

INTRODUCTION

EARLY AND LATE MODERN CREATIVITY: USES OF SHAKESPEARE

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Shakespeare is like the world, or life itself. Every historical period finds in him what it is looking for and what it wants to see.

Jan Kott¹

The contributions gathered in this special issue are products of two workshops, organised within the KREAS project (Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions for the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World) at Charles University in Prague, in 2020 and 2021. The wide range of topics is a testament to the power of creativity to inspire reflection, critique and radical reappraisals of works in diverse genres, from fiery theological tracts to canonical plays. As if taking its cue from the great Polish literary critic, Jan Kott, a champion of creative Shakespearean criticism, this issue, focused on Shakespeare and modern uses of his works, traces the manners in which his plays offer a world of such cornucopian fertility that it continues to inspire reflections about our own society and its vulnerabilities, works from across media and centuries, and potent insights into the historical period that engendered it. A hotly contested term, early modernity appears to be an era onto which contemporary anxieties, ideologies and concepts are projected, as can be seen not only from Miguel Ramalheite Gomes's examination of truth claims and tyranny, but also Matthias Riedl's cogent analysis of the power of affect shaping the history of this period.

¹ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Routledge, 1974) 5.

Still more noteworthy is the manner in which the intrinsic plurality of the concept of creativity is treated, implicitly and explicitly, by the articles in this issue. Whether examining protestant firebrands from early modern Germany, an upwardly mobile boy from Stratford, a decidedly eccentric aristocrat, a protestant Irishman from Foxrock, or a contemporary American literary critic, the diverse contributions illustrate from radically different angles the fact that the all-too-human capacity to generate new insights and ideals (and to give the lie to old ones) remains quite undiminished. Moreover, it is clear that creativity can no longer be simply considered a Promethean spark, gifted by the gods to enliven the quotidian business of existence – nor, indeed, does it connote the act of divine “creation” in the manner understood by Chaucer, who was, according to the *OED*, one of the first to have used the word in the English language.² Rather, creativity is now in the focus of national and international policy-makers, as the Warwick Report (2015) on the UK’s “creative industries” attests or, in fact, the KREAS project itself does. This, of course, is nothing new. Far from disregarding the relationship of creativity to commerce and politics, the contributions published here directly engage with the world-shaping power of creative acts.

Perhaps the most pronounced of the current risks facing societies in Europe and beyond are the new forms of populist autocracy and plutocracy. Their originators utilise the power of pathos to spread fear and jingoism, not least through the technological innovations of our own time – innovations which have been designed so as to all but diminish reasonable discussion and critical reflection. Since many political thinkers in early modernity, from La Boétie to Milton, were concerned with the dangers of tyranny, it is hardly surprising that several of the contributions to this issue engage with its various forms, guises and contexts.

These dangers are also very prominent in Shakespeare. In his *Lectures to the Collège de France*, Michel Foucault is particularly attuned to Shakespeare’s engagement with the “problem of the infamy of sovereignty, of the discredited sovereign,” which is, as he suggests, “precisely the problem posed by [Shakespeare’s] royal tragedies,” only without “the sovereign’s infamy ever being theorised. As Foucault concludes, “from Nero [...] down to the little man with trembling hands crowned with forty million deaths, who, from deep in his bunker, asks for two things, that everything above him be destroyed and that he be given

² See, for instance, in “The Parson’s Tale”: “For sothe, synne is in two maneres, outhur it is venial, or deedly synne. Soothly, whan man loveth any creature moore than Jhesu Crist oure Creatour, thanne is it deedly synne.” Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957) 283.

chocolate cakes until he bursts, you have the outrageous functioning of the despicable sovereign.”³ Indeed, Shakespeare often shows this “functioning” from its very inception, when the audience is drawn into complicity with the tyrant through the use of soliloquy, to its inevitably gory end.

Matthias Riedl’s article, “Creativity in the Early Reformation Period: Technology, Society, and the Magic of Language,” opening this issue, demonstrates that it was as much the ecstatic rhetoric and manipulative strategies of early modern reformers, especially Thomas Müntzer and Martin Luther, that fanned the flames of religious dissent and compelled ordinary people to action, as it was the often overemphasized development of the printing press. Rather than treating the inhabitants of the past as statistics driven by the development of a new communication technology, Riedl approaches them as feeling and speaking individuals. By re-examining the frequent claims that it was media technology which fueled early modern social, political, religious, and intellectual revolutions, Riedl draws attention to the immense creativity of individual agents and the people behind the technology – something that clearly resonates with our times too. As he concludes, “[t]he sensuous and intellectual experience of the reformer is real; it is an internal reality, which desires to become an external social reality, through the articulation of experience in symbolic narratives.”

