



THE SHAKESPEAREAN INTERNATIONAL YEARBOOK

17: Special Section, Shakespeare and Value

Edited by
TOM BISHOP AND ALEXA ALICE JOUBIN

Guest Editor
SIMON HAINES

The Shakespearean International Yearbook

Currently in its seventeenth year and formerly published by Ashgate, *The Shakespearean International Yearbook* surveys the present state of Shakespeare studies, addressing issues that are fundamental to our interpretive encounter with Shakespeare's work and his time, across the whole spectrum of his literary output. Contributions are solicited from among the most active and insightful scholars in the field, from both hemispheres of the globe. New trends are evaluated from the point of view of established scholarship, and emerging work in the field encouraged, to present a view of what is happening all around the world. Each issue includes a special section under the guidance of a specialist Guest Editor, as well as a review of recent critical work in Shakespeare studies. An essential reference tool for scholars of early modern literature and culture, this annual captures, from year to year, current and developing thought in Shakespeare scholarship and theater practice worldwide.

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Tom Bishop and Alexa Alice Joubin

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this Special Section is dedicated to
David Parker
1943–2015



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Preface

At the London Globe in May 2012, pro-Palestinian activists protested a Hebrew production of *The Merchant of Venice* by the Israeli company Habima (from Tel Aviv). Both the play and its supposed anti-Semitic sentiments have been the subject of debate in critical history, but this protest brought contemporary international politics into the mix. Leading actors—Mark Rylance, Emma Thompson, and others—called for the Globe to boycott the company because it had performed in Jewish settlements in the West Bank. When Shakespeare is referenced in the global cultural marketplace, the canon is often given an additional ethical burden, and the same play can end up valued in quite different ways depending on its use.

How do Shakespearean plays sustain clashing values within them, or imposed on them? Is Shakespeare anti-Semitic? Can Shakespeare be a feminist? How is value subject to context, to market, and demand? A wide range of moral, political, and aesthetic values—profitable or heartening or threatening from case to case—have been associated with Shakespeare, and those values have changed over time. And conflicting values may coincide at different levels of discussion of a given play, at once driving diversity in entertainment industries and sustaining traditional aesthetic principles, or in some other concatenation.

This volume's special section of essays on "Shakespeare and Value" explores these questions through general enquiry and case studies of complex moral designs that resist easy profiling in the plays. Instead of following formulae or jumping to conclusions, the contributors urge us not to flatten out the contradictory sets of values in these designs, but to set these clashes at the heart of action and inquiry.

The Shakespearean International Yearbook surveys the present state of Shakespeare studies, addressing issues that are fundamental to our interpretive encounter with Shakespeare's work and his time, across the whole spectrum of his literary output and across historical periods and media.

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Part I

Special Section

Shakespeare and Value

Guest Editor: Simon Haines



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1 Introduction

Simon Haines

Six years ago the Research Centre for Human Values at the Chinese University of Hong Kong convened a small seminar on “Glassy Essence: Shakespeare and Value”. Five of the contributions in this collection have evolved from papers presented to that seminar. The other two were invited subsequently. The theme, or brief, was and has remained deliberately vague, in order to allow seminar participants and later contributors alike to interpret it as they wished. Still, my predecessor, the founding Director of the Centre, our late dear friend and colleague David Parker, had this to say in his original invitation to revise the papers:

my main thought is that several of you have some exciting thoughts about what we might call Shakespeare’s rich ontology of character or the self, articulated through creative profusions of metaphor rather than through the static, reified moral concepts most of us have been inducted into thinking with. This ontology being precisely where the “glassy essence” speech invites us to begin. . . . At the risk of being over-directive I’d say that what remains is to think more about the axiological significance of this ontology as you each see it. . . . What already distinguishes the pieces is a sense of engagement, that important things are at stake, whether these things be ethical, aesthetic, political, legal or whatever: things that go to the question of what makes Shakespeare distinctive.

