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# *Introduction*

How do you say something new about Shakespeare? No doubt all Shakespeare scholars have been asked the question at some point, or even asked it themselves. And what is 'new' in any event? We know that nothing is wholly new, that nothing comes of nothing. Contexts and critical histories fill our minds. Indeed, the new often seems to be little more than a reaction against the old: character critics against old historicists, New Critics against character critics, various postmodern theorists and New Historicists against New Critics and character critics. And on it goes, as new old historicists return to dominate the critical landscape. The actions and reactions of criticism often seem to say more about us, and our academies, than they do about Shakespeare. That is perhaps no great cause for alarm. It is unavoidable that we encounter Shakespeare through the prism of our present concerns, and this is particularly the case in an academic industry that demands constant newness to justify the next paper, the next publication, the next position.

Looking back, it seems clear that this book began in another of these reactions: the ill-defined reactions of a frustrated postgraduate student, uprooted from encouraging Queensland to challenging Oxford. Placed in a foreign environment, a reaction was only natural. Mine was against both the historicist norm and the postmodern scorn for 'character'. It seemed to me that these critics had placed their contextual, linguistic and ideological constructions above the imaginative responses of audiences, readers, directors and actors through the centuries. It seemed as if the heart had been stripped out of the plays, as if the fact that emotional engagement is insufficient for scholarly study had caused critics to reject it entirely. 'If it is not enough, it is nothing!' they seemed to cry, like so many disappointed Lears. Another overreaction – as was mine. For even as I reacted against the more extreme reaction against character and subjectivity, I began to realise that the movement to re-theorise and reinvigorate the human 'subject' and Shakespeare's 'character' had already begun. The reaction was already



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bubbling away. Character, in particular, did not need my help: 'Character has [already] made a comeback.'[1]

Time passed, as it does, and things changed. I experienced my own arrivals – a daughter born surprisingly early – and perhaps I changed too. But still I felt there was something different about Shakespeare's major characters, only it was something that could not be captured in terms of traditional character. All plays have characters and some even have strong, 'believable' or original ones. All audiences react to characters in some way and some even bring them 'to life' through their imaginative investments and responses (including to the actors' own imaginative responses). Character, I realised, was too general a concept to explain Shakespeare's ongoing newness. But if not character, what? What was it about the plays that made certain Shakespearean characters seem different: to seem as if they were *more* than characters? Something must happen to them, I reasoned, for they do not start out being more than characters. The name 'Juliet' does not pre-empt or contain the extraordinary and singular entity that emerges in the following scenes, any more than her first line, 'How now! Who calls?' (I.iii.5).[2]

So something must happen. A lover's voice from the dark. A ghost on the ramparts. Weird figures on the stormy road. Slowly, a thought formed: what if, in the most basic sense, it is the new that happens to these characters? And the question prompted a reappraisal. What if, rather than desperately trying to say something new about Shakespeare – or to rehabilitate his character and distinguish it from its antecedents – I looked at how the new comes about and operates in Shakespeare's plays? Of course, there are always new interpretations of Shakespeare and this is yet another, but the new also lies at the heart of Shakespeare's dramaturgy. The great tragedies seem to engender it, or spring from it, like Macbeth on the road – a kind of dark Saint Paul – at once confronted by its radical intrusion and transformed by the confrontation. When I looked again, it seemed that it was this rupturing newness, and not Macbeth's ('ambitious') character, that was driving the action and, indeed, driving Macbeth. 'Macbeth' only seemed to come about after, as an effect of the newness – as if drawn from the weird sisters' cauldron. It seemed as if the weird sisters were given the dramatic and imaginative force to convulse the dead world of Duncan's Scotland and thereby conjure the new mode of being that is Macbeth's imaginative subjectivity.

But again, what is the new? Is it the next page of the history, the next link in the chain, or is it the break that unbinds the chain, shuts the book and begins again? For there are many 'news': there is the new product, the new

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invention, the new dawn, the new breath, the new man. We must anatomize the new. In the Early Modern period, no thinker exemplifies newness more clearly than Montaigne. His new essay form surveys the era's novelties and, in doing so, helps create a new means of representing the self. Montaigne is his subject and, in subjecting himself to a multitude of assays, he builds a remarkably vivid, compelling and at times touching portrait of a mind at work. It is a mind filled with diversity: with generosity and scorn, wonder and disdain; with Falstaff and Hamlet, Miranda and Prospero. Of course, comparison between Shakespeare and Montaigne is almost a given, and for good reason. Reading the essays, the Shakespeare scholar is constantly struck by resemblances, whether it be Montaigne's Hamlet-like distrust of show, his Iago-like insistence that he is not what he is, or his Lear-like recognition of the need for divesting and unlearning. But is Montaigne's self-portraiture commensurate to Shakespeare's creations?

