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Introduction: rethinking Shakespeare and ethics

Patrick Gray and John D. Cox

This collection of essays originated in a conception that runs against the grain of Shakespearean criticism over the past thirty years. Our focus on Shakespeare as a thinker – and a moral thinker, in particular – is not new, but it is also not current.[1] Within the larger tradition of Shakespeare studies, dating back to figures such as Johnson, Coleridge, Goethe, and Hazlitt, open discussion of Shakespeare's ethical thinking is the norm. For these early critics, the focal point of Shakespeare's plays simply is, without any great contention, individual character, revealed over time through various moral trials.[2] This approach corresponds, even today, to what Michael Bristol calls "vernacular criticism" of Shakespeare ("Introduction" 10–11). Despite the many important differences between eighteenth-century moral criticism and nineteenth-century character criticism, they share a belief that ethical categories provide a fitting framework for thinking about Shakespeare, and this assumption still prevails among "vernacular intuitions" of Shakespeare held by "a lot of smart, well-educated people," including "colleagues in academic departments other than English" (Bristol, "Introduction" 10–11).

In the past few decades, however, professional Shakespeareans have more often shown a "striking absence" of interest in ethics, to use philosopher Martha Nussbaum's phrase. "The sense that we are social beings puzzling out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be, for us, the best way to live – this sense of practical importance, which animates contemporary ethical theory and has always animated much of great literature, is absent from the writings of many of our leading literary theorists" (170). Writing twenty years ago, Nussbaum focused on Derrida and the linguistic turn in a way that seems dated today. Derrida and deconstruction no longer enjoy

[1] For the concept of Shakespeare as a "thinker," see Nuttall, *Shakespeare*; Poole and Scholar, eds.; and, more recently, Lupton, *Thinking*.

[2] Bradley writes, "The center of the tragedy … may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action" (20). Cp. Bristol, "Oeconomical Prudence."

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the prominence once afforded by their *succès de scandale*. Still, their influence continues: as David Kastan has explained, the oft-proclaimed death of Theory is not so much a disappearance as a taking up (*Aufhebung*), in the Hegelian sense. Deconstruction, like the New Criticism that it reacted against, taught a salutary attention to the complexity of aesthetic form. What has faded away, however, is the common ground of both movements, a Kantian focus on ahistorical questions of form.[3]

Analytic philosophy, even today, tends to approach historical works of political theory in much the same manner that the New Criticism would interpret poetry. Individual treatises, or the body of work of an individual political philosopher, are examined discretely, as if in a vacuum, looking for principles of internal coherence (Bevir). One reaction against this philosophical hermeticism is evident in the "Cambridge School" or "Cambridge method," as Burke and Hume point out. Spearheaded by J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, historians at Cambridge began to take closer account of historical context in the study of political philosophy from the past. Skinner in particular insisted that literary works were historical objects and therefore necessary for a historian to know and understand. "A poem, a play, a novel" is as much the historian's subject matter as any more abstract "exercise in ethical, political, religious, or other such mode of thought" (Skinner, "Meaning" 3).[4] Following Skinner's lead, and taking up the "Cambridge method" that he articulates and defends, historians since the 1980s have done much to situate early modern English authors within the context of contemporary political theory.[5] Shakespeare is the supreme challenge in this endeavor, because his intersection with the high politics of his day is not as prominent or clear cut as that of Milton, Marvell, Sidney, or Spenser, and his abstract opinions on subjects such as politics, ethics, and religion remain notoriously elusive. Nonetheless, a trio of prominent intellectual historians, David Armitage, Conal Condren, and Andrew Fitzmaurice, in 2009 assembled a collection of essays, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, designed to bring Shakespeare into the political conversation in the Cambridge vein. "Until very recently," they begin, "one major early modern writer has not been treated systematically as a participant in the

[3] Nussbaum attributes the rift that she identifies between literary criticism and moral philosophy to a range of causes, including *inter alia* "Kant's aesthetics," "early twentieth-century formalism," and "the New Criticism" (171–2). For a more complete account, see Roche.

