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RIVERRUN

Collana di letteratura e cultura inglese

La collana intende promuovere lo studio della letteratura e della cultura inglese, rivolgendo un'attenzione particolare alle letterature e alle culture anglofone nella loro dimensione innovativa, intese cioè come produzione di testi che parlano di altri mondi, di altre sensibilità artistiche, di altre modalità espressive e conoscitive. Da questo punto di vista, rimane la centralità della lingua e della letteratura inglese *tout-court*, termini imprescindibili di un confronto con la tradizione. Mentre la lingua inglese allarga sempre più lo spazio della sua funzionalità nella comunicazione e impone la sua egemonia linguistico-culturale, nel panorama globalizzato del terzo millennio nulla è immobile in un processo in cui non è sempre facile distinguere chi influenza da chi è influenzato — anche in termini culturologici. Di qui il ruolo assunto dal concetto di “attraversamento” che implica anche fluidità e permeabilità degli spazi culturali. Un *riverrun* che si sostituisce alla dialettica centro/periferia o, se si vuole, alla coppia oppositiva continuità/discontinuità, configurando in tal modo un territorio nuovo per gli studi di anglistica, anche sul piano della ricerca comparativa e interculturale.

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Daide Del Bello
Alessandra Marzola
Shakespeare and the Power of Difference



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via Raffaele Garofalo, 133/A-B
00173 Roma
(06) 93781065

ISBN 978-88-548-4155-0

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1st edition: May 2011

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Acknowledgements

This book would not have been conceived had it not been for the exchange of views and ideas in the classroom. Students, to whom this study is confidently addressed, have been our major source of inspiration. Precious help has come from colleagues and friends who, in the course of time and in various capacities have taken the pain to compare notes and to offer suggestions. A special thank goes to Catherine Belsey for being over the years a source of inspiration and friendly support. Patricia Parker opened up lines of analysis always discussed and often pursued. Fellow scholars who have taken part in seminars on the *Difference of Shakespeare* held in Bergamo over the past few years have offered a range of stimulating insights: Shaul Bassi, Michael Neill, Carlo Pagetti, Alessandra Petrina, Kiernan Ryan, Maggie Rose, Alessandro Serpieri and Mariangela Tempera.

Christopher Nield and Rosalind Brooke Ross saw major sections of the manuscript through to their final draft with an unwavering attention to detail and an elegant touch. Any errors that remain are entirely our own.

Helpful comments have come from Bruno Cartosio and Valeria Gennero, while Francesca Guidotti has offered timely remarks and unflagging moral support.

In a time of lean budgets and stringent cuts, the financial support of the Dipartimento di Scienza dei Lin-

guaggi, della Comunicazione e degli Studi Culturali at the Università di Bergamo is all the more meaningful: without this contribution, the publication of the book would not have been possible.

Introduction

Davide Del Bello, Alessandra Marzola

The difference of Shakespeare¹

Shakespeare is different. On that point no one would disagree. Like him or loathe him, he stands apart from other authors. No other playwright has provoked such adulation and controversy or continued to be performed, decade after decade, far beyond his native shores. That Shakespeare should be part of the core curriculum for students of English even in non-British countries is therefore commonplace. There is no need to endorse Harold Bloom's eulogizing claim that Shakespeare "invented the human"² or to embrace the Bardolatry still entrenched in Shakesporean scholarship to recognize the long lasting impact of his work, imagery and vocabulary on Western culture.

No doubt, Shakespeare's ever resurgent vitality owes a lot to the flourish of celebrations which in two cen-

1. *The difference of Shakespeare* is the title of a collection of essays edited by Alessandra Marzola in 2008; A. MARZOLA ed., *The Difference of Shakespeare* (Bergamo: Bergamo University Press/Sestante, 2008). This volume is meant as a follow up to that publication. While starting from the same conjectures we have furthered the exploration of Shakespeare's textuality focussing on the close reading of Shakespeare's language in some of its most memorable instances.

2. H. BLOOM, *Shakespeare and The Invention of the Human*. (New York: Riverside, 2008).

turies transformed him from a protean talent into the Bard of Avon. Still, the fact that Shakespeare should have become national property — namely one of the most treasured blazons of an unchallengeable *Englishness* — has turned out to be surprisingly compatible with a more democratic kind of popularity. Along with the Shakespeare industry supported by a host of conservative scholars and commercial theatrical directors, there exist other, more anarchic Shakespeares, as exemplified by rewritings, adaptations and alternative performances across a range of media.

