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978-0-521-19982-7 - Shakespeare and the Modern Poet

Neil Corcoran

Excerpt

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INFLUENCE

The most influential modern critic to study poetic interrelationships is Harold Bloom in his book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and several of its successors. Bloom's theories of influence were developed while he was writing about one of the central figures in what follows here, W. B. Yeats. They were also almost certainly in part indebted to Richard Ellmann, a dedicatee of *The Anxiety of Influence*, who, in *Eminent Domain* (1967), a study of six modern writers including two given attention in what follows, Yeats and Auden, tacitly developed a well-known tenet of another, T. S. Eliot (that 'Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal') into this:

That writers flow into each other like waves, gently rather than tidally, is one of those decorous myths we impose upon a high-handed, even brutal procedure. The behaviour, while not invariably marked by bad temper, is less polite. Writers move upon other writers not as genial successors but as violent expropriators, knocking down established boundaries to seize by the force of youth, or of age, what they require. They do not borrow, they override.¹

Rewritten with energetic conviction and terminological brio, this is essentially the view of *The Anxiety of Influence* too, in which poetic interrelationships are read as a species of neo-Freudian, Oedipal melancholy, a version of the 'family romance'. Poetry, as a consequence, is 'misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misalliance'.²

The first edition of Bloom's book pays very little attention to Shakespeare and regards literary history from Homer to Shakespeare as a form of prelapsarian 'generous' influence: anxiety is a post-Enlightenment phenomenon. For the second edition published in 1997, however, Bloom writes a

¹ Richard Ellmann, *Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and Auden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 3.

² Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 95.

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preface in which he explains that in the first he had deliberately hidden the Shakespearean origin of its key term, ‘misprision’, which derives from sonnet 87, ‘Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing’. The relevant lines in the sonnet are ‘So thy great gift, upon misprision growing, / Comes home again, on better judgement making’. Used by Bloom as ‘an allegory of any writer’s . . . relation to tradition’, the word therefore puts Shakespeare at the origin of influential anxiety; and the new preface introduces a further memorable category to Bloom’s impressive arsenal by denominating ‘the anguish of contamination’.³ Bloom’s sole example is the relationship between Shakespeare and Marlowe, about which he has arresting things to say. He now plays down the Freudianism of the original theory and, in describing the way Shakespeare took a very long time to overcome Marlowe, he in effect – if not in theory – reinscribes in the relationship between writers a form of psychological agency which any Oedipal theory must, necessarily, consign to the realm of the unconscious.

The theory of the anxiety of influence has saved literary criticism from indulging any sentimentality about writerly interaction; and it makes a great deal of sense in relation to particular poets and poems. But, as the preface to Bloom’s second edition, now openly under the sway of Shakespeare, seems almost on the verge of admitting, it does not tell the whole story. Neither does the now conventional use of the word ‘intertextuality’ to define the relationship between writers and between texts. In Julia Kristeva, who first, in her readings of Bakhtin, gave the term currency, intertextuality has to do not with human agency, with intersubjectivity, but with the ‘transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another’.⁴ So unhappy did Kristeva become, in fact, with its more casual usage that she began to employ instead the term ‘transposition’. Not soon enough, however, to prevent the word’s common and persistent (mis)use in contemporary literary criticism. Although it is far too late to sabotage that now, the takeover has meant that the word ‘allusion’ has come, in some circles, to seem a bit tame, outmoded and even reactionary.

Although I make use of the term ‘intertextuality’ in what follows, to signal a larger and more diffused relationship between texts than ‘allusion’ is liable to suggest, I retain the latter term too in this book, notably in relation to Eliot, and I am interested in its reformulation in the work of Walter Benjamin and, after him, Marjorie Garber. I also believe, *pace* Harold

³ *The Anxiety of Influence* (2nd edn, 1997), p. xi.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’ (1974), repr. Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 89–136, p. 111.

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Bloom, that relationships between writers and texts can be – indeed, cry out to be – viewed as species of things other than melancholy; and that this is often the case too when poets writing in English take cognisance of that poet who must seem in all sorts of ways the most anxiety-inducing of all, William Shakespeare. Belatedness is certainly sometimes an affliction: and in what follows I describe circumstances in which some form of suffering obtains. But to be an heir can also be a consolation. Corroboration may happen as well as competition. Similarly, the term ‘appropriation’ is often used to figure the relationship, which suggests that the earlier writer is being laid claim to as a kind of property; but negotiation and even collaboration – that admittedly two-edged sword of a word – sometimes obtain too.