It is here worth looking at two distinct types of newness that are apparent in Montaigne. The first is what we might call the newness of diversity: 'No quality is so universall in this surface of things, as variety and diversity.'[3] In turning his mind to novel customs, occurrences, and discoveries, Montaigne envisages a multi-layered, world-spreading diversity. As he writes of the law: even 'a hundred thousand kinds of particular cases . . . hath no proportion, with the infinite diversity of humane accidents'.[4] For Montaigne, inconstancy is the end result of this type of newness, and this inconstancy undercuts the idea of a stable determining 'character'. The human mind is simply too variable and dependent on circumstance: 'If I speake diversly of my selfe, it is because I looke diversly upon my selfe. All contrarieties are found in her.'[5] Montaigne thus splinters the unity of the self in a strikingly modern manner.

Although in one sense Montaigne revels in the newness of diversity, in another his essays are an extended effort to rise above its 'infinit confusion of opinions'.[6] Here enters the second type of newness in the *Essays*: the process of writing that allows Montaigne to, in part, escape this infinite diversity. The process is productive of Montaigne's self and perhaps of a new form of representing selfhood.[7] Montaigne *becomes* a subject – the subject of his essays – through the action of testing, assaying, essaying and self-reflecting that is embodied in the essays themselves: 'I have no more made my booke, then my booke hath made me.'[8] Despite the inconstancy, the custom and the contradiction, for his readers he does emerge as something singular: as Montaigne. In Chapter 1, I therefore discuss how critics have turned to Montaigne as an important Early Modern thinker of 'process', who stresses that one only *becomes* one's self. Furthermore, such a constructed self connects

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with recent critical attempts to chart a course between the inward-looking and allegedly essentialist understandings of character put forward by Romantic and Bradleian criticism, and the endless diversity of context, discourse and ideology on the other. The subject may not be natural or pre-existing but that does not mean that it cannot *come to be*.

There is, however, a seismic rift between the way in which Montaigne comes to be and the way Shakespeare's major tragic characters 'arrive' as something more than characters. Throughout this book I therefore use Montaigne as an important point of contrast that throws the explosiveness of Shakespeare's creations into relief. To understand this distinction, we must examine how Montaigne establishes an alternative to the limitless diversity of human customs. After showing how custom infiltrates our deepest selves, Montaigne's 'Of Custome' offers something of a way out. Briefly put, we need not thoughtlessly follow our inherited structures and beliefs if we assay them and thereby ourselves: the 'man of understanding' may follow the 'common guise' at the level of appearances, but 'inwardly' he 'retire[s] his minde from the common presse' and possesses 'liberty and power to judge freely of all things'.[9] Montaigne's exceptionalist formulation foreshadows both Hamlet's famed interiority and Iago's dark workshop of inwardness. But it also foreshadows modern capitalist forms of interiority more generally, in which a space is created inside the mind for judgement and freedom – a space for the individual – even as the individual seems almost powerless in the outward world, where it must follow the 'common presse' of consumption.

The final chapter of the third book, appropriately titled 'Of Experience', is a fitting end to Montaigne's *Essays*, concluding in a glorious tribute to the greatness of ordinary life. For all of Montaigne's wide-ranging diversity, there is a charming modesty to this conclusion, in which he celebrates a life of congenial isolation. The voyaging mind tests itself in the world's infinite confusion of opinions, but it does not advance too far into this chaos. It constructs its home and there retires. To some extent, Montaigne emerges as an exception to custom – emerges as Montaigne – precisely by retiring from the world. It is here that the gulf between his essays and Shakespeare's drama begins to yawn. In the chapter 'Of Solitarinesse', Montaigne praises the 'man that is able [to] have wives, children, goods, and chiefly health, but not so tie himself unto them, that his felicitie depend on them':

> We should reserve a store-house for our selves, what need soever chance; altogether ours, and wholy free, wherein we may hoard up and establish our true libertie . . . there to discourse, to meditate and laugh, as, without wife,

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> without children, and goods, without traine, or servants; that if by any occasion they be lost, it seeme not strange to us to passe it over.[10]