Parker’s reference to Isabella’s celebrated “ape and essence” or “glassy essence” speech from *Measure for Measure* was meant to evoke just one strand of our seminar conversation: not so much a Rortyan strand (“Our Glassy Essence” is the title of Part I of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*) as a Wittgensteinian one (the vanity of “trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language”, *Investigations* §97). David was always alive to the enduring power of our conception of a punctual or “core” self, or essence: in language as well as in human being. That conception has had an unfortunate tendency to convert values questions into meta-ethical ones, and values into Value. Isabella herself is seen by the

play, one might argue, as a *victim* of this conception, not just its mouth-piece. Only two of the essays which follow have retained clear traces of this “glassy essence” strand in our conversation, but several refer at length to *Measure for Measure*, and all are broadly “axiological” in their focus. Important values questions are indeed at stake, and Shakespeare does indeed think about them distinctively.

Graham Bradshaw argues that Shakespeare’s “perspectivism” is an important ingredient in his enduring popularity across languages and over time. The critics’ habitual fascination with his principal protagonists, especially in their supposed relation to his own or to wider Elizabethan viewpoints, has tended to obscure both the equally important perspectives of the “minor” characters and the inconsistencies and contradictions to be found within the “major” ones. Shakespeare’s complex moral designs are thus “flattened out”, and we are left with “bluntly polarized debates” about modern or Elizabethan attitudes to, say, anti-Semitism (see the history of performances of *The Merchant of Venice* in post-war Germany and Israel) or incest (see the history of attitudes to consanguinity and thus *Hamlet*). But the plays are “orchestrating the very debates the critics want them to *resolve*”. Critics overlook the broader appeal of their perspectivism: that is, of character as represented in poetic drama, especially through metaphor. Shakespeare “expected us to go away from his plays and think about them”, not jump to conclusions we can express in “easy formulas”. The *Merchant* and Shylock, *Hamlet* and Hamlet, are *not* polarized and flattened into either-or positions. Cleopatra’s “natural” Egypt and Antony’s “artificial” Rome supply richer metaphorical contexts for their characterizations than any explicit reference to laws or beliefs or shared social values could hope to capture. The larger design of Shakespeare’s perspectivism—within the principal protagonists, across the “minor characters”, *via* complex cultural metaphors evoking broader attitudes and dispositions—shapes a richer values world recognizable to many and diverse audiences if not always to critics.

But if we must be careful not to let a flattened view of its major characters determine our attitude toward each play, we must be equally careful not to be prejudiced by “pithy extracts”. Value is always “subject to context”. This is especially evident in the plays which used to be known as “problem plays”, but it is important everywhere. In her paper, Ros King looks in some detail at *Troilus* and *Cymbeline*, but spreads her net much wider than just these two. Ulysses’ famous speech about “degree”, “too often presented as an expression of the Elizabethan and . . . Shakespear-ean ‘world picture’”, is explicitly arguing for one value while actually serving another. Ulysses is re-enlisting Achilles in order to kill Hector and win the war. Hector’s own “is she worth keeping” speech, the one which provokes Troilus’s notorious “what’s aught but as ’tis valued” response, is about Trojan honour, not Helen. *Cymbeline* explores “a basic mismatch between status and moral worth”. John of Gaunt’s “scept’red isle”

speech has “lent itself” to so many “other uses” of a patriotic nature, acting principally “in the office of a wall”, in the service of a fortress mentality, that it’s easy to overlook (a) its main point, which is that “Richard’s excesses as king are destroying the country from the inside”; and (b) its principal outcome, which is that John’s own son returns from exile to usurp Richard and throw the country into seventy-five years of civil war. Brexit close to home, and Trump’s proposed “wall” farther afield, are much on King’s mind here. Beware the dangerous gap between declared values (or corporate “values statements”!), which create or exploit some shared “ideological fantasy”, and actual intentions. Characters in plays, like people in “real life”, are devious. The performative power of language often works better at an implicit level than on its apparently value-bearing surfaces. Language games reflect the tangled intricacies of the people who play them and are constituted in them.