The relationship between modern poets and Shakespeare can be provoking or sterilising; it can involve the sharing of humane inquiry or represent the fundamental foreclosure of opportunity; it can give rise to awed obeisance or irreverently disfiguring travesty; it can be parabolic, or it can be self-projecting. And many other things. The fascination lies precisely in the many things it can be, and in the many things it makes possible, among them some of the greatest poems of our modernity and some of the most arresting literary-critical prose. In the relationships I describe in this book poets encountering Shakespeare are also profoundly encountering themselves and, occasionally, one another; and in this process too Shakespeare becomes in many ways the first modern.

THE FIRST MODERN

There is one sense in which poets are manifestly responsible for making Shakespeare the first modern: the fact that he figures crucially in the literary criticism of the poet William Empson, which was influenced by the poet Robert Graves. In his preface to the second edition of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, originally published in 1930, Empson says that Graves was ‘the inventor of the method of analysis I was using here’.⁵ He is thinking of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) by Graves and Laura Riding, which includes a chapter entitled ‘William Shakespeare and e.e. cummings: A Study in Original Punctuation and Spelling’. The originality of cummings’s typography, which looked very ‘modern’ indeed in 1927, now seems an element of his occasionally attractive but often cloying faux-naïveté. Riding and Graves compare it to the original Q 1609 version of sonnet 129,

⁵ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930; 2nd edn, 1947; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 14.

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‘Th’expense of spirit in a waste of shame’, and an edited version by Arthur Quiller-Couch. Unpicking the poem, they say that ‘All of these alternate meanings acting on each other, and even other possible interpretations of words and phrases, make as it were a furiously dynamic crossword puzzle which can be read in many directions at once, none of the senses being incompatible with any others.’⁶

Riding and Graves in fact carefully discriminate between difficulties of understanding in Shakespeare and in Cummings, saying that ‘Shakespeare is more difficult than Mr Cummings in thought, though his poems have a familiar look on the page: Mr Cummings expresses with an accuracy peculiar to him what is common to everyone, Shakespeare expresses in the conventional form of the time, with greater accuracy, what is peculiar to himself.’⁷ Nevertheless, their comparison ignores one salient difference: the fact that Cummings was self-consciously deviating from conventional norms whereas Shakespeare had none to deviate from. It is plain, then, that in this survey of ‘modernist’ poetry the comparison is made polemically. A method of reading appropriate to a modern(ist) poet is also appropriate to Shakespeare. Therefore what may initially look bizarre and appear unfathomable in modernist poems will come, with closer scrutiny, to seem justified as the method necessary to the fusion of ‘alternate meanings’. Modernist difficulty is sanctioned by Shakespearean practice; and Shakespeare becomes the first modern(ist).

That a Shakespearean sonnet may be read as a furiously dynamic crossword puzzle clearly registered strongly with Empson; and Shakespeare is also a central figure in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. He is an exemplar of all seven types, and the book’s first, now classic close reading is of sonnet 73, ‘That time of year thou mayst in me behold’. Shakespeare figures centrally again in this book’s successors, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) and *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951). Empson’s ingenious, provocative demonstrations of the way ‘ambiguity’ operates in literary texts formed the basis of that ‘New Criticism’ which became a staple form of academic writing about literature until at least the 1960s. So in this way too Shakespeare was in at the beginning.

Empson’s own intricately allusive poetry, which owes many debts to the poetry of the English seventeenth century, is occasionally allusive to Shakespeare, most notably in the opening lines of ‘To an Old Lady’.

⁶ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, ed. Charles Mundy and Patrick McGuinness (1927; Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2002), p. 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

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Here Empson picks up Edgar's famous words in *King Lear*: 'Ripeness is all; her in her cooling planet / Revere; do not presume to think her wasted.' This allusion has weighty reverence in this poem of filial feeling and its caution against what we would now call 'ageist' presumption. What allusion, in fact, could be more weighty with reverence for a parent in age, more subdued to *pietas*? But Empson's poetry nowhere engages with Shakespeare more fully than in the way of passing allusion, and neither does that of Robert Graves. What Empson says of Shakespeare in his criticism, on the other hand, is of such interest and memorability that I find myself often citing it in what follows, and sometimes too as humane counterbalance to insensitivity, or excess, elsewhere.