[4] See also Skinner, "Shakespeare."

[5] See Armitage, Condren, and Fitmaurice, eds. 1 n. 1, for a list of examples. Note esp. Armitage, Himy, and Skinner, eds.

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political thought of his time: William Shakespeare" (1–2). Substitute "ethical thought" for "political thought," and the same statement could apply appropriately to the collection of essays assembled here.

Within the field of literary criticism, the turn to history initially took Marx as its guiding light, rather than the more moderate historicism of the Cambridge School.[6] Situating Shakespeare in the politics of social class is one way to connect him to his context, and it serves as the engine of Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, the single most influential book in rethinking Shakespeare and history for the age of deconstruction.

> As my work progressed, I perceived that fashioning oneself and being fashioned by cultural institutions – family, religion, state – were inseparably intertwined. In all my texts and documents, there were, so far as I could tell, no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed, the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society. (256)

The kind of contextualization that Greenblatt describes, however, virtually eliminates ethics, which assumes human choice as foundational. For Greenblatt – or at least, Greenblatt at this stage in his career – ethics is a red herring. Character is not the product of individual decision-making but instead a symptom, a manifestation of more important things such as juridical power. Ethics is the froth on the top of the wave rather than the tides underneath. "Power" in this case is reified, as it is in the thought of Foucault, as if it were a physical force and detached from any putative individual agent. Human beings are its victims, its instruments, "remarkably unfree," rather than its possessors.[7]

Whereas Greenblatt was guarded and oblique, Fredric Jameson was forthright in enunciating the implications of Marxist assumptions for relating ethics to literary criticism. According to Jameson's account of literary history, political conflicts between social classes are so vast in

[6] For a sense of the divergence between the Cambridge School and Marxism, see Skinner, "Meaning" 42ff. Following the lead of MacIntyre, "Mistake," Skinner argues that the logic of deterministic explanation rests upon a confusion of action and circumstance. "Every statement made or other action performed must presuppose an intention to have done it – call it a cause if you like – but also an intention in doing it, which cannot be a cause, but which must be grasped if the action itself is to be correctly characterized and so understood" (45). Thus, Skinner argues, "an unavoidable lacuna remains: even if the study of the social context of texts could serve to *explain* them, this would not amount to the same as providing the means to *understand* them" (46).

[7] As David Norbrook points out, however, "Greenblatt himself always remained ambivalent toward anti-humanist theory." Thus, Norbrook suggests, he is not always a representative example of the critical movement he inspired. "Much writing that falls under the 'new historicist' label has been more unambiguously committed to a Foucauldian programme" (278).

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scope, and so resistant to reconciliation, that they tend to be recast in narrative form as individual choices between the binary opposites "good" and "evil." These moral categories are themselves fictions; concepts such as virtue and vice are nothing more than mental placeholders, disguises, for what are in fact manifestations of impersonal social forces. Ethics has no meaning in and of itself; it stands in relation to its ground of being, which Jameson takes to be politics (specifically, Marx's "dialectic"), as a work of art does to one of Plato's forms. Ethics is a shadowy and distorted imitation of the thing itself, lacking any inherent value or significance, akin to a dream or other product of the unconscious. The role of literary criticism, as Jameson sees it, is precisely to undo this mysterious mimesis: to unravel the illusory dilemmas of morality, as they seem to appear in fiction, and explain them instead properly, realistically, as symbolic proxies for social history.

Greenblatt and Jameson were the harbingers of a new school of literary criticism that often identified itself as antihumanist, taking "humanist" as a fairly continuous set of cultural assumptions from the sixteenth century through the nineteenth. In the eyes of the antihumanist, art, poetry, moral philosophy, and religious belief are all epiphenomena. What looks like independent, individual thinking is in fact a screen or stalking horse for the propagation of disembodied and ubiquitous political processes: Greenblatt's "circulation of social energy," for example, or Norbert Elias's "monopoly mechanism." Barthes proclaimed "the death of the author," and critics took up this conceit. Shakespeare himself, traditionally perceived as an agent, an author, was instead recast as a passive conduit; his art, as well as its abiding canonicity, as an effect of impersonal structures such as "ideological state apparatuses." What might look like creativity was instead a pawn's move in a much larger, and largely unconscious, socioeconomic chess match. Within the critical discourse of this period, "thought" was a nonstarter: a bubble, merely, produced by the ceaseless fermentation of class conflict.

