

GREAT SHAKESPEAREANS

*Edited by Adrain Poole*

JOYCE · T. S. ELIOT · AUDEN

BECKETT



12

Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Auden, Beckett  
Great Shakespeareans  
Volume XII

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## Series Editors' Preface

What is a 'Great Shakespearean'? Who are the 'Great Shakespeareans'? This series is designed to explore those figures who have had the greatest influence on the interpretation, understanding and reception of Shakespeare, both nationally and internationally. Charting the effect of Shakespeare on cultures local, national and international is a never-ending task, as we continually modulate and understand differently the ways in which each culture is formed and altered. *Great Shakespeareans* uses as its focus individuals whose own cultural impact has been and continues to be powerful. One of its aims is to widen the sense of who constitute the most important figures in our understanding of Shakespeare's afterlives. The list is therefore not restricted to, say, actors and scholars, as if the performance of and commentary on Shakespeare's works were the only means by which his impact is remade or extended. There are actors aplenty (like Garrick, Irving and Olivier) and scholars too (Bradley, Greg and Empson) but our list deliberately includes as many novelists (Dickens, Melville, Joyce), poets (Keats, Eliot, Berryman), playwrights (Brecht, Beckett, Césaire) and composers (Berlioz, Verdi and Britten), as well as thinkers whose work seems impossible without Shakespeare and whose influence on our world has been profound, like Marx and Freud.

Deciding who to include has been less difficult than deciding who to exclude. We have a long list of individuals for whom we would wish to have found a place but whose inclusion would have meant someone else's exclusion. We took long and hard looks at the volumes as they were shaped by our own and our volume editors' perceptions. We have numerous regrets over some outstanding figures who ended up just outside this project. There will, no doubt, be argument on this score. Some may find our choices too Anglophone, insufficiently global. Others may complain of the lack of contemporary scholars and critics. But this is not a project designed to establish a new canon, nor are our volumes intended to be encyclopedic in scope. The series is not entitled 'The Greatest Shakespeareans' nor is it 'Some Great Shakespeareans', but it will, we hope, be seen as negotiating

and occupying a space mid-way along the spectrum of inclusivity and arbitrariness.

Our contributors have been asked to describe the double impact of Shakespeare on their particular figure and of their figure on the understanding, interpretation and appreciation of Shakespeare, as well as providing a sketch of their subject's intellectual and professional biography and an account of the wider context within which her/his work might be understood. This 'context' will vary widely from case to case and, at times, a single 'Great Shakespearean' is asked to stand as a way of grasping a large domain. In the case of Britten, for example, he is the window through which other composers and works in the English musical tradition like Vaughan Williams, Walton and Tippett have a place. So, too, Dryden has been the means for considering the beginnings of critical analysis of the plays as well as of the ways in which Shakespeare's plays influenced Dryden's own practice.

To enable our contributors to achieve what we have asked of them, we have taken the unusual step of enabling them to write at length. Our volumes do not contain brief entries of the kind that a Shakespeare Encyclopedia would include nor the standard article length of academic journals and Shakespeare Companions. With no more than four Great Shakespeareans per volume – and as few as two in the case of volume 10 – our contributors have space to present their figures more substantially and, we trust, more engagingly. Each volume has a brief introduction by the volume editor and a section of further reading. We hope the volumes will appeal to those who already know the accomplishment of a particular Great Shakespearean and to those trying to find a way into seeing how Shakespeare has affected a particular poet as well as how that poet has changed forever our appreciation of Shakespeare. Above all, we hope *Great Shakespeareans* will help our readers to think afresh about what Shakespeare has meant to our cultures, and about how and why, in such differing ways across the globe and across the last four centuries and more, they have changed what his writing has meant.

Peter Holland and Adrian Poole



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# Introduction

Adrian Poole

It would be scurrilous to describe this volume as the one about two Irishmen, an Englishman and an American. More respectable to start with their high academic credentials. Joyce, Eliot, Auden and Beckett all enjoyed a University education, they were in their various ways exceptionally learned (not simply by formal routes), and their art takes a delight in 'difficulty' that keeps the riff-raff at bay. Such indeed, from one point of view, are the insignia of 'modernism'. But, as we shall see, the scurrility, irreverence and playfulness they found in Shakespeare are essential features of what in return they did with him. Of course, there is another side to this. Eliot wrote admiringly of the 'alliance of levity and seriousness (by which the seriousness is intensified)'.<sup>1</sup> There are more rambunctious ways of putting this, such as *Finnegans Wake* would require. But we can begin by recognizing that the clowns and fools, rascals and rogues, ingenious malcontents and scathing wits are at least as important to the modernists' Shakespeare as the noble lovers, princes and statesmen who appealed to their Victorian forebears.