SHAKESPEARE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Many modern poets, and poems, however, do figure Shakespeare in extended and intricate ways. English poetry of the First World War is complicatedly concerned with Shakespeare. In Edward Thomas Shakespeare in wartime provides emblems for the poet as solitary traveller. In the first of two poems called 'Home', a poem strung between ambivalent longings for the first place and the last, between nostalgia and melancholia, stoical irresolution is ghosted by allusions to Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy so fleeting as to seem themselves almost vagrant, finding no adequate home in this poem of emotional destitution. A similar vagrancy inheres in 'The Owl', in both the lonely persona of the traveller and in an allusion to the song 'When icicles hang by the wall' in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Unlike Shakespeare's, Thomas's wartime owl, with its 'most melancholy cry', sings 'No merry note': so that in its cry the poet hears it 'Speaking for all who lay under the stars, / Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice'. By taking their part, by speaking in their stead, the owl, inherited from Shakespeare but transmuted to present purpose, obviates the need for the poet to do likewise more directly. This owl, Shakespearean and not Shakespearean, becomes the means by which Edward Thomas both gives weight to, and avoids being weighed down by, the expectation that poets in wartime should speak for others, should take on representative status.

'Lob', a lengthy poem in rhyming couplets written in April 1915, matches its poet-persona 'travelling / In search of something chance would never bring' with a figure conjured from the past by the poem itself, one briefly encountered, recalled, and never found again, who may be the same one described years later by 'a squire's son', a man whose 'home was where he was free' and who is 'English as this gate, these flowers, this mire'. This

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figure is named multifariously during the poem: he is 'my ancient', 'Lob-lie-by-the-fire', 'Lob', 'tall Tom', 'Hob' and 'our Jack'. 'Jack' is also Falstaff's name; and, as 'tall Tom', this figure has encountered Shakespeare himself:

This is tall Tom that bore
The logs in, and with Shakespeare in the hall
Once talked, when icicles hung by the wall.
As Herne the Hunter he has known hard times.

This Shakespearean evocation combines another allusion to the *Love's Labour's Lost* song with one to the figure identified by Mistress Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where the legend of Herne the Hunter becomes her means of taunting Falstaff.

The poem makes other allusions to Shakespeare too. In a poem much given to naming, notably of English places themselves, Lob is the namer of birds and of flowers, one of which is love-in-idleness, the magically transformative flower used by Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As 'tall Tom', and as one who knows 'thirteen hundred names for a fool', he may remind us also of Edgar in *King Lear* transformed into the mad 'poor Tom'; and the very name 'Lob' figures in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* too when the fairy addresses Puck as 'thou lob of spirits'. Towards the end of the poem, the squire's son himself metamorphoses into yet another representation of the poem's 'ancient', uttering a lengthy list of further names for the figure. These include Jack Cade, the leader of the Kent peasants' revolt of 1450 which Shakespeare dramatises in one of the most memorable episodes of *Henry VI*.

That iteration of names also makes the figure of English folklore, legend, myth, politics and literature absolutely contemporary in 1915 as 'One of the lords of No Man's Land, good Lob'; and this passage of 'Lob' has something of the defiant assertiveness of traditional identification which also inheres in the passage known as Dai's Boast in David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, where the tradition is a Welsh one. If Edward Thomas in 'Lob' appears to be co-opting Shakespeare to the service of an idea, and an ideal, of 'ancient' Englishness, the fact that his representative figure fetches up finally in the trenches strongly suggests that the idea itself may not lord it over No Man's Land for long. The original Lob figure at the beginning of the poem tells the poet about 'barrows' opened sixty years earlier by archaeologists: 'They thought as there was something to find there, / But couldn't find it, by digging, anywhere.' The loving conjuration of an 'it' in 'Lob', partly by means of highly charged Shakespearean allusion, makes the poet himself an archaeologist of the ancient Wiltshire ground, retrieving an enduring spirit from

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its depths. However, as the squire's son 'disappear[s] / In hazel and thorn tangled with old-man's-beard' at the poem's conclusion, the ideal seems to be disappearing too, an irrecoverably aporetic 'it' conjured again only for poet and readers to receive 'one glimpse of his back'. For all its passion of naming, 'Lob' is actually discovering what Thomas's poem 'The Word' calls 'an empty thingless name', and the footpath identified and opened at the poem's origin becomes, in fact, impassable: a literal 'aporia', a shut-off path.