Shakespeare is thus both monolith and matrix. We use the word “matrix” to refer to the way Shakespeare’s work has the ability to inspire new meanings and withhold final closure, remaining in a creative state of flux.

Traces of Shakespeare’s language, and indeed, of the Shakespearean imagination, have been afloat in the collective memory of Western cultures, resurfacing not only in poetry, drama, literature and film, but also — unpredictably — in the language of everyday idioms, in advertisements or in management manuals, and even in self-help guides. Whether in clichè-ridden slogans selling products or in more sophisticated literary endeavours, Shakespeare’s language, even in translation, has become the stuff of our own interior monologue and public conversation. Albeit largely unacknowledged, the pervasive presence of Shakespearean language continues to affect our modes of feeling and ways of living. Shakespeare has moulded the ways we love and hate, we desire and fear; the ways we think of death and of power, the ways we laugh and cry. Who, in doubt over crucial decisions, no matter how harrowing or how prosaic, has not slipped into Hamlet’s «to be or not to be»? Who, feeling wronged, has not claimed justice in the indignant language of Shylock, or pleaded love with the fervent words of Romeo?

Is Shakespeare better than? Is he more valuable than any other contemporary or subsequent author? Perhaps. We are not, however, concerned with issues of absolute judgement. Nor do we submit Shakespeare — rather than Marlowe, Webster, Sidney or Spenser — to the attention of our intended addressees — Italian graduate students — or of any other reader, under the assumption of a superior value to which homage ought to be paid. The argument we propose is the reverse. We submit the evidence of Shakespeare's fame as a shared ground of experience and as a matter of wonder and of inquiry. The celebrity of Shakespeare is not just greater; it is of a different kind. We set off from this difference and attempt to retrieve what in his language might have made the difference.

Of course, Shakespeare's popularity has definite historical roots. It is the outcome of the near apocalyptic clash between cultural forces that marked early modern England; where the gaping fissures of religious, political and economic differences became fertile ground for debate and renewal; where the rising assertiveness of Protestant beliefs fought the waning power of Catholic convictions; and where theatre entered the battleground.

As the most popular medium, addressed to, and attended by all social classes, from the aristocracy to the lower ranks, theatre became the arena of political and ideological contentions. It became an intellectual coliseum where playwrights and actors, producers and investors belonging, like Shakespeare himself, to the merchants' guild, engaged in a harsh competition for success and tried to outdo one another to please the fickle tastes and mercurial moods of their all too vocal audiences. Theatre became the ideal venue for the enactment, and, indeed, the anticipation of collective hopes and dreams: the place where lofty classical models could be tested, celebrated or trashed in the forging of a new national

conscience. Theatre was also the place that made it possible to ‘catch the conscience’ of kings and laymen alike, by staging the conflicting fantasies of the would-be worlds kings and laymen were supposed to inhabit. No wonder then that a bright youngster like Shakespeare, in search of money and success, should make the most of the potential offered by the theatre, in all capacities — first as an actor, than as a scriptwriter and eventually as a wealthy entrepreneur and owner of his own company: *The King’s Men*.

All this is still not enough, however, to justify the singularity of Shakespeare’s lasting fame. A crowd of ambitious and skillful playwrights — Marlowe, Kid, Webster, Middleton — to mention just a representative few — did in fact successfully compete with Shakespeare, but the fame they enjoy to this day is much narrower, elitist and scholarly. All of them knew how to write a brilliant story, how to compose catching verse, and how to piece together parts and roles effectively. Still, there remains something more and something different to Shakespeare: his plus must reside in a special linguistic, dramatic, or poetic skill, a bent for moulding modern English into memorable phrases, passages, rhetorical frames.

More than being nurtured in the isolation we still romantically associate with creative genius, Shakespeare’s craftsmanship was subject to the laws of patronage and of the theatre market — open to all sorts of exchanges, interventions, engraftments. A matrix, more than what we nowadays call a text, the early modern theatre script bristled with the daily alterations of actors, often initiated by the response of theatregoers. Following performance, Shakespeare’s work circulated in a number of unauthorized, often pirated quartos for about two years before the ‘real’ or supposedly ‘good’ version was handed in at the Stationer’s Register for final recording; which proves the

fluidity, and, ultimately, the indeterminacy of what we call Shakespeare's texts. It comes as no surprise that after 1623 — when Shakespeare's collected work was first published in the expensive format of the Folio — philologists labored in vain for two full centuries in search of the authentic, indisputable original.