Many twentieth-century artists have been drawn to Shakespeare's attendants, to marginal figures who witness the top dogs' shenanigans, and beyond the pale to the outcast, vagrant and migrant. In their own lives and art, these four writers courted displacement. Auden was the only one to end up in the country of his birth, and even he managed to die abroad, in Vienna. As Dan Gunn contends, 'elsewhere' was what Beckett strove for. We can readily think of them all pondering that bravura exclamation of Shakespeare's Coriolanus, as he turns his back on the city of his birth, on mother and wife and child: 'There is a world elsewhere.' (3.3.135)

The elsewheres they sought and made for themselves were various, as were the homescapes they left behind. But there are obvious reasons for pairing Joyce with Beckett and Eliot with Auden. The former grew up in or near Dublin and finished their formal education there, Joyce at University College, Beckett at Trinity College; both sought refuge on the Continent. Born on opposite sides of the Atlantic, Eliot and Auden became in mid-life

citizens of each others' countries. Their formal education had culminated in Oxford, though Eliot had already been forcefully shaped by Harvard. Joyce and Beckett were more deeply marked by the Dublin they abandoned than Eliot and Auden were by any city; the latter found it easier to retain (and in later life, for Auden, to renew) their connexions with the world of Oxford, than Joyce and Beckett ever did with the city of their youth and education.

Eliot and Auden remained actively in touch with an academic milieu as Joyce and Beckett did not, and the fact that their critical and creative writings affect each other puts them in a different relation to Shakespeare. Among his many University affiliations and commitments, in 1937 Eliot lectured on 'The Development of Shakespeare's Verse' at Edinburgh; in 1946–9, Auden lectured on virtually all the plays and poems at the New School for Social Research in New York. It is true that Joyce lectured on *Hamlet* in Trieste in 1912–13, and that the young Beckett taught some Shakespeare, without enthusiasm, to the teenagers of Campbell College, Belfast,<sup>2</sup> but these were no more than temporary ploys. Their influence on late twentieth-century Shakespeare (and beyond) has been less direct than Eliot's and Auden's, but at least in Beckett's case the routes can be clearly discerned, as Gunn's essay demonstrates, through the powerful mediation of the Polish critic Jan Kott, and of theatre-practitioners such as Peter Hall and Peter Brook.<sup>3</sup>

There is another way of pairing the four of them. Joyce (born 1882) and Eliot (born 1888) belonged to the same generation. As regards Shakespeare, the authorities whom they could not help but assimilate, if only then to reject, included some potent figures in the shape of Edward Dowden and A. C. Bradley, Georg Brandes and Sidney Lee (Anne Stillman adds a specifically American cast to the young Eliot's development). Beckett and Auden were born some 20 years later, in 1906 and 1907; they were not oppressed by the late Victorian and Edwardian patriarchs who loomed over Joyce and Eliot, including the 'Shakespeare' of those times. In fact, among the authority figures they did have to deal with were precisely Joyce (for Beckett) and Eliot (for Auden).

There were some good reasons for hostility towards the Shakespeare inherited by the first generation of modernists from their nineteenth-century predecessors. One was the extent to which he had been annexed by a political and cultural agenda that saw him as 'the greatest Englishman'. By the tercentenary of his death in 1916, this was the image promoted by the contributors from around the globe to Israel Gollancz's *Book of Homage to Shakespeare*; for some, the temptation to fuse Shakespeare's voice with

King Henry V's was irresistible.<sup>4</sup> W. B. Yeats was not one of them, being more involved in the violent domestic events commemorated in his poem 'Easter, 1916'. He had already expressed his greater sympathy for Richard II, the king whose failings the regenerate Prince Hal was supposed to redeem.<sup>5</sup> When the Anglo-Welsh David Jones came to write his masterpiece *In Parenthesis* (1937) about his experiences in the Great War, he invoked the play *Henry V* only to ignore the title character and concentrate on the Fluellens and Pistols.<sup>6</sup> As for the preceding confrontation in the *Henry IV* plays between Prince Hal and Falstaff, W. H. Auden's sympathy for the saintly rogue and distaste for the cold-blooded heir to the throne were even more blatant. Jeremy Noel-Tod dwells on Auden's 'resistance, as a reader of Shakespeare, to heroic gestures and transcendent absolutes' (142). Meanwhile, at a less exalted social level, 'Shakespeare' could seem to stand for the comfortable commercial prosperity that underpinned the regal and imperial values, turning the icons of European Literature such as Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare into 'Daunty, Gouty and Shopkeeper': thus Joyce, scurrilously, in *Finnegans Wake*, and Auden, gleefully repeating him (see Ellmann, 15 and Noel-Tod, 105).

