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978-1-107-13240-5 - Shakespeare and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Cultures of Quotation from Samuel Richardson to Jane Austen

Kate Rumbold

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

What a mind must *Shakespear* have possessed! what amazing powers! what divine illuminations!—I am astonished every time I think of him and cannot give utterance to the big idea I have of him—the best compliment we can pay our immortal bard must be in his own words,

The poet's eye in a fine phrensy rolling
Doth glance from heav'n to earth, from earth to heav'n,
And as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shape, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.¹

So says Mr Melville, a character 'of good sense, as well as an excellent scholar', to the eponymous hero of *The Amours and Adventures of Charles Careless* (1764), when he finds the latter 'reading one of *Shakespear's* plays'.² For Robert Gale Noyes, author of the only previous book-length study of Shakespeare in eighteenth-century fiction (1953), Melville's observation supports the wider 'thesis that Shakespeare was virtually beyond criticism' at this point in the eighteenth century.³ Examining 750 novels published between 1740 and 1780 for mentions of Shakespeare, Noyes assembles a 'testimony' about 'the drama, the stage, and Shakespeare', and credits the novel with doing a 'fundamentally sound job of reporting' Shakespeare's praise.⁴ As his title, *The Thespian Mirror*, suggests, Noyes concludes that the novel reflects growing admiration for the playwright in the eighteenth century.

The words 'testimony' and 'reporting', like the '*Mirror*' of Noyes' title, are, however, signs of an earlier critical moment: as J. P. Hunter has noted, 'verbs such as "reflect," "mirror," "portray," and "picture," and their noun equivalents' have been supplanted as critical terms in recent years by the less passive concept of 'representation'.⁵ For all his vivid examples, Noyes' 'mirror' metaphor threatens to relegate novel writers to the status of

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‘a recorder or photographic mechanism for preservation rather than the active agent *within* history as well as a scribe of it’.⁶ Noyes sets out to consider the novels as a neglected ‘body of criticism’, but concludes only that they ‘add jewels to Shakespeare’s diadem of praise’, passively echoing, rather than actively contributing to, Shakespeare’s status.⁷

It is, however, in articulating the novel’s reflective role that Noyes gestures to what it is, as this book argues, that the novel actually *does* do for Shakespeare:

Almost every opinion they [the novelists] held can easily be duplicated in the non-fictional criticism, academic or journalistic, of their times. But to say this is not to admit that study of their Shakespearean passages is without value, for their testimony adds to the sum total of what is already known, and their lively presentation affords much pleasure. Their manner, indeed, rather than their critical ideas, is important, for here, virtually, we have criticism in action. Their expression of opinions about Shakespeare is livelier, more dramatic, more humorous, more emotional, and hence more readable, than that of their soberer contemporaries.⁸

Noyes suggests that, while the novels are largely derivative in their attitudes to Shakespeare, ‘their manner’ is more important than their ‘ideas’. For him, the novelists’ lively, dramatic, humorous, emotional and readable treatment of Shakespeare makes received critical ideas accessible to a wide audience.

By contrast, I argue that the novelists’ lively, dramatic, humorous and emotional handling of Shakespeare’s words is not a mere conduit of received ideas: it *constructs* Shakespeare’s value in the eighteenth century. His words are not merely admired by numerous characters – from educated ‘scholars’ like Mr Melville in *Charles Careless* to fashionable men and women – but *applied* to their ‘emotional’ situations. In the process, these words accrue new authority. Shakespeare’s theatricality is absorbed into, and legitimated by, the characterisation techniques of prose fiction; through the ‘humorous’ misquotation of Shakespeare by aspiring individuals, novels instil in their readers a new literary judgement. The novels help to *make* Shakespeare ‘a living issue, worth arguing and fighting over’.⁹ Noyes tends to record commentary on Shakespeare rather than quotations, but it is quotation – and, in particular, quotation by character – that is crucial to establishing Shakespeare’s status. Performances and editions of Shakespeare’s plays would contribute to his growing reputation in this century; and the extracts of his words in anthologies and periodicals would familiarise readers with his speeches,¹⁰ but novels in particular will help to construct Shakespeare not just as an ‘immortal bard’, but, as Melville says, as ‘*our* immortal bard’, through snippets of ‘his own words’.