How far we are from Juliet! How far from her violent commitment. How far from Othello and his violent despair. Or from Macbeth's rapture at the words of the weird sisters. Or Hamlet's cursed inability to let go of the ghost – or further still from his rash violence in Act V. There is no retiring for Shakespeare's great tragic characters. There is no modesty. No home. Lear may attempt to retire but he ends up plunging into the storm. Hamlet may long to retire but he ends up plunging into providential action, plunging in the rapier. Montaigne charts a course that is simply not open to Shakespeare's Prince. His selfhood is a slowly drawn portrait: its form emerges gradually as it is placed in manifold scenes and settings, from ancient Greece to far-flung lands only just discovered. And a rich and compelling painting it is. Indeed, more than a painting, for we feel we have seen his mind at work. But that is not Shakespeare or even Hamlet. For Shakespeare's tragic characters, there is no next essay; there is only now, only this world. And it is this violent attachment to their world, to their present moment, in which they must arrive and act, that divides Shakespeare's subjects from Montaigne.[11]

There is, then, an existential urgency in Shakespeare that is not present in Montaigne: the present, the moment, the urgency of now. And not just as a political slogan but a matter of life and death, of becoming what we will forever be. One might respond: well, that's drama; dramatic characters must act and become themselves in the two hours' traffic of the stage. And that's true too, but there is something more at play, something beyond saying 'it's a play'. There are many plays, but not many stage such radical transitions as Hamlet's movement from withdrawal to readiness. Or Romeo's from Petrarchan parrot to committed lover. Or Othello's from sure-footed warrior to crumbling husband. This is not to simply say that Shakespeare's characters change; rather, that through Shakespeare's staging of the radical intrusion of the new they become something other than what they were. They become 'themselves'. Or at least the selves we know. They arrive as 'subjects'.

What, though, does it mean to say that they arrive? First, and most fundamentally, it means that they were not. The change that takes place is more than one of circumstance or knowledge. It is not the old Grecian *peripeteia* but a *creation*. Far from being 'already there' as presupposed entities, I show how they are born before our eyes. It is this radical sense of creation that I believe distinguishes Shakespeare. In examining the emergence of Shakespeare's major tragic characters, the following chapters will

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show a persistent sense of something coming from nothing, or at least of the coming of something that is nothing like what went before. And this radical form of creation is an irrevocable departure from Montaigne's portraiture. Metaphysically, which is to say dramatically, the world(s) works differently in Shakespeare; things come to be in a different way. The new arrives like a thunderbolt.

The term 'arrival' is vital because it signals a break from traditional notions of character. Seen as a process of arriving as much as a product that arrives, I reach a different understanding of both 'what' and 'where' these characters are. Although Shakespeare's arrivals may be metaphysical, involving the emergence of new subjects and new worlds, their basis always lies in dramatic process. More specifically, the sense of radical creation is the product of a particular type of dramatic motion: an intrusive happening that, following Alain Badiou, I call an 'event'. The following chapters therefore show how Shakespeare's important tragic characters burst excessively from fissures within the play-text and the play-world that configure new forms of language, structure and action. They arrive through dramatic events that rupture the pre-existing 'situation' of both narrative and dramatic structure and thereby prompt them to become something more than functional dramatis personae. The result is a sharp reversal of Bradley's Hegelian notion of a defining character. Action does not come from 'within' character; rather, action reconfigures characters and creates 'subjects'. The subject, here, is not an individual or a settled substance but a diffused dramatic process of arriving. It is not synonymous with character but is something that may (or may not) emerge from these events. We are thus looking at a supra-individual process that builds something more than a character's words or deeds. The point is not an obvious one, for it goes against the search for origins that permeates historicist, cultural and linguistic criticisms, as well as the 'essentialism' of humanist thought. It rejects the search for some extant 'thing' – whether it is language, historical context, culture or spirit – that underpins the subject, and instead looks to its 'becoming': how characters *become* something more than a role or a mouthpiece for cultural and ideological discourses.