For in the wake of Victorian and Edwardian biography, the idea of Shakespeare as the supreme artist was to say the least fraught, as Henry James's magnificently bewildered late essay on *The Tempest* (1907) insisted. Everything that could be known about the man from Stratford indicated ordinariness. Where could he have found his astonishing gifts? How could he have kept going back to the mundane world of Stratford? Here was an idea of the artist radically at odds with the modernists' needs to escape from everything associated with 'home'. Listen to Joyce's Stephen Dedalus claiming to hear in Shakespeare the summons to flight: 'The note of banishment, banishment from the heart, banishment from home, sounds uninterruptedly from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* onward till Prospero breaks his staff, [...] .' (quoted Ellmann, 28) Dan Gunn writes of Beckett that 'he was drawn towards the foreign as an escape from almost everything that might be considered *home*' (Gunn, 153). This is close to the way Auden thought of escaping from England: 'I couldn't grow up. English life is for me a family life, and I love my family but I don't want to live with them'.<sup>7</sup>

Another good reason for antagonism towards the late nineteenth-century Shakespeare was focussed in *Hamlet* and his play. After watching a performance of *Hamlet* in Trieste in 1908, Joyce complained about 'the gross dramatic blunders of the play' (Ellmann, 16). A few years later, D. H. Lawrence saw a performance in an Italian village that provoked an extravagant meditation on the protagonist and what he represented: 'I had

always felt an aversion from Hamlet: a creeping unclean thing he seems, on the stage, [...] The character is repulsive in its conception, based on self-dislike and a spirit of disintegration.<sup>8</sup> Most notoriously, the young T. S. Eliot adjudged the play 'most certainly an artistic failure'.<sup>9</sup> The early twentieth century does not hold a monopoly on such violent reactions to the play and its protagonist, and Freud was at hand with an explanation of why this might be so. Joyce liked to spin alternative theories about the dramatist's personal investment in his play, not in the complex allegedly focused in Hamlet junior, but in the sexual betrayal suffered by Hamlet senior. For Joyce, Eliot, Lawrence and their generation, the passions ignited by this play in particular, and Shakespearean drama in general, had much to do with the permission it offered, or the demands that it made, to speak more freely about sexual incitement, inhibition and injury, and more widely, about the realities of physical existence and bodily needs, our everyday underworld.

Eliot would modify his early views, and the exasperation with a specifically Victorian Hamlet to a large extent dies away, allowing renewed interest in Hamlet the inquirer, asking sharp questions of a vertiginous world. Specifically, a European world suffering a melt-down comparable in scale and quality to the protracted European crisis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What struck Eliot about Renaissance culture, Richard Halpern notes, was 'its essential *modernity*'.<sup>10</sup> Right now, however, in the wreckage of post-war Europe, it was not Italy that provided the most powerful examples, provocations and threats: it was France and Germany. Especially, for the young Eliot, the France of Mallarmé, Laforgue, Claudel and Valéry, in whose work could be glimpsed other ways of thinking about Hamlet. Claudel strikingly calls Hamlet 'un professeur d'attention', a word that anticipates the attentiveness and waiting that would be the subject of Beckett's first great drama. In 'La Crise de l'Esprit' (1919), Valéry sees the modern intellect typified by its heterogeneity, 'its mixture of fragments of past culture'; 'The European Hamlet watches a million Ghosts [...] He has for his phantoms all the objects of our controversies.'<sup>11</sup>

For all these writers, the generic instability of Shakespeare's art is a crucial feature, and a liberating one. In this respect, the concept of the 'grotesque' is vital. Not that it is a new one. As essays on Dickens and Hardy in an earlier volume have demonstrated, the idea of the grotesque developed increasing purchase in the nineteenth century, taking courage from Shakespeare's example in challenging the purity and integrity of genre, of character, of language, and promoting kinds of black sardonic ribaldry that the modernists would take to new extremes. We should

note the significance for mid-twentieth-century Shakespeare criticism of G. Wilson Knight's emphasis on the dark comedy in *King Lear*, and the welcome later afforded to Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of carnival and the grotesque body.<sup>12</sup> Joyce's progress from *Dubliners* to the *Wake* marks an increasing commitment to carnival and the derangement of all hierarchies, including the verbal. More soberly, and traditionally, Eliot questioned the discreteness of tragedy and comedy: 'to those who have experienced the full horror of life, tragedy is still inadequate [...] In the end horror and laughter may be one.' (quoted Stillman, 80)