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Shakespeare's 'own words' are a major presence in the eighteenth-century novel, and novelists punctuate their pages with direct quotation. Other English authors such as John Milton, John Dryden, Thomas Otway, Abraham Cowley, Nathaniel Lee, Nicholas Rowe and more besides are also quoted in fiction; and the classics, the Bible and other proverbs and sayings feature frequently too. But all of these sources pale into insignificance next to Shakespeare: first, for his ubiquity; second, for the range of characters who invoke him; and third, for the warmth with which they do so. Overt quotation by characters is especially abundant in the work of mid-century novelists such as Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Sarah Fielding and Laurence Sterne (who collectively quote Shakespeare nearly 200 times in their fiction alone), as well as many lesser-known or anonymous authors. This formal practice, in which an indented or italicised quotation briefly interrupts the flow of the narrative, can appear a stylistic oddity: a sign of a discrete period in literary history between the 1740s and 1760s when everyone invoked Shakespeare. This distinctive kind of intertextuality, however, would boost the cultural status of Shakespeare and the novel, and influence significantly the narrative techniques of later fiction.

Shakespeare and the novel: all rise?

It would be easy to assume that cultural status was all Shakespeare's to bestow. At mid-century, novels 'remained a dubiously respectable form, perhaps partly because women wrote and read so many of them'.¹¹ By the time Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* was published in November 1740, eliciting both critique and praise and unleashing 'a market-led multiplication of lowbrow print',¹² the 'immortal Shakespeare' had become a staple of the London stage, his complete works celebrated in at least three eighteenth-century editions, and his person shortly to be represented in a marble statue in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey, erected '124 years after [his] death by public esteem'.¹³ Shakespeare's promotion to the status of England's national poet was well underway – a process, as major accounts of this period attest, achieved by the appropriation of Shakespeare's plays to new political and cultural interests, as a side-effect of a project to further national interests in foreign wars, and by the gradual promotion of his every line as sacred.¹⁴ By quoting Shakespeare (as *Pamela* does once, and subsequent novels do on numerous occasions), mid-century prose fiction appears to align itself with a vernacular literary tradition, and to borrow the authority of this august literary figure.

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Yet 'Shakespeare' at mid-century was not a securely legitimating name, even after the theatrical vogue for 'improving' his plays through adaptation had been replaced with textual reverence. Samuel Johnson's Preface to his edition of Shakespeare still censured the playwright for his 'loosely formed' plots, his disregard for 'time or place', his fondness for the 'quibble' and the 'conceit', and, above all, for his apparent ability to 'write without any moral purpose': a failure of writerly duty that even the 'barbarity of his age' could not excuse.¹⁵ Recent critics have begun to ask 'What did Shakespeare do to the eighteenth century?' as well as 'What did the eighteenth century do to Shakespeare?', drawing attention not merely to one-way acts of appropriation in which Shakespeare is manipulated for new political and cultural ends, but to a dialogic relationship between borrower and borrowed.¹⁶ This book, however, reveals 'Shakespeare' to be not just a coherent author who 'gradually penetrated' eighteenth-century culture and came to 'dominate' it,¹⁷ or who 'scripted' modern ideas about human nature,¹⁸ but a complex figure shaped by the literary forms in which he appeared – forms which in turn benefited from his presence. In the eighteenth century, amidst multiple ways of encountering his work, Shakespeare and the eighteenth-century novel mutually construct each other as morally and emotionally valuable, and help to establish each other as dominant cultural forms.

The fortunes of Shakespeare and the novel are closely entwined, yet the novel remains absent, or briefly touched upon, in major accounts of Shakespeare's eighteenth-century promotion, which often focus on performances, adaptations, actors, complete works editions and playtexts. For Michael Dobson, Shakespeare's appearances in the novel are more the sign of his increasing domestication than the engine of it.¹⁹ Two separate 'rise' narratives describe the cultural fortunes of Shakespeare and the novel, respectively. The notion of the 'rise of the novel' was given its most definitive expression by Ian Watt, who attributed the genre's emergence to the rise of the middle classes, and its 'formal realism' to growing interest in the personal experience of the individual. This compelling thesis has been repeatedly challenged. It has been exposed as a retrospective construction that reflects the values of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth century (Defoe, Richardson, Henry Fielding, Smollett and Sterne all posthumously profiting from the nineteenth century's interest in realism, for example).²⁰ Twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism has rediscovered work by women; pre-Richardsonian publications; Gothic fiction; late-century sentimental and political novels previously passed over en route to Jane Austen; and, more recently, 'it'-narratives and experimental

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fiction that seem far from the private experience of the individual. The very idea of a 'rise' has been challenged by feminist critics who argue that 'Literature is not progressive';²¹ and by others who lament the 'pernicious influence of evolutionary views of the novel'.²² The story of the novel's rise – 'a fictional narrative – a kind of novel about the novel'²³ – is in fact a continual redefinition of the boundaries of what constitutes valuable prose fiction, by which process the realist novel came to seem defining.