Therefore, the key point of originality, if not the enabling assumption, in the collection of essays edited by Armitage, Condren, and Fitzmaurice can be summed up in that single term, "thought": a word that they stress in their choice of title. For these historians, Shakespeare is not merely a victim of politics but instead an active "participant," thinking about politics just as we do today. His opinions are not altogether dictated or determined by any extrinsic "dialectic" or "discourse." Instead, in some measure, however partial, Armitage *et al.* see Shakespeare's ideas as his own, formulated in dialogue with intellectual contemporaries such as Machiavelli and

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Montaigne. He weighs in on the political controversies characteristic of his age with insight, originality, and independence.

The same insistence on Shakespeare as a fellow thinker can be seen in recent work on Shakespeare and religion. In an article on "the religious turn" in Shakespeare studies, Julia Lupton describes everyday religious practice, as well as more abstruse and abstract formulations of theology, as "a form of thinking."[8] "The 'religious turn' in Renaissance studies represents the chance for a return to theory, to concepts, concerns, and modes of reading that found worlds and cross contexts, born out of specific historical situations, traumas, and debates, but not reducible to them" ("Religious Turn" 146). Following the example of the earlier volume, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, another collection of essays from Cambridge University Press, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, edited by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore, takes a similar stance. The authors present Shakespeare as an engaged participant in the religious controversies of his day, without casting about, in the manner of the "school of suspicion," for impersonal deterministic explanations as to why he might have held this or that opinion.[9]

The present collection, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics*, stands in the same intellectual tradition.[10] In many ways, in fact, this anthology can be understood as a natural extension of the findings of *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*. Citing the work of Skinner, as well as the conclusions of the various contributors to their own, more specialized project, Armitage, Condren, and Fitzmaurice stress the inseparability of individual ethics and mass politics in the early modern understanding of political life.[11] "From the early modern perspective, it was the character and spirit of those making up the polity that was crucial to its political health. In relative contrast, modern political analysis has put more stress on the institutional and constitutional arrangements of politics" (4). Political theory was understood as a branch of moral philosophy; its focus was not the state, which was only beginning to emerge, but instead the city, or the

[8] See Lupton, "Religious Turn." Cp. Jackson and Marotti, "Turn to Religion"; Jackson and Marotti, eds., *Shakespeare*; and Shell. For related bibliography, see Jackson and Marotti, *Shakespeare* 20 n. 1.
[9] See Ricoeur, *Freud*, for the origins of the phrase "the school of suspicion."
[10] Cp. also Ebbersmeyer, as well as Lines and Ebbersmeyer, eds. Ebbersmeyer uses Ludwik Fleck's concept of *Denkstil* ("thought-style"), the inspiration for Kuhn's concept of the "paradigm," as a framework for understanding the emergence of new modes and methods of moral philosophy in the Renaissance. For a review essay on Fleck and his influence, including the connection between Fleck and Kuhn, see Harwood.
[11] Skinner, *Foundations* 1:44–5, and Skinner, "Political."

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prince.[12] "In this sense, early modern politics was particularly personal, whatever its constitutional form" (4).[13] Taking up this political emphasis on individual virtue, the contributors to *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics* extend the Cambridge method of moderate contextualism from its origins, the study of political philosophy, to a parallel study of Shakespeare's thought about ethics, situating Shakespeare's ideas within contemporary debate about rival, overlapping moral paradigms. Christianity, Skepticism, Epicureanism: these and other such schools of thought serve as examples of Pocock's "languages," but in the realm of moral philosophy, rather than political. The collection also places Shakespeare in dialogue with a representative Continental analogue, Montaigne.