Consequently, it is a matter of wide scholarly conviction that the search for the one Shakespeare is futile. Recent critical editions of Shakespeare's plays typically collate more authoritative versions, providing glimpses into more than one text, each of which is taken to be historically relevant and culturally revealing. Occasionally, alternative full-length versions of the same plays from different times are set side by side. The moulding of Shakespeare's language seems very much a case of multiple forgery, which, incidentally, explains why Shakespearean authorship has so frequently been a matter of sometimes rancorous dispute. Whether Shakespeare was the real author of all the plays and poems credited to him or not, the fact remains that the language commonly recognized as Shakespeare's was malleable and open-ended from the start. It had to remain pliable to the demands of actors, to their rereading of the play, to their own inventions.

Even here, though, nothing goes to prove that Shakespeare's case was exceptional. The long, uncertain transition from script through stage to a registered text applies to all theatrical productions and playwrights of the time. What makes a difference is presumably the greater popular success Shakespeare's scripts and companies enjoyed at the time, which brought actors into a rush to appropriate Shakespeare's clues, and prompted first editors to yearn for the ultimate printed version, able to settle the somehow random fluidity of theatrical performances. In the prologue to their 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare's

works, editors exhort audiences already familiar with the plays to the comparatively new habit of reading, and re-reading Shakespeare:

But it is not our province, who only gather his works, and give them you, to praise him. It is yours that read him. And there we hope, to your diverse capacities, you will find enough, both to draw, and hold you: for his wit can no more lie hid, than it could be lost. Read him, therefore, and again and again: And if then you do not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him.

We agree with Simon Palfrey, to whom we owe the quotation, that «this is one of the most suggestive things ever written about Shakespeare»³. It is a quote, we would add, that touches a remarkably modern chord, especially when the editors give Shakespeare away to the readers («It is yours that read him»), trusting their ability to be alternatively drawn and held back, in the awareness that no single reading will be enough.

In much of the same spirit, we would like to submit samples of Shakespeare's poetic and dramatic language to Italian readers of English Literature. We trust that reading and re-reading will prove our belief that his work is best understood and appreciated not as pristine monolith, but as an open, plural and ultimately uncontrollable matrix of meaning and elusiveness.

Which Shakespeare?

The passages selected for analysis here include both highly memorable and relatively obscure Shakespear-

3. S. PALFREY, *Doing Shakespeare* (London: The Arden Shakespeare 2005), p. 2.

ean verse. Such a piecemeal approach is meant to provide a fresh way of mapping the terrain of Shakespeare. As we set out, we aim to explore unforeseen digressions along well-established paths, paths made barren by centuries of plodding. We hope that from certain angles and vantage points, our readers will find Shakespeare both more approachable and more strange. We aim to make him less forbidding precisely by making him less familiar.

The readings we propose are not meant as self-contained drills, but as first steps towards an understanding of the texts also in their historical, cultural and political relevance; a relevance — we must recall — that attaches both to Shakespeare's distant past and to our very near present. We argue that if these fragments have remained imprinted in collective memory it is because the thick fabric of Shakespeare's language has proven capable to intercept such key issues and archetypal themes as life and death, time and mortality, appearance and reality. And it has done so in ways which bear dramatic witness to their immediate relevance in 16th century England and which foreshadow the impact such issues would have on future generations. What has often been hailed as the universality of Shakespeare's language lies not in metaphysics, but in the ongoing conversation of history. While speaking to us, this language remains rooted in the controversial assumptions and the divisive beliefs of late 16th century English Protestants.

Our aim is therefore to test the ways in which the density of Shakespeare's language, embedded in his history, still interacts with our historical condition in the present, and to explore such interaction as evidence for Shakespeare's lingering popularity. In doing so, we will try to withhold clear-cut interpretations, in the conviction that the burning core of Shakespeare's wheel of fire —

to paraphrase George Wilson Knight's momentous title⁴ — pertains to the realm of ideal achievements. We will focus instead on what in Shakespeare's figures of speech remains unstable and non-decidable, on unsolved ambiguities and multiple perspectives; in short on what utterly resists the logic of interpretation.

It should be stressed that exploring indeterminacy or non-reducibility does not entail overlooking the importance of history. On the contrary. What we aim to underscore is not some kind of eternal malleability, but an indeterminacy that is historically charged; replete with contradictory allusions whose import will be the subject of our attention.

