

## INTRODUCTION

### No Fear Shakespeare?

The title of this introduction refers to popular attempts to make Shakespeare's seemingly overwhelming art less daunting and demanding, more accessible, user- or student-friendly. Of course the necessity of comprehensible interpretations of the playwright's work is not in doubt; but nevertheless, the question mark of our title betrays a mistrust of over-simplification, of making things too easy and producing pat answers to the complex and disturbing questions that should chafe at our certainties. Shakespeare's plays warn us not to be so sure of ourselves; doubt is indispensable and we ignore it at our peril. Perhaps the most important lesson that can be learned from reading Shakespeare's plays is the humility of those half-blind creatures who cannot tell night from day, foul from fair, rank weed of vice from sweet-smelling flower of virtue. Shakespeare never lets his audience forget that to stumble in the dark is the universal, yet least acknowledged, condition of the fallen world. In one and the same sentence, Prince Hamlet both extols the infinity of human faculties, actions and apprehension, and reminds us that man is but a "quintessence of dust" (2.2.301). The Duke in *Measure for Measure* says that our existence is as light as a breath, "servile to all skyey influences" (3.1.8–9). Macbeth realises, though too late, that his life resembles "a walking shadow"; it is "a tale [...] signifying / Nothing" (5.5.27–28). To listen to this playwright, who so insistently sounds the note of human fragility, is no easy task.

"I will show you fear in a handful of dust," wrote T. S. Eliot in the aftermath of the Great War and under the looming shadow of a still more terrible nightmare less than a generation away (*The Wasteland*, 1.30). This warning is not only a statement about the fear of death. The poet seems to imply that what terrifies us more even than death is the knowledge of the insupportable flimsiness of our experience. In Shakespeare this unwelcome knowledge is ever-present. His Prospero bids farewell to the stage with an ominous reminder that we all "are such stuff as dreams are made on" (*The Tempest* 4.1. 156–157); "stuff" that slips between the fingers, impossible to grasp. In his *Grammars of Creation* George Steiner includes Shakespeare among those authors whose texts can help us understand "the unbearable lightness of being," to use Milan Kundera's famous phrase. Indeed, in our times, haunted as they are by the tragic memory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the existential dimension of Shakespeare's drama has come particularly to the fore. Steiner writes:

Being overwhelms us with its blind, wasteful coercion. It is always 'in excess.' [...] The word Shoah tells of a wind out of blackness (those great winds 'from under the earth' heard by Kafka). We are blown to ash whatever the weight of our hope or the dignity of our pains. Levinas, in his unbroken dialogue with Heidegger's celebration of being argues that only altruism, and the resolve to live for others, can validate and make acceptable the terror of existence. We must transcend being in order to 'be with.' A noble doctrine, but also an evasion. No self-sacrificial motion, no struggle for reparation, goes to the heart of the question. Is there in creation an enormity of irrelevance so far as human life is concerned? Have we no natural place, no at-homeness in the world, being instead unwelcome guests as is proposed in Euripides' *Bacchae*, in Shakespeare's *Lear* and *Timon* or in the death-watch parables of Beckett? (44)

Thus the critic weaves together the fatalistic threads of ancient tragedy, the modern insights provided by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas and the existential void envisioned by the Theatre of the Absurd. Steiner knows of course, but refuses to accept, the conventional theological answer to his question, provided in the Book of Genesis and repeated in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. He implies that the "language games' of religious faith," which name the guilt of the First Parents and attach "unimaginable responsibility" to God's making, make little sense in the face of the world's folly, which dooms even children to die cruel deaths (44). In *Fear and Trembling* Soeren Kierkegaard ironically thanked the false Samaritans who instead of taking care of a neighbour who was "overcome by life's sorrows" and "left behind naked," offered him "the expression, the leaf of the word," with which to "hide his wretchedness" (53–54). However, the philosopher's criticism of those who flee away from harsh truths into the thickets of purely ornamental rhetoric did not include Shakespeare. Kierkegaard pointed to the silence at the heart of the playwright's work; although the bard could say "everything, everything exactly as it is," he never gave verbal expression to the loneliness of the human abandoned by God. Like Kierkegaard, Steiner too implies that Shakespeare was not only well acquainted with the nightmares which cannot be named in words, but left us also a detailed account of all our sleepless and lonely nights.

Shakespeare's universe (which indeed seems infinite and can be said to encompass all of Giordano Bruno's multiple worlds) is pregnant with very much the same terror as fills the characters of Beckett's plays: the terror of uprooted, orphaned and therefore desperately hollow existence, beyond the hope of redemption. This may be the reason why, in order to speak about our fear, our lack of certainty and our longing for words which carry the weight of the world, we return constantly to Shakespeare's texts. Celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death, we take advantage of the moment to speak not only about his world and work, but also about our own, all too "sophisticated," and yet always equally vulnerable and weightless being in the world. In this, Shake-

spere proves to be both of all times, and of our times. “Our contemporary.” Paraphrasing one more great author of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we may say that we always read, as we dream, alone. Indeed, the act of “reading Shakespeare” is not limited to scholarly critical analysis of his texts. As W. H. Auden argued in his lectures, it frequently becomes an existential exercise *par excellence*. The stake in this game is first and foremost the precious moment of self-recognition, which provides us – to use the Pascalian categories taken up by Michael Edwards in *Towards a Christian Poetics* – with the knowledge of human *grandeur* and *misère* (14). Provided, of course, that we dare to respond to the questions posed by the playwright and, instead of explaining away the inherent aporias of his texts or being content with findings shaped by predefined ideological premises, are ready to face that which is given to us “in excess”; that which overflows the horizon of our expectations.

