little girl with something of my mother in her face has just brought me a roll baked by her mother, [...] interrupted me where I write in isolation at the top of the house, such sweet interposition!". See Id., *See the Old Lady Decently*, London, Hutchinson, 1975, pp. 27-28.

novel. [...] Thus it is the author himself who directly reaches the impasse of ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’.”⁶⁹

Such an interpretation, naïve and superficial as it is, would seemingly confirm the conviction, on Johnson’s part, of a direct intervention of Beckett in his own text, thus providing a strong reason for claiming an affinity of purpose between *Albert Angelo* and *The Unnamable* – and not by chance Johnson extends here the idea of Beckett’s alleged presence to the entire novel by quoting its conclusion: his voice, Johnson seems here to affirm, is always to be implied behind the words of the narrating voice.

On several other occasions, however, Johnson rather appears to distance himself from Beckett, denoting, if not the awareness of a difference existing between himself and the latter, at least a desire that his work be regarded in a different light from that of his master. In an interview with Christopher Ricks of BBC, for instance, Johnson points out that “I admire Beckett very much, while I don’t imitate him in any sense. I look upon him as a great example of what can be done. I think personally he is in a cul-de-sac”,⁷⁰ a view he had already expressed in a review of Beckett’s *How it Is*, in which he confesses more or less directly a cooling down of his enthusiasm for this new phase of his master’s writing:

“Beckett seems to me to be exploring a cul-de-sac, and while I cannot help admiring both his integrity and his dedication in breaking new ground therein, I deeply regret at the same time that he has abandoned on the way those incidental qualities of language and intellectual exuberance and wit which so magnificently characterise his first two novels, *Murphy* and *Watt*.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ B. S. Johnson, review of H. Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, in “The Spectator”, 23 November 1962, p. 44.

⁷⁰ See P. Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, cit., p. 145.

⁷¹ B. S. Johnson, review of *How It Is*, cit., p. 22.

The ambiguity of Johnson's position on Beckett is then further complicated by some notes he makes in a personal notebook intended originally towards a prospective biography of Beckett.⁷² Here Johnson is seen pondering retrospectively on the crucial role the reading of his master has played in a defining moment of his own writing career, or rather, when the writer lurking inside of him was still at a stage of development: "somewhere it was in *Murphy* [...] that I first saw the word SOLIPSISM, [...] it formed part of a solution for me, hinted at some kind of mode of being = mode of GOING ON for me".⁷³ And Beckett is again involved, later on in the same notebook, in an imaginary dialogue centered on Johnson's solipsistic revelation: "SAY – well, you 'taught' me (introduced me to) Solipsism – so if my tribute to you is of that kind, then you have only yourself to blame".⁷⁴

Such cryptic passages would seem to indicate a perhaps belated awareness, on Johnson's part, of a certain degree of manipulation he might have exerted on Beckett's message to serve his own ends, a deeply personal interpretation of a partial aspect of his writing he has perhaps charged with a subjective meaning not intended in the original – "does all he says seem significant for me in the light of what I know he is, of what I believe him to be?",⁷⁵ wanders indeed Johnson later on in the same pages. It is also possible that Johnson might have interpreted Beckett perhaps too literally or superficially at an initial stage – a contention that would seem to be supported by admissions such as: "Beckett's solipsism/stoicism fitted, I read him with an intensity [...]. Yet the time when I was to study him

⁷² The notebook is entitled "Experiment / Venture into BIOGRAPHY".

⁷³ See Samuel Beckett Notebook (1966-1973), B. S. Johnson Archive, London, British Library, Archives and Manuscripts.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁵ *Ibidem.*

really deeply and seriously was yet to come”⁷⁶ –, but that developing his own ideas about the novel and, more crucially, becoming increasingly more conscious that his intentions differed considerably from those of his master, he might have reoriented his early somewhat intuitive interpretation of Beckett in a solipsistic way, bending it towards an altogether different direction.

A curious but significant echo of these dynamics, incidentally, is to be found in the genealogy of the name of Johnson’s protagonist, who was initially to be called Samuel Angelo,⁷⁷ which inevitably recalls both Beckett and Angel, the London district in which Johnson was living at the time,⁷⁸ thus giving possibly the idea of a sort of Beckettian Londoner, a definition easily applicable to Johnson himself – and Johnson’s own note about killing off his protagonist “comically à la Murphy”,⁷⁹ being Murphy the most London-bound of Beckett’s characters, is a further telling evidence of this link. The name Samuel was eventually dropped in a later revision of the novel, a fact perhaps even more crucial to our discussion, since renouncing the “Samuelness” of his character Johnson betrays a more or less conscious desire to place some distance between himself and

⁷⁶ See Samuel Beckett Notebook (1966-1973), in *Notebooks, Diaries and Proposals (1949-1973)*, B. S. Johnson Archive, London, British Library, Archives and Manuscripts. This passage relates to a personally difficult time for Johnson, corresponding to his breaking up with his former fiancée in 1958, an episode that informs crucially more than one Johnsonian novel and is central to the narration of *Albert Angelo* itself.