It also needs to be noted that our work does not set out to thwart the students' legitimate desire for final meanings and definite interpretations. Far from offering a deterrent against interpretation, this volume is meant as a needed introduction to the students' free interpretations and appropriations of Shakespeare along the lines they believe most suitable to their concerns. We want to suggest that the first steps are an awareness of the fluidity and an appreciation of the rhetorical potential of the language at stake. Awareness and appreciation are what we intend to convey and hope to achieve.

Close Reading: premises and scopes

Close reading is hardly novelty in critical practice. And yet, while always invoked as *the* prerequisite of informed criticism and the locus of insight it remains vague in scope and misguided in its application. What is generally

4. G. WILSON KNIGHT, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Routledge, 2001 [1930]).

left obscure or implied is “how does the actual reading work?”, or “how do we relate the reading to the world out there, to past and present history?”; and again “how does the reading affect or produce more knowledge about the text, and which kind of knowledge?” Within the much wider realm of interpretation, the practice of close reading ultimately interrogates the relationship between signs and the world, a relationship which in the course of the 20th century has been painstakingly charted and forcefully revised by literary critics and by linguists.

Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de Linguistique Générale*⁵ is generally held as the initiator of an ongoing debate over the workings of language in its relationship to the outside world. In particular, his definition of language as a codified system of mutually related signs has been taken to mean that language cannot be read as the straightforward reflection of facts, events, or even of inner thoughts, emotions, and perceptions⁶. Rather, language is a social fact, and meaning a system of socially constructed and historically determined aural and visual signs developed over time by a given speaking community⁷. In poststructuralist studies, Saussure’s theory has

5. SAUSSURE F. de, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Paris: Payot, 1995 [1916]); Italian transl. DE MAURO cur., *Corso di Linguistica Generale* (Bari: Laterza, 2003).

6. Signs, Saussure argues, do not define pre-existing objects as in a nomenclature. On the contrary «language precedes the existence of independent entities, making the world intelligible by differentiating between concepts» (C. BELSEY, *Critical Practice*, 2002 [1980], p. 36)

7. In Saussure’s influential account of language, signs are made up of *the signifier* (the sound image or the written shape) and *the signified* (the concept) which is conventionally and arbitrarily associated to the signifier by the speaking community in a historical continuum. Being socially and historically determined, meanings and concepts are subject to modifications in the course of time. It goes without saying that, whereas the relationship between the individual *signifier* and the *signified* (the sound shape and the concept) is arbitrary (there is no special ontological reason why the word

been enlisted as the main tool for social and cultural criticism, and developed along two main related views. The first one relies on Saussure's theory of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs to claim that language is to be understood dynamically as a signifying practice, a way of articulating experience, implicit in the very process of social formation. The second is based on the assumption that the ways of articulating experience are in turn affected by ideology, that is by the way people belonging to a given linguistic and social community represent to themselves their relationship to the conditions of their existence⁸. Although not reducible to ideology, language inscribes ideological choices: differentiating, in the way language always does, may involve discriminating, as gender studies have amply documented.

For the purposes of our study, the Saussurean idea of arbitrariness and the culturalist notion of ideology can be used to qualify the practice of close reading. Reading closely implies thinking of language as a representational screen; as a signifying filter or a cognitive map which, for all its pliability, is always interposed between the subject who reads or writes and the world. In a sense, we love and hate in the terms allowed by socially agreed codes about loving and hating. And so does Shakespeare.

Admittedly, to students, especially to Italian students with a limited knowledge of English, Shakespeare's language is likely to look and sound "not natural"; "not immediate", and therefore not directly expressive of real feelings or perceptions. But the practice of teaching has taught us that there are passages and lines from Shakespeare — including some in our selection — whose emo-

cat should be associated to the real *cat/s* we know), the whole network of *signifieds* constituting the language in use of a social group is not.

8. C. BELSEY, *op. cit.*, 2000, pp. 39–40.

tional charge and appeal have been able to mask their own linguistic constructedness, and to stand in time as instantaneous, transparent vehicles of the “human mind”. Bardolatry has thrived precisely on such assumption. Still, we need to remind ourselves that, even when they might sound like spontaneous outflows of the mind and the heart, Shakespeare’s words are drawing from the multiple layers of highly-codified cultural scripts: the screens which in Shakespeare’s time worked as a filter to what could be felt or known in the world.