The story of the eighteenth-century 'rise' of Shakespeare has been more readily accepted. This is despite the strong resemblance between the terms that underpin that rise – the emergence of the bourgeois middle-class, for example, or of 'patriarchal family, constitutionalism, economic individualism, nationalism'²⁴ – and those employed in Watt's account of the rise of the novel. In the narrative of Shakespeare's reception, it is anti-French nationalism, growing reverence for the English literary past and the rejection of neoclassical rules of drama that served to elevate him from a 'provincial playwright' in need of improvement at the beginning of the century to a sacred demi-god near its end. Critics often talk as if Shakespeare's rise was natural, and unstoppable. Its most extreme manifestation, 'bardolatry', is said to have a 'genesis' and a 'growth', and to have 'steadily ... increased' during the century.²⁵ The 'seed of Bardolatry' that 'took root at the beginning of the eighteenth century' was 'in full flower' or 'full-blown' by its close.²⁶ Shakespeare 'rose through the ranks of poets' in a steady 'accession to pre-eminence', taking 'progressive steps' on his 'journey'.²⁷

The eighteenth-century careers of Shakespeare and prose fiction can appear not only separate, but mutually opposed. In *Shakespeare Illustrated*, novelist and critic Charlotte Lennox compared Shakespeare's work to *the Novels and Histories on Which his Plays are Founded*, and found it wanting. Next to the superior 'Probability' of his prose sources, the unnatural 'Contrivance' of his dramatic plots seemed a backwards step.²⁸ In Lennox's eyes, 'Shakespeare antiquates the novel and makes it romance'.²⁹ By contrast, Samuel Johnson, posing as 'The AUTHOR' in the dedication to Lennox's study, demoted the novel in order to give credit to Shakespeare: 'a very small Part of the Reputation of this mighty Genius depends upon the naked Plot, or Story of his Plays'.³⁰ The eighteenth-century growth in the status of Shakespeare and of prose fiction, as I argue in this book, however, represents neither a parallel process of inexorable 'rise', nor a century-long struggle for cultural dominance. The presence of Shakespeare's words in the novel promotes the value of both the dramatist and the genre of prose fiction.

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Shakespeare appears in the mid-century novel chiefly through direct quotation, most often delivered by character. The overt quotation of Shakespeare and other authors begins in earnest in the work of Samuel Richardson and is repeated, adapted and adjusted in later texts. Quotations in Richardson's epistolary fiction are revealing of character: the rakish Robert Lovelace writes to his confidant, John Belford, that 'these lines of Shakespeare came into my head: / *Thy heart is big. Get thee apart, and weep!*'.³¹ Henry Fielding's narrator muses on human behaviour: 'why, in any Case, will we, as *Shakespear* phrases it, "put the World in our own Person?"'.³² Sarah Fielding's most virtuous characters make sense of the world through Shakespeare, reasoning 'if *Shakespear* is right in saying, that man is a player, hypocrisy must then begin at home' (while her least virtuous fruitlessly compare their dilemmas with those of Shakespeare's characters);³³ and passersby in Laurence Sterne's fiction cannot help but declaim 'Alas, poor YORICK!' aloud.³⁴

Until now, though, critics discussing Shakespeare's presence in the eighteenth-century novel have tended to overlook, or even disparage, such instances of overt quotation, in favour of more subtle forms of allusion. As one critic says of Henry Fielding's classical references, 'his practice of relying on allusions requires a thorough understanding of the authors he cites, since he is not just repeating their words but is summarizing their ideas'.³⁵ Just as humanist Renaissance education trained its students not simply to quote, but to rework, classical, rhetorical and Biblical material in new and compelling ways, regarding loose or free quotation as a sign of understanding and appreciation rather than careless unconcern,³⁶ modern criticism often implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, treats allusion as a marker of greater authorial knowledge and skill. For many critics, allusion connotes the strong author described by Harold Bloom, forcefully wrestling with, rather than weakly emulating, his literary predecessors.³⁷

Others have treated overt quotation in, for example, *Clarissa* and *Tristram Shandy* as the outward sign of an extended parallel with, say, *Hamlet* or *Lear*. Such an approach can lead to contortions, as when in *Clarissa* a single direct quotation, beginning '*Ay, but to die, and go we know not where*',³⁸ and a couple of possible echoes of *Measure for Measure*, are taken as evidence of a larger 'skeleton of allusion' to that play. Such a claim is difficult to defend in a vast, quotation-filled novel: even if *Clarissa* 'echoes' Isabella, has 'traces' of Juliet, is 'like' Ophelia and 'has parallels' with Desdemona, she cannot live out all their fates.³⁹