In the interest of evenhandedness, critical ecumenism, and the taking up of Theory into common literary discourse, some sympathetic discussion of deterministic perspectives appears in the essays that follow. Peter Holbrook, especially, argues that Shakespeare and Montaigne alike embrace the Augustinian concept of the individual sinner as *incurvatus in se* ("curved inward upon himself"), as mediated through the influence of Luther: each individual is so dominated by his "ruling passion" that he is effectively determined in his course of action, to the exclusion of rational choice.[14] Holbrook then draws analogies between this perspective and the fatalism of Nietzsche, as well as present-day philosophical arguments against free will. Even Holbrook, however, stops short of arguing that Shakespeare's advocacy of this position, or Montaigne's, is itself a result of the kind of determinism that he describes.

In her account of changing perceptions of the morality of laughter, Indira Ghose draws extensively upon the work of Norbert Elias, as well as that of Quentin Skinner. Political and economic changes in the early

[12] Hankins's forthcoming study of humanist political theory, although focused instead on the earlier, Italian Renaissance, also emphasizes the political importance ascribed to individual virtue in this period. E.g., for Hankins, Machiavelli is an exception, a reactionary, rather than a representative humanist. His cynicism about the political relevance of virtue ethics is a secularized variation on the political pessimism of St. Augustine, dominant in the medieval period – a tradition that other Italian humanists sought to replace, in contrast, with neoclassical optimism. Cp. Cox on the "residual political realism of Augustine" evident in Shakespeare's own vision of history, as well as medieval English drama (xii).

[13] Green's recent study of Montaigne and "freedom" corroborates this conclusion. According to Green, Montaigne's interest in "neo-Roman" liberty is "ethical, rather than constitutional, in its orientation: freedom is to be secured, not through political participation in a free state, but through a personal practice of self-regulation allowing us to preserve our will from subjection and expropriation" (3).

[14] See Luther, *Lectures* 218–19. For the Latin, see Luther, *Römerbriefvorlesung* 356. See also Strier, *Unrepentant* 37 n. 27. For a theological history of the concept of the sinner as *homo incurvatus in se*, see Jenson.

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modern period, alongside the recovery of classical authors, led to new concepts of social decorum. Turning to Shakespeare, however, Ghose sees, not a leaf on the tide, but instead a keen-eyed, self-aware skepticism about these emergent social norms. Shakespeare as author is not bound by the new discourse of the courtier, Ghose points out, but is instead able to stand outside it, to critique its shortcomings, and to propose original and appealing alternatives. Shakespeare has the ability to make a "cognitive leap" outside his own milieu. In adopting this perspective, Ghose signals her distance from stronger versions of social determinism, including Elias's own systematic Marxism.

All told, the essays gathered here are written in the awareness that the intellectual landscape of literary criticism has changed significantly in the thirty years since Greenblatt and Jameson first made their stunning impact. Within the Anglophone academy, the *soixante-huitard* trinity of Foucault, Althusser, and Lacan is no longer revered as the queen of the sciences. Medievalists such as David Aers and Lee Patterson have effectively rebutted the claim that the concept of the individual or "self" or "bourgeois subject" was an early modern innovation.[15] Skeptics such as Brian Vickers, Graham Bradshaw, Richard Levin, Tom McAlindon, and Robin Headlam Wells have challenged antihumanism's theoretical claims.[16] The cumulative effect is that of a hegemony displaced. One of the inspirations for the present volume, the anthology *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*, assembled by Michael Bristol, takes as its animating premise the belief that there may be some real validity to the "character criticism" of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[17] Another, still-more-recent anthology, *Shakespeare's Sense of Character*, edited by Yu Jin Ko and Michael Shurgot, continues this line of thought, connecting it to present-day performance practice.[18] "Self," "character," and "agency" are no longer words that require quotation marks to indicate the writer's embarrassment in using them.