In Shakespeare’s case the drawing from cultural material is all the more massive and striking. Hardly anything — it is well known — is new in Shakespeare in terms of plots, themes, styles and conventions. Like most of his contemporaries, Shakespeare ransacked a number of sources — plundering the rich archive of classical learning and scholarship which Italian humanists, amongst others, had contributed to popularize in England since the beginning of the 15th century. But he also drew from native lore and the chronicles, from folk tales and from the popular jargon of the London streets and the market. Shakespeare’s versatility, attested by his multifaceted talent in all genres — poetry, drama and comedy, low and high styles — has turned the body of his work into an exceptional record of vast, varied portions of the linguistic filter that traversed his own culture.

To read Shakespeare closely is to look at the ways those portions have been mediated, refashioned, endowed with new potential meanings in his language. The aim is then to release the range of conventional, unconventional or uncharted meanings that are invested in language by means of rhetorical patterns, and in particular, through the deployment of figures of speech. Part of the difficulty involved will be to take stock of more than one potential meaning at a time, to tackle unsolved am-

biguities. And yet, ambiguities and suspended meanings are the crucial, cross-cultural site of language. While they mark a signifying power that was probably intended to meet the different demands of audiences in the 16th century, they have also been able to address the variable needs of subsequent readers and theatregoers ever since. In fact, familiarity with the representational scripts Shakespeare tapped is insufficient. Differences and discontinuities between our present and his past will only come with an appreciation of our own cultural script, of the different or similar encodings of meaning at stake in our own culture.

Reading Shakespeare closely along these tracks is both demanding and challenging. It demands a cultural and historical awareness of language understood as a signifying practice: it asks readers to question their present in the light of the past, and the past in the light of the present; it challenges the facile inertness that goes with eulogy and admiration. But the reward may be equally grand: the chance to play an active role in the signifying practice that Shakespeare so powerfully engaged and so dazzlingly enriched.

Contents

Our close readings explore densely interconnected clusters of language dealing with the experience of time, death and mortality (chapter 2); and of appearance, reality, dream and memory (chapter 3).

Although separate treatment of the issues engaged in different chapters may fail to do justice to their ubiquity in Shakespeare's corpus, we trust it will allow for dedicated focus on these themes in the fragments selected. For the sake of cohesion and in order to highlight the

continuity of Shakespeare's poetic and dramatic language, we have matched excerpts from Shakespeare's plays with sonnets relevant to the issues engaged. We have been encouraged to do so by the critical consensus on Shakespeare's «historically unique dual relationship with the printing house and the playhouse»⁹ within a cultural context where — long before Shakespeare's birth — stage and page, drama and poetry were understood as interactive arenas¹⁰.

Readers will find that our close readings engage the texts at different but complementary levels. Reflecting as they do the focal priorities and the critical views of the two authors, these two ways of approaching Shakespeare's language differ in scope and intent. Yet, they share the same conviction about the inexhaustible potential of Shakespeare's language to renew its difference, century after century.

Chapter 1 (*Charting the Long Century* by Davide Del Bello) — an illustration of key historical features of Shakespeare's England — is designed as a historical and cultural introduction to the close readings that follow.

Chapter 2 (*Tempus Fugit* by Alessandra Marzola) consists of three sections. In section 1 the historical scope narrows down to the main events of 1599, arguably a crucial year for Shakespeare and for England. Section 2 retraces the pattern of contemporary cultural anxieties about the interrelated issues of time, death and mortality at the turn of the century. Section 3 includes microreadings of sonnets 60 and 73 as well as of selected passages from *Hamlet*, all of which share a prominent concern with the

9. P. CHENEY, "Introduction: Shakespeare's poetry in the twenty-first century", in P. CHENEY ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Poetry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

10. PETERS STONE J., *The Theatre of the Book, 1480–1880: Print, Text And Performance in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

related issues of time and of death. Unsolved, recurrent ambiguities in the rhetorical folds of Shakespeare's language are shown to make allusion to irreducible cultural traumas still affecting Western civilization.

Chapter 3 (*Shakespeare the Mystifier* by Davide Del Bello) addresses *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale* from a macro perspective aimed at isolating instances of rhetorical and poetic mystification in Shakespeare's romances and in sonnet 38. The mystifying quality of Shakespearean romances is read as the thematic and rhetorical pointer to a realm of possibilities — theatrical but also social, political, spiritual — which lie beyond the scope of ideology and the scripts of culture and yet can be shown to influence both.

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