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To treat a quotation as the tip of an iceberg is often to defend the author from the charge that their quotations are just ‘embellishments’.⁴⁰ One critic, keen to prove that Henry Fielding does more than ‘merely quote lines from Shakespeare’s plays’ in *Tom Jones*, distinguishes between quotations that ‘merely interrupt or ornament’ the text, and those allusions and analogues that have a sustained, thematic resonance with the original.⁴¹ It has been argued that ‘the most effective appropriations of earlier works into later writing are usually those that invoke the full force of a passage’s original context’.⁴² True as this often may be, this approach can imply that free-floating quotations are devoid of meaning: empty signifiers cut off from their original speaker. Others defend quotations by demonstrating their structural significance: Herman Meyer denied that quotations offer the ‘momentary delight’ of ‘raisins in the cake’, and argued instead for their integral narrative function, such as contributing to the ‘finely balanced harmony of contrasts’ in *Don Quixote*.⁴³

Alternatively, quotations are sometimes regarded as outward emanations of the texts that inhabit the author’s mind. Henry Fielding is said to have ‘had *Macbeth* in mind’ in a certain passage in *Tom Jones*, while the Shakespearean echoes in *Tristram Shandy* have been regarded as evidence of Laurence Sterne’s ‘delight’⁴⁴ in Shakespeare’s plays: *Hamlet* was ‘never far from his mind’, and ‘may even have colored his view of life’.⁴⁵ Such an approach can sometimes figure the author as the passive recipient, by osmosis, of cultural influences that include Shakespeare. This resonates with Julia Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality as a textual ‘mosaic of quotations’ and cultural signs.⁴⁶ Kristeva’s sense of the associations that words bring with them from previous discourses outweighs their deliberate invocation by a decision-making author; she seems to ‘evade human subjects in favour of the more abstract terms, text and textuality’.⁴⁷ Likewise, Roland Barthes’s assertion that the text is a ‘tissue of past citations’, and that ‘any text is an intertext’, reinforces his declaration of ‘the death of the author’.⁴⁸ These important approaches to intertextuality cannot quite account for the deliberate presence of direct quotations, nor, more importantly, for their delivery by fictional characters.

For all their insights, then, existing approaches to intertextuality in fiction often inadvertently dismiss the most significant form of literary reference in the eighteenth-century novel. From Pamela Andrews to Emma Woodhouse, numerous characters quote Shakespeare overtly. When they do so, what is most significant is not the original context of the borrowed words, but the act of quotation itself. The attitudes that

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characters strike when quoting Shakespeare – earnest or histrionic, admiring or showing off, thoughtfully reworking or casually recycling – evoke the numerous ways in which Shakespeare might be encountered in this period. Characters attend and discuss the theatre, read Shakespeare in their libraries, collect quotations in their commonplace books and hear him invoked in polite conversation. But when they quote ‘as I read in a book last night’, or ‘with a theatrical air’, the quotation’s real source is often less important than the provenance that character chooses to present.

The central method of this book is to scrutinise these acts of quotation, and the acute judgements that other characters, and, by extension, readers, make about them, in order to trace precisely how characters confer value upon particular lines, and on Shakespeare; how they navigate Shakespeare’s theatricality; and how they determine what constitutes proper engagement with his words. Stefan Morawski defines a quotation as a ‘semantic portion designed to perform a certain function in a new and extraneous semantic structure of a higher order’,⁴⁹ and the function of quotations in the mid-century novel is neither primarily decorative, nor structural: it is a sophisticated tool for characterisation. Studies that have previously noted the connection between quotation and characterisation have tended to see characters illuminated from the outside, for example, through the mock-heroic discrepancy in stature between Shakespeare’s tragic heroes and Fielding’s lowliest characters, as described by the narrator: between ‘the sincerity of Othello and the hypocrisy of Square and Mrs Wilkins’.⁵⁰ But quotation’s most important contribution to characterisation, this book shows, is to be found in the repeated acts of self-presentation by characters themselves.

Shakespeare says well

The promotion of Shakespeare is almost a side-effect of quotation by character. Quotations in mid-century fiction have three major effects, collectively and cumulatively, on the perceived status of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century and beyond. First, by repeated application of his words to the personal situations of novelistic characters, novelists help to construct ‘Shakespeare’ as a figure of emotional and moral authority on whom individuals can draw. Second, while they demonstrate Shakespeare’s theatricality in the histrionic outbursts of some of their characters, novelists also rehabilitate it by aligning Shakespeare’s dramatic skill with the emerging representational mode of the novel. Third, novelists draw comic attention to the increasing banality of quoting Shakespeare in polite

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company, and, in doing so, train their readers in new modes of literary quotation and conversation.