John Gillies looks at the continuities between Shakespeare’s values world and that of post-Revolutionary modernity, specifically in Georg Büchner’s 1835 drama *Danton’s Death*. At the heart of his account lies a reading of Isabella’s “glassy essence” speech, especially as it applies to Angelo. Gillies argues that her criticism of the magistrate’s “little brief authority”, with criticism and authority alike clearly developed by Shakespeare against the backdrop of the medieval *theatrum mundi*, is essentially a vision of *fallenness*. This condition is manifested above all in Angelo’s self-righteous assurance that “like a prophet” he can look “in a glass” and see “future evils”. But he is “most ignorant of what he’s most assured”. The “glass” he thinks he’s peering through to see the future is really being used by Heaven to see through *him*. We see as through a glass darkly, but can’t see that *we* are seen clearly. This darkness is the shadow of our “radical evil”: whether that is grasped as a classical *hamartia* or a Pauline original sin. Büchner is “thinking with Shakespeare” about this condition of fallenness, and at the same time authentically engaging as a revolutionary with this seemingly reactionary doctrine, out of genuine personal need, rather than being “colonised” by it. Büchner transposes the condition into the secular revolutionary context of the Terror, the “threshold of modernity”: itself a *theatrum mundi* where any of us (he says) can “fall” at any moment into the maw, a place where fanatics sacrifice their own families, where mankind “eats its own limbs in eternal hunger”. In the play Robespierre is an Angelo, his “conscience” an “ape tormenting itself before a mirror”. Across a “large historical and discursive gap” there is a “continuity” between the “thought worlds” of these two dramatists (Gillies finds other Shakespeare echoes in *Danton’s Death*, especially from *Hamlet*). This is a values continuity, one might say, bridging the gap between two theatres of tormented, conceited apes (there is no reference here to a presidential candidate).

Clashes rather than continuities of value are Indira Ghose’s theme in her interleaved readings of *The Merchant of Venice* and Castiglione’s

Courtier. As she shows, however, great poetry can express such clashes ironically or sceptically. Final judgment is suspended. Bradshaw or King might attribute this suspension partly to their varieties of perspectivism. Gillies points to “tuition” and “intuition” in order to distinguish between being colonized by a value system, almost as by a doctrine, and authentically engaging with one, so as to remake it for oneself. Ghose, however, notes the way in which Castiglione’s “programme” of *sprezzatura* or effortless gracefulness, rooted in Cicero and before him in the Aristotelian understanding of the virtues, in which conduct can be inculcated through habit, can easily mutate into a kind of bluffer’s code of self-display or “image management”, with deception at its heart. Castiglione is fully aware of this, however; indeed, his fiction both foregrounds and critiques its own artifice. *Sprezzatura* itself is recommended, yes: but ironically. The vast majority of Castiglione’s many inheritors ignored this subtlety, as so often happens in the histories both of ideas and of manners. They became indoctrinated by the code, as if the work were a how-to manual. In the *beau monde* of the *Merchant*, meanwhile, it appears that *le style, c’est l’homme même* (as Buffon was to put it). Bassanio is an adept at extolling the values of being, not seeming. But how “authentic” is *he* being, in saying this? And how and why does it matter? Also, of course, style and grace require money. Portia is well aware of authenticity’s necessary compromises. Is she not fully capable of playing marriage- or ring-games of her own? At the same time there is an absolute fault-line between a risk-taking merchant aristocrat, who belongs to this elegant world, and the “irreducible singularity” of a “radically alien” Jewish moneylender who (unlike his daughter) refuses to belong to it—who demands that it recognize humanity itself as value-bedrock, and thus exposes its pretensions and fragilities. Shakespeare’s perspectivist value-thinking in the *Merchant* thus fully and authentically engages with Castiglione’s sceptical espousal of gracefulness in the *Courtier*.

Our fifth contributor asks us to reflect on two notoriously opposed or contrary value-sets. On the one hand is an essentially pagan, Stoic set: glorious heroism, assertive self-sufficiency, authenticity, liberal individualism, aristocratic masculinity, the virtues of the great-souled man. On the other hand is an essentially Christian, even a more feminized set: humility, dependency, vulnerability, mercy, need, a kind of democratic or communal belonging. The Renaissance, and therefore Shakespeare, held both sets in tension (indeed, it might be said that from this unique and complex values-tension emerged the modern Western conception of the self): Nietzsche *versus* Aristotle, Kant or Mill *versus* Aquinas, deontology and/or consequentialism *versus* teleology. Having explored the first set at length in his recent book on Shakespeare, Peter Holbrook now turns his attention in this essay to the second, drawing partly on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre in claiming that Western modernity, in its preoccupation with the free, proud, heroic individual (Iris Murdoch called