It is here worth making a further note about the terminology. There are two reasons why I make the somewhat unusual distinction between 'character' and 'subject'. The first relates to the philosophy of Badiou, which suggests that the subject only emerges through an event and is thus distinct from the individual. But this ties into a second, more fundamental, reason that drew me to Badiou in the first place: there is something of a terminological and conceptual deadlock when it comes to discussing the creation of

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dramatic character. Is it a name, a role or a virtual person? Is it something that is already there or something that happens? For instance, Bert O. States speaks quite reasonably of 'a single character-entity that will convincingly support a particular range of behavioral acts conditioned by the needs of the plot and idea'.[12] He calls this the character 'container' or 'character base' and argues that it can 'be found in characters of most, if not all, plays from the Greek to the modern period'.[13] For my purposes, the concept of the character-base is too general to help explore what Shakespeare *does* with it, but that does not mean that, in one sense at least, States isn't right that 'character is what is always all there'.[14] For character *has* to always be there: it is what ties together certain actions and utterances in one name, one actor's role, one virtual life. When character is seen as a role, or character-base or even as 'the organizing principle of Shakespeare's plays',[15] it is hard to disagree that the character at the play's end is (necessarily) the same as the character at the play's beginning. States thus points to a terminological difficulty for those – like me – who claim that character is *not* always 'all there'.[16] It is for this reason that I have split the subject from the character. Character, in a functional sense, may always be there, but the 'subject' is not. The split allows an exploration of what Shakespeare does with this base: of what is born *from* character or into what character is born. The character remains the bedrock, but the rising volcanic island of the subject – for as long as it lasts – alters its co-ordinates, its cartography and its language. In short, in becoming a subject, the character relates to, and communes with, its world in a different manner.

The emergence of the new is a difficult thing to map, however. It involves the borderlands between something and nothing, form and formlessness, borderlands where language begins to break down. Such phrases are evocative of Shakespeare and the clash between Lear and Cordelia, but how does something arrive? Is it possible for something to come from nothing after all? The answers must depend on what counts for nothing and what counts for something. Relevant to these fundamental yet perplexing questions is the work of Badiou, whose thought is outlined in Chapter 1. Badiou's notion of the 'event' is precisely an examination of these treacherous borderlands. It is critical to my project because it departs from Montaigne at a similar point to Shakespeare: how the new arrives. Badiou's first axiom, like Montaigne's, is multiplicity. For both, the world's 'infinite diversity'[17] (Badiou would say 'infinite multiplicities'[18]) precludes any easy notion of an essential or natural self. And for both, the task of thought is to reach something that lies beyond this inconstancy and diversity. But whereas, for Montaigne, this infinite diversity precludes any

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radical commitment or revolutionary moment, Badiou's response is quite the opposite: the genuinely new and singular can only emerge through a (revolutionary) rupture of a given multiplicity. In other words, something beyond multiplicity – some 'one' or 'truth' – *can* arrive, albeit through a rare and seemingly miraculous happening. That is Badiou's event. It is not another of Montaigne's 'infinite diversity of humane accidents' but the interruption of this multiplicity, its violent rupture.

The effects of this interruption are profound. Badiou takes up 'adventist' thinkers, such as Saint Paul, in the context of mathematical 'set theory' to show how it is possible for things – above all the 'subject' – to emerge from 'nothing'. Nothing, here, means that which is not presented within a given situation and is, therefore, unthinkable from that situation's perspective. Badiou's event is a dysfunction, or rupture, of a situation's constitutive structure, through which that situation's 'void' – its unknown or unspoken truth – suddenly intrudes as an uncontrollable but creative excess. It is an almost miraculous happening that makes the invisible visible. As with Saint Paul's own transformation, such a rupturing event may cause what previously counted for nothing to suddenly become everything. Saint Paul is a hero for Badiou because, unlike Montaigne, he makes the critical move from the diversity of custom to the radically transformative event that breaks down established differences ('there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female') in the creation of a new 'truth' ('for ye are all one in Christ Jesus': Galatians 3:26–28).[19] As with Paul's Damascus happening, the result of the event is the birth of a 'new man' (Ephesians 4:24). Put in Badiou's terms, the 'subject' is not a pre-existing entity but is what emerges in fidelity to such a rupture or 'truth-event'. It is what grasps such an event and sets it to work inside the situation. Badiou's subject is not natural, then, but irruptive, breaking into a situation from its 'void'.

Badiou's thought is complex and challenging, but I believe it helps to articulate something complex and challenging in Shakespeare: the dynamic and evental process by which character arrives as something more than character, of how, in a flash, Romeo and Juliet arrive as something other than they were. From the love of *Romeo and Juliet*, to the ghost of *Hamlet*, the weird sisters of *Macbeth* and the 'Nothing' of *King Lear*, Shakespeare founds his plays around gaps, breaks, scandalous intrusions, that irrupt into an existing structure. The generators of these events are found equally in the happenings of plot and in changes of poetic intensity and form. The following chapters show how, in the wake of such happenings, characters confront their changed selves

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through asides, mid-line shifts and soliloquies, thereby becoming a new 'subject'. The subject, then, does not 'belong' to the character; rather, the movement between character and subject is an event for us, the audience. Such a subject is unstable and precarious but also explosive and creative. Characters may arrive as subjects unexpectedly, almost unprepared for, but they need not arrive at all and, even when they do, they may also fade, retreat or flicker uncertainly.