Shakespeare also talks to the lords of No Man's Land in *In Parenthesis*. This long 'writing' – Jones's word for its imbrications of prose and verse – was first published in 1937. It is therefore a work long meditated by a combatant private soldier, one of the 'jacks'. Set in an early phase of the war, December 1915 to July 1916, it is a poem which holds itself in a kind of tense apposition with *Henry V*. In one of its sometimes lengthy footnotes Jones tells us that 'Trench life brought that work pretty constantly to the mind'; and his preface says that 'No one ... could see infantry in tin-hats, with ground-sheets over their shoulders, with sharpened pine-stakes in their hands, and not recall "... or we may cram / Within this wooden O ..."' Part 2 of the poem's seven parts is called 'Chambers Go Off, Corporals Stay', after a stage direction at the end of act 3 scene 1 of the play and a petition which Nym makes to Bardolph at the opening of the following scene: 'Pray thee, corporal, stay. The knocks are too hot; and for mine own part, I have not a case of lives.'⁸

In the poem itself the allusions are not at all, as we might anticipate, intended as ironic contrast between past and present, between some form of military heroism then and some form of contemporary military compulsion or stoical endurance now. In fact, *In Parenthesis* is set in the early phase of the war because Jones, controversially, sees continuities rather than discrepancies in traditions of war: he is fully aware that any later phase would not be amenable to such treatment. *Henry V*, however, is not a play only about military heroism. It is a play about military terror too; and this is what the title of Part 2 of Jones's poem points to: 'corporals stay' because they are too frightened to go. The allusions made by *In Parenthesis* to *Henry V* ignore the hero himself – problematically king and patriot – and focus instead on the common soldier. In particular, several references are made to Fluellen's catchphrase, 'the disciplines of the war'. Fluellen, the comic Welshman of Shakespeare's text, appropriately shadows the soldiers of Jones's because,

⁸ All quotations from Shakespeare in this book which are not derived from the texts I am writing about are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edn, ed. G. Blakemore Evans *et al.* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).

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‘mostly Londoners with an admixture of Welshmen’, as the preface tells us, they are members of a battalion of the Royal Welch [*sic*] Fusiliers. In Jones, however, the phrase which is comically inclined in the play comes to take on an aura of dignified endurance in the face of a shared threat – as when the men first move into position under fire in Part 3:

With his first traversing each newly scrutinised his neighbour; this voice of his Jubjub gains each David his Jonathan; his ordeal runs like acid to explore your fine feelings; his near presence at break against, at beat on, their convenient hierarchy.

Lance-Corporal Lewis sings where he walks, yet in a low voice, because of the Disciplines of the Wars. He sings of the hills about Jerusalem, and of David of the White Stone.

When Lewis is killed in Part 7 an elegiac passage imagines a tutelary spirit called ‘The Queen of the Woods’ blessing the dead in ways appropriate to their origins. The rite for Lewis, the Welshman, joins together Welsh myth and *Henry V*:

She carries to Aneirin-in-the-nullah a rowan sprig, for the glory of Guenedota. You couldn’t hear what she said to him, because she was careful for the Disciplines of the Wars.

Fluellen’s comic catch-phrase is in these instances literally elevated by being raised into upper case as a significant element of ritual benediction. In *In Parenthesis*, therefore, it is as though Fluellen and what he represents are being repositioned from the periphery to the centre of the Shakespearean text.

In an outstanding essay on the poem John Barnard, reading this as the transformation of Fluellen into a figure of order, shows how these allusions thereby also transform the play’s balance between the serious and the comic. In an argument too complex to rehearse here, Barnard persuasively reasons that this points towards failures in the structure of *Henry V*, to do with both the absence of Falstaff and the strain involved in writing a national epic. He believes that this may intimate something which can also be unearthed from inconsistencies in the Folio version of the play’s text: that we may sense the ‘shadowy outline of another *Henry V* which would have been of the same heroi-comical mode as *I-II Henry IV*’.⁹ If this is so, then it seems to me that in *In Parenthesis* we have a remarkable instance of a modern poetic figuration of Shakespeare in which one of his best-known plays is newly scrutinised, and the moral implications of its thematic and structural patterns reorganised, in the light of catastrophic twentieth-century military

⁹ John Barnard, ‘The Murder of Falstaff, David Jones, and the “Disciplines of War”’, in René Wellek and Alvaro Ribeiro (eds.), *Evidence in Literary Scholarship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 25.

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experience. This produces a critical, even deconstructive reading which is not a 'misreading' in the Bloomian sense but a provocatively insightful counter-reading which then becomes newly and differentiatingly generative, producing the responsively creative thing which is *In Parenthesis* itself.