This is not to say that these words are used exactly as they once were. Deconstruction and antihumanism alike have been subsumed into a complex, multifaceted theoretical position that makes the culture before "Theory" impossible to recover simply by using its language. In his introduction to *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*, Bristol stakes out his and his

[15] For a critique of similar claims, still pervasive in Montaigne scholarship, that Montaigne presents a "decisive rupture with the values of the ancient world" (45), that he is "distinctively modern" (45), etc., see Green.
[16] For an overview, see Halliwell and Mousley, as well as Headlam Wells.
[17] Cp. Yachnin and Slights, eds., as well as Nuttall, *New*.
[18] Ko's introduction, especially, serves as a useful and engaging review essay.

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contributors' ground firmly in between the two poles of what he sees as a false dichotomy: "It is abundantly clear in all the essays that compose this volume that no one works from a concept of the agent as untrammeled, lucid, or fully self-aware. At the same time, no one is satisfied with arguments that say, in effect, 'the devil made me do it'" (6). In his book on *Hamlet*, John Lee describes the past few decades of Shakespeare studies as dominated by what he calls "the controversies of the self." And, like Bristol, he sees this debate as needlessly polarized. Shakespeare does seem to be skeptical of the wholly autonomous, disembodied, and disinterested Kantian or Cartesian subject, insofar as he espies this prospect out on the intellectual horizon. This does not rule out the possibility, however, that he imagines some other, more limited form of human agency.

In short, considerable middle ground exists between the transcendent, self-controlled, coolly rational self posited by Enlightenment thought, a kind of miniature god, and the *nullus homo* of antihumanism. The individual can fall short of omnipotence without therefore being represented as utterly powerless, a hapless victim of "cultural institutions," "relations of power," or "class conflict," like a votary ground beneath the wheels of a juggernaut. Drawing upon the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, as well as Shakespeare's contemporary, Montaigne, Lee proposes that Shakespeare himself, through the character of Hamlet, enters into an anticipation of recent critical controversy about subjectivity, and that he depicts a "processional," relational form of interiority, akin to Montaigne's fluid or inconstant self, as an alternative.[19] The scope of human agency can be found somewhere in between Augustinian debasement and Pelagian exaltation; there is no need to push the question so far to one side or the other.

Moving past the old poles of the debate between humanism and antihumanism enables literary critics to engage more fruitfully with recent developments in philosophy, as well as psychoanalysis.[20] In both of these fields, the new focus is the compromise concept of the "relational" or "intersubjective" self. Each individual exists in a state of constant dialogue and interaction with other individuals, like a node in a computer network. The mind is neither flattened out into nothingness nor yet altogether detached from the world, like a solipsistic monarch. Instead, the self can be better understood as existing in a state of constant, ever-changing engagement with the other, like a partner in a dance or an interlocutor

[19] Cp. Mousley, *Re-humanising*.
[20] Key theorists of post-Freudian "relational" psychoanalysis include Harry Stack Sullivan, Heinz Kohut, and Stephen A. Mitchell. For overviews, see Greenberg and Mitchell, and Mitchell and Black.

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in a conversation. This vision of the self is likely to be most immediately familiar to literary critics through the prescient "dialogism" of Bakhtin. It can also be found, however, in the work of a wide range of philosophers in the Hegelian tradition, notably Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Francis Fukuyama.

Within this philosophical tradition, the ethics of "recognition" (*Anerkennung*) takes on central importance.[21] This concept is likely to be familiar to Shakespeareans through Stanley Cavell's emphasis on "acknowledgment" in Shakespeare's tragedies and more recently through Ewan Fernie's book, *Shame in Shakespeare*, where he touches upon the role of the "other" in the thought of Sartre and Levinas. In her contribution to the present anthology, Jane Kingsley-Smith asks how this line of inquiry might apply to comedy rather than tragedy. Focusing on *Love's Labour's Lost*, she explores similarities between Aristotle's thought about shame in his *Rhetoric*, as it appears in Shakespeare's plays as well as the poetry of his contemporaries, and the importance assigned to recognition in new theories of intersubjective ethics. She also considers the new emphasis on interpersonal relations that is characteristic of post-Freudian, non-Lacanian psychoanalysis.