⁷⁷ It is however known, from various personal notes and correspondence, that the very first version of the protagonist’s name was Henry Angelo, which would have marked a stronger continuity with Johnson’s previous novel *Travelling People*, whose main character was named indeed Henry Henry.

⁷⁸ Johnson specifies indeed, in a note found among his working papers for *Albert Angelo*, that the final breaking off must occur “after a bit in which S sits at window looking at architecture, doing architectural drawings in which what he sees (=life around Angel) interferes with his own creation or architectural originalities”. See *Albert Angelo Working Papers*, in *Working Papers and Drafts for Novels by B. S. Johnson (1960-1975)*, B. S. Johnson Archive, London, British Library, Archive and Manuscripts.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

Beckett, as indeed he admits in a letter to his friend Zulfikar Ghose, in which he also explains how this move will allow him to use the quotation from *The Unnamable* in a way that will hopefully not encourage too strong or quick an identification with Beckett: “It’s not SA any longer but AA = Albert Angelo because I wanted a quotation from Sam at the beginning and it would look as though I was writing about Beckett, or might do so”.⁸⁰

To say that Johnson was writing “about” Beckett would be “crassly to miss the point” of *Albert Angelo*, for sure; it is nonetheless evident, however, that the figure of Samuel Beckett and the influence of his writing has always been present, obsessively and problematically, in some prominent corner of Johnson’s mind, during the composition of this novel as well as in many other stages of his development as a writer.⁸¹

4. Conclusion

It is thus perhaps not possible, as has been hopefully demonstrated, to assert the exact degree of consciousness and profoundness of understanding with which Johnson incorporates Beckett’s epigraph from *The Unnamable*, as well as establish the precise way in which such incorporation is to be interpreted, or by what kind of light such passage is meant to illumine the reading and reception of *Albert Angelo*, if that was

⁸⁰ B. S. Johnson, letter to Z. Ghose (30 July 1963), in *The B.S. Johnson – Zulfikar Ghose Correspondence*, edited by V. Guignery, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars, 2015, p. 204.

⁸¹ In a reply to a young Johnson, his friend Frank Lissauer had indeed prophetically commented: “Since you dare not laugh at the things Beckett laughs at, for fear of plagiarism, you’ll have quite a job” (F. Lissauer, letter to B.S. Johnson, 15 January 1959, in *General Correspondence (1957-1973)*, B. S. Johnson Archive, London, British Library, Archives and Manuscripts. We have no access to Johnson’s original letter, but this passage can be regarded as sufficient evidence of Johnson’s preoccupation, from early on in his career, of being too closely affiliated with the work of his master.

ever among Johnson's plans. What is sure, in any case, is that interpreting the link between these two texts in too transparent or literal a way can be utterly misleading and detrimental to the understanding of Johnson as a unique and original voice quite distinct from that of the master he nonetheless owes so much to.

For Beckett's *The Unnamable* is indeed an extremely complex and ambiguous text, one whose paradoxical, antithetical way of progressing "by affirmations and negations invalidated as soon as uttered" makes it impossible to isolate a single passage that could be made to explain and encapsulate all the issues it addresses. And Johnson has indeed certainly "only himself to blame", for the rather partial and extremely personal interpretation he appears to give of Beckett's text, and for basing such momentous turn in his writerly practice on such a reworked, solipsistically reoriented reading. It is not a matter of blame, however, nor certainly a pity, if by doing so Johnson, instead of following blindly into Beckett's steps and becoming an empty imitator of his master, has taken – consciously or unconsciously – an altogether different direction, one that has brought him to create a body of work of striking originality, producing a vision of the novel that challenges the very separation between art and life which Beckett explores to such obsessive extremities in a work so different in scope, tone and nature: "Johnson", concludes indeed Tew, "utilizes the aesthetic example of Beckett almost as his launch-pad to other realms. Again, he is neither slavishly nor narrowly imitative, making literary allusions to register a fond recognition of source and influence of an alternative project".⁸²

The history of the novel, in a way, has thus perhaps only to thank Johnson for substituting – again, apparently – Samuel Beckett for the

⁸² P. Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, cit., p. 146.

kaleidoscopic 'me' of the narrating voice of *The Unnamable*, whereas otherwise we would only have a redundant repetition of ideas already past their exhaustion.

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