SHAKESPEARE IN AMERICA

Shakespeare takes many shapes in modern American poetry, including his treatment in a vast, bizarre 'critical' work by the Objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky and an engagingly experimental long poem by H. D., the erstwhile Imagist poet Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare* (1963), which he wrote between 1947 and 1960, is the product of a lifelong obsession with Shakespeare, whose work he first saw performed in Yiddish. It is a vast book, accompanied in a second volume by an operatic setting of *Pericles* by Zukofsky's wife, Celia. Parts of the book are redistributed in the text of Zukofsky's huge poem almost lifelong in its composition, 'A'. Much taken up with music and philosophy, *Bottom: On Shakespeare* is in part an eccentric anthology and is remote indeed from any orthodox critical study of Shakespeare. Its decision to lay out a poetics and a theory of knowledge under the aegis of an engagement with Shakespeare must be read, however, as a spectacular act of cross-cultural and cross-historical poetic homage.

H. D.'s *By Avon River* (1949) ought to have survived better than it has. Like *In Parenthesis*, the text combines verse and prose, but in separate sections. A long, three-part poem called 'Good Friend' (after the warning on Shakespeare's gravestone) is followed by a relatively short prose piece called 'The Guest'. The poem has a lapidary quality reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, to which it may be indebted. It parallels a memory of H. D.'s visit to Stratford on Shakespeare Day, 23 April, in 1945 with an inquiry into the circumstances and fate of Claribel, Alonso's daughter from whose wedding the shipwrecked victims of *The Tempest* have been returning. This is in turn paralleled with the journey of the ship the *Sea-Adventure* to the Bahamas, an account of which is one of Shakespeare's sources for the play.

H. D.'s poem celebrates Shakespeare, certainly, but also engages in a kind of proto-deconstructive intervention in which the character Claribel and various possibilities occluded in Shakespeare are further probed and investigated; and this is a matter of almost obsessive vocational urgency:

Read through again, *Dramatis Personae*;
She is not there at all, but Claribel,

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Claribel, the birds shrill, Claribel,
 Claribel echoes from the rainbow-shell
 I stooped just now to gather from the sand.

Invisible, voiceless, ‘a mere marriage token’, Claribel, the silenced woman, is brought to a kind of visibility and audibility in H. D.’s configuration of various circumstances and identities for her. Claribel imagines herself being created out of ‘a shadow / On his page’; hers is posited as the voice calling Shakespeare just before his death, even though Ariel’s might have seemed the more obvious one to do so; and she may have been a nurse to the wounded in wartime Venice. So that this poem, written at the end of the war, is very much a woman’s wartime poem too. This Venetian transformation of Claribel into ‘Clare-the-fair, / Claribel, not a Poor Clare’ – into an active agent of benevolence, that is, rather than a conventual nun retired into another kind of silence – is an unpredictable conclusion to H. D.’s poem and not an entirely successful one. *By Avon River* suddenly lapses from the intensity of its Shakespearean concentration into what must be a matter of more private psychological and emotional moment. Nevertheless, *By Avon River* is a notable contribution to modern poetic reinventions of Shakespeare. It engages in the activity of what ‘The Guest’, which is, essentially, a reverie on various Elizabethan and Jacobean writers, calls ‘Remembering Shakespeare always, but remembering him differently’. This combination of mnemonic deference and difference might well act as a motto for more recent feminist readings of Shakespeare.

American ‘confessionalism’ absorbs Shakespeare too. John Berryman spent a great deal of his life on the study of Shakespeare and, although the only Shakespeare criticism he published during the course of it was the essay ‘Shakespeare at Thirty’, which conceives a Shakespeare ‘highlone in thought’, he wrote a great deal more, some of which was eventually collected by John Haffenden as the large volume *Berryman’s Shakespeare* in 1999. Berryman also projected but never completed an edition of *King Lear*, on which he worked extensively for many years; and he envisaged other Shakespeare studies too, including a critical biography.

Almost everything we now have of Berryman on Shakespeare is of interest, but an observation in an essay on Robert Lowell is exceptionally so in attempting, self-interestedly, to make Shakespeare an honorary confessional poet. ‘One thing critics not themselves writers of poetry forget,’ says Berryman, with that slightly autocratic panache not uncommon in him, ‘is that poetry is composed by actual human beings, and tracts of it are very