The well-known prophecy expressed in *Julius Caesar* that Shakespeare’s characters will be impersonated by actors from “states unborn” and will speak in “accents yet unknown” has come to pass not only because the plays are so widely translated, but also because they reverberate in so many different idioms of culture: in music, fine arts, popular culture and in politics. But first and foremost, Shakespeare’s plays live and breathe in the theatre. We cannot forget the fact that his texts, written in the “language” of the theatre, were meant to become flesh on the stage. It is not only the written word and the markings on the page of the printed book (which in our times are often replaced by texts read from the computer screen), but the living speech and breath of mortal men which grant these plays their long-lasting popularity. The same holds true for all of Shakespeare’s poetry: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this and this gives life to thee” (Sonnet 18, lines 13–14). The only form of immortality conceivable in this world, as the Ghost of Hamlet’s father seems to indicate, depends on memory.

It has been argued that in *Titus Andronicus*, the very structure of the play compels the audience to think about the inadequacy of poetic language in the face of truly unspeakable suffering. When we see Lavinia’s mutilated body and listen to her inarticulate shrieks, we are not only encouraged to interpret her story with the help of Ovid’s narrative of the ravished Philomel whom merciful gods transformed into a nightingale, but are also made to understand the “rest” of the victim’s pitiful, naked existence which remains when language dies in the depths of human misery. For Shakespeare’s dramatic poetry urges us to move beyond words and rhetoric. In his plays, the resonance of silence, which is the indispensable “rest” of the word and the most precious remainder of speech, combines with the eloquence of countless unknown languages which pass our understanding: the secret infra- and ultra sounds of the living universe.

In *The Tragedy of Hamlet* Claudius wishes his wife to disclose to him the reason of her grief: “There’s matter in these sighs, these profound heaves: / You

must translate.” Claudius’s demand chimes well with his nephew’s observation on the theatrical performance of mourning. Hamlet knows only too well that tears and piteous groans can be used to deceive the spectator when they serve as a sign of feigned distress, but at the same time he fiercely defends his right to articulate his pain in the language of suffering, that is the language of the flesh, not of words:

I know not ‘seems.’  
 ’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother.  
 Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
 Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,  
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
 Nor the dejected ’haviour of the visage  
 Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
 That can denote me truly: these indeed “seem.”  
 For they are actions that a man may play. (1.2.76–86)

This speech not only prepares us for Hamlet’s skilful performance of a fit of madness in Ophelia’s chamber, a “show” which frightens her almost out of her wits, but also discloses Shakespeare’s mastery in employing the multiple layers of signification in theatre, where the character’s speech, apart from communicating, becomes a sign of natural language, and the actor’s body, fashioned into manifold “forms” and “shapes” of grief or joy, can denote genuine passion or feigned sentiment. When the playwright’s words are made flesh on stage, they cut us to the quick and anatomize not only the “actions” which we “may play” to deceive others, but also our most secret thoughts, in which we may be wrong about our own feelings. In the hide-and-seek games of our weightless and meaningless lives we are thus found out by Shakespeare’s theatrical magic. His pithy metaphors remind us that the time in which we live is “out of joint”; our world is out of shape, and our perspective awry.

Shakespeare, in his stubborn insistence on remembering about us, cannot be silenced or satisfied by our countless “revisitings” of his plays. It is now more than fifty years since Jan Kott discovered Shakespeare for us as “our contemporary,” but even half a century has proved insufficient to explore all the dimensions of our turbulent present which we can see reflected in the rear-view mirror of his plays. We still have to decide what we “mean by Shakespeare” and what sense his texts make of our individual stories and public history. The editors of this special issue of *Anglica* are grateful to the contributors for accepting the invitation to delve deeper into the secrets of Shakespeare’s enchanted worlds. The articles collected in this issue represent a wide spectrum of approaches to Shakespeare. They comprise literary and linguistic insights; traditional textual and editorial studies; scrutiny of frequently recurring motifs and description of Shakespeare’s art of character-drawing; as well as politically-committed analyses of Shakespeare

---

as reproduced and recycled in theatrical and cinematic adaptations. While no collection of essays can ever do justice to Shakespeare's "infinite variety," we hope the reader will sense here something of his unrivalled power to provoke, tease and inspire.

Małgorzata Grzegorzewska

## References

- Edwards, Michael. 1984. *Towards a Christian Poetics*. London: Macmillan.
- Kierkegaard, Soeren. 2001. *Fear and Trembling*. Trans. and ed. by Stephen S. Evans and Sylvia Walsh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Steiner, George. 2001. *Grammars of Creation*. London: Faber and Faber.