As Kingsley-Smith suggests, the relational concept of the self that tends to be associated today with the Hegelian tradition of moral philosophy, and that itself is indebted to the influence of Aristotle, as well as Cicero, is much closer in spirit to Renaissance thought than either the untrammeled confidence of Enlightenment humanism or the reactionary cynicism of postmodern antihumanism. Early modern analogues of these opinions can be found, albeit at the farther edges of contemporary thought: the counterpart of Enlightenment optimism about the power of the solitary, rational mind was Stoicism, and the counterpart of postmodern deterministic pessimism about the human condition was radical (predestinarian) Protestantism. By and large, however, the vision of the self most prevalent in Shakespeare's England, the "commonsense" default, was that of an individual interacting with other individuals, each possessing some degree of agency and none having absolute autonomy. The sources for this opinion would have been twofold – classical and Christian – as the organization of this book suggests. St. Paul's epistles stress the nature of the Church as a community of responsible individuals before God. Without the theological affirmation, Aristotle writes in like vein about the *polis*; Cicero, the *res publica*. On a smaller scale, St. Paul emphasizes the importance of marriage; Aristotle and Cicero, the bond of friendship.

[21] See, e.g., Ricoeur, *Oneself* and *Course*, as well as Taylor, "Politics," and Robert Williams.

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Taking this understanding of the self seriously, either as objectively true or, more modestly, as an apt representation of the majority opinion in Shakespeare's time, makes an interest in ethics natural. "Ethics" comes from the Greek word for "habit" or "custom" (*ethos*), just as "morality" comes from the Latin word for roughly the same concept (*mos*, cp. "mores").[22] As individuals within a community interact over time, patterns of behavior establish themselves: habits for individuals; customs for communities. Philosophers and other thinkers such as poets reflect upon these patterns and, eventually, measure them against various alternatives: templates, ideals, counterexamples. This study of how people interact with each other, as measured against hypothetical variations or alternatives, is ethics. And the subject is indispensable, if we aim to understand Shakespeare and his contemporaries as they most likely would have understood themselves.

Studying Shakespeare and ethics has been discouraged, however, not only by the debate between Kantian autonomy and Marxist determinism but also by the recent appearance of a new positivism. This interest seems to have been born of the desire to avoid high-flying theoretical controversy, but it is also indebted to the taking up of materialistic premises into a new set of common assumptions. An example is the rapid rise in interest in the "history of the book." Understanding the material circumstances of producing printed books is, of course, an integral part of literary criticism, with a role akin to that of papyrology, paleography, or textual criticism. When it is done well, as in the case of authors such as Lukas Erne, David Scott Kastan, and Roger Chartier, close attention to the physical details of reading and writing can prove surprisingly illuminating, opening a window into larger and perforce less material questions of meaning. A danger arises, however, if critics begin to imagine that small-scale, materially oriented analysis of particular objects and events can serve as a sustainable, self-sufficient alternative to literary criticism as a whole. Taken too literally, Barthes' analogy between "text" and "textile," or de Grazia and Stallybrass's between "book" and "paper," risks degenerating into inadvertent absurdity, like the naive materialism of the narrator in Swift's *Tale of a Tub.*[23]

[22] Strier, "Shakespeare," follows Bernard Williams in trying to separate "ethics" from "morality." The fine distinction that they both draw, however, is factitious. By appropriating vernacular synonyms and assigning them different meanings, the authors create an ad hoc shorthand that, although useful for their argument, is also artificial and idiosyncratic.

[23] In the section titled "A Digression in the Modern Kind," Swift's narrator proposes that "a small portable Volume, of all Things that are to be Known" could be created by compiling "fair correct Copies, well bound in Calfs Skin" of "all Modern Bodies of Arts and Sciences," boiling them down to a pulp and distilling them, according to a complex alchemical process. After "three Drops of this Elixir," he claims, "the Brain … will immediately perceive … an infinite Number of Abstracts,

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