These three chief effects are the subjects of Chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively. First, Chapter 2 places quotation by fictional character in the context of emerging literary and cultural practices of quotation. In the past, increasingly ubiquitous sources like Shakespeare have been difficult to categorise: Sterne's modern editors list Shakespeare not as one of the 'sources' for *Tristram Shandy*, but as a figure who is quoted 'liberally' in the novel, 'as we would expect', because his plays, like the Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer*, were part of 'the entire literature available to the age'.⁵¹ This book draws attention to the practical ways in which such figures became part of that literary milieu, not only through complete works editions and performances, but also through anthologies, periodicals and the sociable exchanges of polite conversation. Chapter 2 builds on important studies that have explored the pre-history of the novel in popular print culture, asking for the first time what the pieces of Shakespeare that circulated in those forms brought with them into the novel, and how the novel transformed them.

Chapter 3 shows how quotations in mid-century fiction construct Shakespeare as a knowing figure of emotional and moral authority. In a period when Shakespeare was, to adapt a term used by Dobson (see Chapter 3, pp. 52–3), 'embodied', or given human form – in statuary, in stage characters who professed to be him, and in actors who professed special knowledge of him – the novel goes further to create a compelling image of Shakespeare the author. Fictional characters not only frequently quote Shakespeare, but treat the words of his dramatic characters as the playwright's own wise insights. They introduce quotations with admiration:

Shakespeare says well. . .⁵²

saying in the words of their admired *Shakespeare*. . .⁵³

and connect Shakespeare's words with the situations in which they find themselves:

Nor will there be any fear of taking them when they are in any act that has *the relish of salvation in it*, as Shakespeare says—so that my revenge, if they perish in the flames I shall light up, will be complete as to them.⁵⁴

'Faith,' cries *Booth*, 'it was an odd Dream—and not so easily to be accounted for, as that you had formerly of my Marriage; for as *Shakespeare* says, *Dreams denote a foregone Conclusion*.'⁵⁵

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he had (as *Shakespear* terms it)

—————*with jealousy infected*
The sweetness of affiance,—————

and in its stead introduced into my mind anxious doubts and gloomy suspicions.⁵⁶

These approving quotations often attribute the insight or ‘moral sentiment’ to the figure of Shakespeare. They exhibit for the reader a direct relationship with ‘our beloved Shakespeare’, whose beneficent observations are ‘applicable to many Motions of the human Mind’.⁵⁷ The aptness of the quotation – or, indeed, its complete inappropriateness – in turn confirms how well Shakespeare’s sentiments are fitted to his own characters. Quotation enacts, and reenergises, the critical truism of Shakespeare’s knowledge of human nature. Characters confirm in practice the truth of his observations and, by their own experience, turn fragments of Shakespeare’s plays into precepts.

The eighteenth-century novel does not, however, entirely transform Shakespeare into a wise, gentlemanly authority figure, better fitted for the library than for the stage. Shakespeare’s eighteenth-century reception is sometimes summarised as a relocation from ‘stage to page’, but Chapter 4 shows that, rather than simply suppressing Shakespeare’s theatricality, the novelists exploit it. Shakespeare’s potentially dubious association with the stage contributes to the characterisation of dangerous figures such as Richardson’s Lovelace, who noisily declaim his words (‘Thou wilt say I rave. And so I do!’ (p. 146)). Yet even the most virtuous character, including Lovelace’s seeming moral opposite, Clarissa, is touched, when they quote, by the pejorative associations of performance: are they acting? The act of quotation exaggerates the inherent self-dramatisation of the mid-century fictional character. Dramatic quotation resonates with eighteenth-century discussions of character in terms not of ‘individualities and inner lives’ but of surfaces and social relations; and with an ‘understanding of the self’ represented by the ‘masquerade’.⁵⁸ It reveals the porous boundaries between dramatic and novelistic characterisation.

At the same time, the novel rehabilitates Shakespeare’s theatricality by celebrating its capacity, in the right hands, to represent life truthfully. The actor David Garrick is named repeatedly in fiction of the period: *Tom Jones*’ Partridge confidently declares after seeing him perform the role of Hamlet, ‘why I could act as well as he myself. I am sure if I had seen a Ghost, I should have looked in the very same Manner, and done just as he did’.⁵⁹ Novelists connect the naturalistic style of acting for which