'The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living'. Thus wrote W. H. Auden, grotesquely, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' (1939), as Jeremy Noel-Tod reminds us (127). Writing in 1937, in a general introduction to his work, Yeats declared his ambivalent feelings towards England and the English: 'I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris, and to the English language in which I think, speak, and write.'<sup>13</sup> Other Irish-born writers would put it differently. Maud Ellmann dwells on the important passage in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in which Stephen Dedalus complains: 'The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. [...] My soul frets in the shadow of his language.' (13) His language – Shakespeare's, surely? But no: as Ellmann points out, it is a brilliantly calculated snub to name the oppressor who casts this shadow as – Ben Jonson. Many modern writers have fretted in the shadow of the English language, especially those whose origins have involved subjection to colonial or imperial authority. 'It is perhaps the fact of writing directly in English which is knotting me up,' Beckett tells a correspondent, 'Horrible language, which I still know too well.' (quoted Gunn, 153) Neither Eliot nor Auden take such an exasperated attitude towards the language of Shakespeare (and Jonson, and others). Nor, indeed, does Joyce: after all, it is Stephen speaking in *Ulysses*, not his author. By the time of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce was striving for 'a language which is above all languages', and could claim: 'I have discovered that I can do anything I want with language.' (quoted Ellmann, 52) When it comes to self-confidence in the face of Shakespeare's putative authority, linguistic and otherwise, Joyce and Auden are alike in their exuberance as Eliot and Beckett are in their anxiety. But Eliot never sought to escape from the shadow of language, Shakespeare's or any other. On the contrary, the more shadows the better.

For any artist born into a society that has experienced political and cultural subordination to British rule, there are strong motives for freeing yourself from the shadow of Shakespeare. This includes or included

Americans, at least until they acquired imperial powers of their own. Joyce and Eliot both grew up under the shade cast by imperial rule, though for Eliot the empire stretched back to Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. For Joyce, it was nearer and specifically British, while the remoter past was a less exigent, more welcoming elsewhere. As for Shakespeare, did he really need to be slain, or even fled from? The rivalry he incited in Joyce took increasingly riotous form. Initially, it entailed the calculated impudence of embracing Ibsen as an alternative to the English bard (following the example of his fellow countryman, creator of the word 'bardolatry', George Bernard Shaw). But Joyce's tactics change, Ellmann argues, and his relations with Shakespeare can be understood through the metaphors of incorporation, of swallowing, consumption and digestion in which his art revels: 'Joyce's answer is to swallow Shakespeare's life and works into his own omnivorous prose. If you can't beat him, eat him.' (10) Shakespeare's words certainly get modified in the guts of *Finnegans Wake*, in which the allusions to *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (or 'Miss Somer's nice dream') are particularly prominent.<sup>14</sup> This is 'mutual cannibalism', Ellmann concludes: 'it is difficult to tell where Shakespeare ends and Joyce begins' (12).

Something similar can be said of T. S. Eliot, though for different reasons, Anne Stillman suggests. So familiar have we become with the passage in 'A Game of Chess', derived from Enobarbus's great speech in *Antony and Cleopatra*, that when we read or hear the passage in Shakespeare we now find it tinged with associations from *The Waste Land*. So, too, with certain lines and passages in *The Tempest* that recur in Eliot's own verse, such as Ariel's song of magical transformation – 'Into something rich and strange' (1.2.402). Eliot is far less direct in his dealings with Shakespeare than either Joyce or Auden, and less confident too, despite some early bravado. In this respect, Eliot and Beckett draw close to each other, and the fact that they have had a deeper effect on the way we have come to read, think and respond to Shakespeare than either Joyce or Auden may be derived from this indirection. Their relations with Shakespeare are less combative than those of Joyce and Auden; the bones they have to pick with him are less personal and particular. It was helpful to the young Eliot's precarious confidence in his own creativity to view Shakespeare amidst his contemporaries: '[w]hen I was young I felt much more at ease with the lesser Elizabethan dramatists than with Shakespeare: the former were, so to speak, playmates nearer my own size' (quoted Stillman, 64). It is striking that, for all the massive influence on subsequent Shakespearean criticism that has been attributed to him, Eliot should only have published two full-length essays

directly concerned with Shakespeare, 'Hamlet and His Problems' (1919) and 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca' (1927). Shakespeare is deeply present in his thinking about poetry and specifically about the possibilities of poetic drama, but his thoughts emerge, as Stillman brings out, abruptly, surprisingly, in response to specific questions of poetic composition, technique or effect.