Some might object that using Badiou to help articulate Shakespeare's dramatic technique is anachronistic, but there are, I think, two counter-points. The first is that this is how history works: that it is, to some extent, anachronistic. History, as Nietzsche writes, is 'untimely', 'acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come'.[20] It is belated. The following chapters show how events such as Hamlet's voyage strike after the fact to transform the subject and its present. In short, different aspects of the past, and of Shakespeare, arrive at different times. Or, as Benjamin puts it, we should 'grasp[] the constellation' that our era forms with an earlier one.[21] The second, and not unrelated, point is that Badiou taps into a tradition that pre-exists Shakespeare – what I call Christianity's 'adventist' tradition – and which Shakespeare himself belatedly translated into drama. As we shall see, Christian notions of advent and rebirth provide something of a historical model for the immediacy and irruptiveness of Shakespeare's arrivals.

Recognising that Shakespeare's subjects are produced by what happens to them as much as by what they say or do, or that these things are indeed inseparable, forces us to recognise their provisional status: that they rely on something other and alien. Badiou may be chief amongst the thinkers I employ, but he is also part of a long religious and philosophical tradition, from Saint Paul to Luther, Soren Kierkegaard to Slavoj Žižek, which stresses that the genuine subject only arrives through an alien and excessive happening. The subject is, in these terms, not reducible to its cultural and linguistic circumstances but is precisely what *exceeds* these circumstances. Also important is the process-orientated philosophy of Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead and more recently Bruno Latour, which stresses that an entity is not a stable substance but a process of becoming. What unites the thinkers I employ is the insistence that the subject *comes to be*. Together, I use them to establish a more creative alternative to the dead-lock between the impossible fullness of the humanist subject and the empty, or even non-existent, postmodern subject.

By stressing the irruptive nature of subjectivity, I hope to get closer to basic questions of passionate emotion – of how the plays embody the

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passions – that lie outside contemporary criticism's desire for objective scholarship and nameable continuums. It is perhaps closer to what drama does than what we are used to saying about it. My focus on the excessive break is more commensurate with the constant newness and surprise in Shakespeare than the strict thinking of context and causal connection, more commensurate with what Hazlitt describes as the 'whirling rapidity' of Shakespeare's 'imagination' and 'language', with all its 'sudden transitions and elliptical expressions'.[22] My approach is thus removed from historicist criticism, which focuses on historical context and progression rather than the exceptional moment that interrupts this linearity and establishes a new paradigm. Scrupulous historicism is necessarily involved with nameable continuums. It maps literature onto these continuums or nominated histories, which therefore come to structure and 'explain' the work. Shakespeare's drama, however, produces configurations that surpass context and, indeed, the very idea of causal progression. It reflects Nietzsche's claim that we 'need history', and literature, 'for the sake of life and action'.[23] The love of Romeo and Juliet or the 'Nothing' (F.I.i.85) of Cordelia come from somewhere else, somewhere beyond their contextual horizons, even as they arise in plays that are conditioned by their historical moment and are part of our cultural history. As T. S. Eliot puts it:

> [T]here is, in all great poetry, something which must remain unaccountable however complete might be our knowledge of the poet, and that that is what matters most. When the poem has been made, something new has happened, something that cannot be wholly explained by anything that went before. That, I believe, is what we mean by 'creation'.[24]

After theorising the notions of 'arrival', 'event' and 'subject' in Chapter 1, I put them into action by analysing the creation of the joint-subject 'Romeo and Juliet'. The event of love ruptures the 'situation' of Verona – structured by Petrarchan cliché and the opposition of Montague and Capulet – and gives rise to new modes of speech, dramatic form and metaphysics that constitute the lovers' emergence as a 'new baptized' (II.i.92) subject. Chapter 2 thereby provides a (comparatively) straightforward introduction to Shakespeare's arrivals, which I go on to complicate. Chapter 3, for instance, addresses *Othello* as a dark twin to *Romeo and Juliet*. I develop a novel account of Othello's tragic trajectory, showing how Desdemona's love is the central event of the play, which halts Othello's closed narrative and opens up the space for the new, vulnerable Othello subject – ruptured and shaken by events rather than 'all-in-all sufficient' (IV.i.262) – that arrives

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