In another engagement with the power of rhetoric, Miguel Ramalheite Gomes in his article “An Imitative Industry: Creating Tyrants after T.” authoritatively illustrates how Stephen Greenblatt’s recent work, *The Tyrant* (2018), offers an oblique critique of the former president of the USA, Donald Trump. Ramalheite Gomes painstakingly reconstructs Greenblatt’s understanding of how Shakespeare uses the crucible of dramatic form to offer a potent critique of political authority – in Shakespeare, after all, the word politician is only ever used pejoratively to signify a disreputable time-server, blind to anything but his own interests. Yet, Shakespeare’s art is one of implication. This is what the doyen of early modern theories of creativity, Philip Sidney, whose arguments inform in one way or another the contributions of Ramalheite Gomes and Sam Gilchrist Hall, shows us: the poet “nothing affirms,” but he “never lieth.”⁴

Martina Pranic’s contribution, “Cavendish’s Clowns: Uses of Wise Folly in Four Plays by Margaret Cavendish,” offers what might be called a *hauntological*⁵

³ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003) 13.

⁴ Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry: or the Defence of Poesy*, ed. R.W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 103.

⁵ The concept of “hauntology” was discussed by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

reading of the persistence of fools in the work of the Restoration writer, scientist, and philosopher, Margaret Cavendish. Cavendish drew on the great tradition of Renaissance folly, immortalized in the works of writers like Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare and Cervantes, long after the fool was banished from the Jacobean stage. At the dawn of the Age of Reason, Cavendish perceived in the liminal figure of the wise fool a character attuned to particularities, or what she describes as “singularities.”⁶ Furthermore, as Pranić shows, Cavendish’s plays not only place great demands upon the reader to imagine her unstageable scenes, but also use the creative form as a laboratory to dissect the gendered nature of the politics, science and drama of the period. Yet, as the article concludes, it was this very gender regime that provided the generative constraints both for Cavendish’s indomitable and idiosyncratic creativity, and her engagement with the fool’s sweet nothings.

James Little’s article, “Samuel Beckett’s Remembrance of Texts Past: Shakespeare, Proust, and Joyce in *Not I* and *That Time*” engages with memory and reading, convincingly proposing a methodological innovation to deal with how writers re-member and mis-remember the works of their forebears. Certain works may haunt a text, without being a clearly identifiable (or intentional) intertext; Little proposes the term *memotext* for such vague stirrings of memory and desire. Little’s own text forces us to confront the possibility that creativity – with the exception of the divine capacity to which Chaucer was referring – does not happen *ex nihilo*, but is, in fact, as much an act of reconstruction, as it is of fashioning the world anew. Might the nexus of understanding a writer’s creativity lie in understanding how they engage with *memotexts* and *intertexts*?

As with Little’s, Gilchrist Hall’s article, “A ‘notable foundation of hearsay:’ Creative Appropriations of Troy in Chaucer, Chapman, and Shakespeare,” elucidates the particularities of Shakespeare’s understanding of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and Homer’s *Iliad*, suggesting that, as a reader, Shakespeare intuitively understood his intertexts’ ironies and ambivalences and re-presented them formally, conceptually and dramatically, relying on his implied audience to discern the subtle shifts of meaning. Whereas Little’s approach employs digital genetic editions to fathom Beckett’s seemingly involuntary allusions to the canon, Gilchrist Hall ultimately focuses on the critical process intrinsic to creativity. And it transpires that Shakespeare could be considered a critic of his own intertexts, according to Ramallete Gomes’s innovative re-definition of the term: “criticism, repeating what was never there, as a means of intervening in history, is imitation in Sidney’s and the Renaissance’s sense, imitating not what happened, but

⁶ Margaret Cavendish, *The World’s Olio* (London: J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655) 71.

creating by addressing previous forms, proposing what is plausible from a reading of the text." Shakespeare, as Gilchrist Hall suggests, amplifies the ironies and ambivalences implicit in his intertexts, in order to unmask the complicity that writers and critics alike have had in glorifying atrocities, such as rape and war.

The issue concludes with an interview with Ewan Fernie about a very recent project happening at the intersection of Shakespeare scholarship and public outreach, "Everything to Everybody," which seeks to give Shakespeare back to the people (of Birmingham, but also the rest of the world) and underline the creative possibilities that places like libraries can have for communities. By seeking to rehabilitate the all-but-forgotten figure of George Dawson, the founder of the Shakespeare Memorial Library in Birmingham, the project engages with a lost civic culture in which artworks, and Shakespeare in particular, were treated with a rare spiritual and moral seriousness, and honoured with a great spirit of openness which pervaded the latter decades of the nineteenth century, a spirit that "Everything to Everybody," through engagement and critique, celebrates.

Yet, another form of civic engagement, which has great consequence for the present moment when these articles were written and the issue compiled, is to be found in Ramalhte Gomes's astute criticism of Greenblatt's peculiar inhibition when it comes to naming one particular tyrant of recent years: Donald Trump. In contrast to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, for whom direct critique of the powers that be would have meant a particularly grisly end, Greenblatt has no such excuse. "Writing about Trump in the US does not get you hanged, drawn and quartered," as Ramalhte Gomes concludes. And if the unfortunate events of the last couple of years have taught us anything, it is surely that it is the capacity of creative works to give us the incentive and the courage to "speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (*King Lear*, V.iii.299).⁷

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⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1997).

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