Auden's engagements with Shakespeare are at once more direct and less perturbed. Shakespeare was essential to him, Jeremy Noel-Tod argues, 'as a dramatist of national and social identity; as a poet preoccupied with poetry's power; and as an ironist of the paradox [...] that "The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning" (105). Like Eliot, Auden was particularly drawn to *Hamlet*, *The Tempest* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, though for different reasons and to different effects; in Prospero, he saw 'Hamlet transformed' into a 'puppet master' (quoted, 126). The difference between the two poets' temperaments can be gauged from Auden's composition of *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944), a 'commentary' on *The Tempest* which he said aimed at 'something which is in a way absurd, to show in a work of art, the limitations of art' (quoted, 135). As for Caliban, such an essential figure now for thinking about the primitive in Shakespeare, and about the colonial and post-colonial subject, Auden outrageously endows him with the voice of high culture, in the style of late Henry James. Auden enjoys arguing with Shakespeare and through Shakespeare. He passes strong adverse judgments on Romeo and Juliet, on Prince Hal, and in favour of Falstaff and other rogues – 'When has Autolycus / ever solemnized himself?'<sup>15</sup> – all in the jubilant service of his own political and religious beliefs. Auden is akin to Joyce in the shameless licence with which he treats Shakespeare, and in his admiration for Shakespeare's portrayal of human weakness and inadequacy, including his own. Yet this issues in a view of art and the artist very different from Joyce's (and Eliot's), a conclusion Auden claims to be Shakespeare's own, that art does not matter very much, after all. 'Shakespeare never takes himself too seriously', he notes approvingly (quoted Noel-Tod, 108).

Beckett's claims to inclusion in this volume are less immediately evident than those of the preceding three writers. In his early fiction and in the plays that first brought him international renown, there are obvious references to Shakespeare, to Hamlet, King Lear and Prospero. And yet, by the time he wrote *En attendant Godot* and *Fin de partie* in the late 1940s and mid-1950s, Beckett had moved beyond the orbit of the Anglophone literary world, or so at least it seemed. These works were conceived and written 'elsewhere', in a language to which Shakespeare was himself an outsider.



It was only then, Dan Gunn suggests, that Beckett's work could make a real connection 'to a Shakespeare whose achievement can indeed accommodate his own achievement-less world, a Shakespeare whose commitment to impoverishment, loss, the grotesque, the impossible, the aporetic, the unutterable, the inconsequential, is as keen as even Beckett could wish' (150). Auden's conscious identification with Shakespeare's sympathy for human fragility consorted with his own positive convictions, political and religious. In Beckett's case, the attention to deprivation goes so deep as to exceed beliefs of any kind, including beliefs about art. Shakespeare does not actively enter into the formation of Beckett's own art, which depends more on jettisoning 'resources' than summoning them. Beckett's work is rather a means of recognizing those elements in Shakespeare that they have in common. Hence, as Gunn argues, the influence that Beckett has exerted on Shakespeare, or our responses to Shakespeare, over the last 50 years. Beckett's art epitomises attitudes that have grown to dominate our view of Shakespeare through the twentieth into the twenty-first century, attitudes towards the integrity of character and genre, towards figures, elements and forces that seem peripheral or excluded, and towards the body, especially in the frailties and compulsions it exerts on our selves.

Hence the attraction already noted, for modern writers and readers and performers, of Shakespeare's outsiders, and the experiences embodied in his plays and poetry of marginality, estrangement, dissociation, distraction, craziness. As, for example, Yeats's 'Crazy Jane', of whom it has been said that she is 'like a sexually demented female Othello or Leontes or, most of all, like a female Lear in the storm'. Neil Corcoran goes on to note 'how usefully counter-cultural a force Yeats found Shakespeare at this point of his writing life'.<sup>16</sup>

One might also think of the crazed Ophelia, and reflect how much less useful Shakespeare has proved to women writers as a counter-cultural force. Virginia Woolf's is the classic statement of this frustration in *A Room of One's Own* (1928), where she imagines the fate of Shakespeare's wonderfully gifted sister Judith, the rebel fugitive 'who killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle' – 'who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?'<sup>17</sup> For Woolf, Shakespeare still stands for an idea of 'freedom' towards which all true artists aspire: 'the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent, like Shakespeare's mind'.<sup>18</sup> But the impediments and advantages are not equally shared, and the margin is a place