Why Shakespeare ?

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Why *Shakespeare* ? – Introducing the Question
(Catherine Belsey)

To the degree that Polart concerns itself with interrogation, taking art as a problem, the question of Shakespeare seems in some respects exemplary. Not, of course, that any single body of work could exhaust the issues: Polart is more generously wide-ranging in its concerns than that. But if a poetics of art raises all the questions that concern the status of literary works within the context of the crisis of knowledges that confronts the human sciences, Shakespeare can be seen to pose at least a number of them. Designating a body of work with an iconic and possibly unique status, the name "Shakespeare" invites us to interrogate our own culture, its values and practices, as well as its relation to history, including the history of Shakespeare's own cultural moment, and the subsequent history of the reception of the works. Of all the writers in all the world, why Shakespeare (and why now, still, in the twenty-first century)?

In putting this question on the agenda for the meeting of the European Society for the Study of English in Zaragoza in September 2004, I had some of these questions in mind — and *as* questions, rather than answers. But rather than specify them directly, let me begin with another. What do the following expressions, all in current use in everyday English, have in common: "out of house and home", "make short work of it", "the primrose path", "the green-eyed monster", "make a virtue of necessity", "fool's paradise", "the mind's eye", "tower of strength", "the milk of human kindness", and "the crack of doom"? It would not be far wrong to answer that they are all proverbial. It would be more precise to say they are all quotations from Shakespeare.[1] In some ways these two replies amount to the same thing:

[1] *2 Henry IV*, 2.1.74; *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.6.35; *Hamlet*, 1.3.50; *Othello*, 3.3.166; *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 4.1.60; *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.4.166; *Hamlet*, 1.1.112; *Richard III*, 5.3.12; *Macbeth*, 1.5.17; *Macbeth*, 4.1.117.

Shakespeare is part and parcel of British culture, and not only high culture. Words and phrases he coined are woven into the fabric of everyday life in Britain nearly four centuries after his death. Other writers have exerted an influence, of course, but it is hard to think of another case where students are so regularly astonished to discover that the plays are "full of quotations".

For that reason it is tempting to think of Shakespeare as quintessentially British. And yet other cultures would challenge this national assumption. It is not for me to say how Shakespeare stands in French culture. Certainly, many Germans feel, not entirely without justification, that Shakespeare belongs to them. Quotations from Shakespeare were used to inspire soldiers in the trenches on both sides in the First World War.[2] Nineteenth-century Italian composers made operas out of Shakespeare. In this instance, as elsewhere, appropriation necessarily reworks what it borrows, testifying in the process to a vitality that is open to reinscription. On a similar basis the old Soviet Union made films of Shakespeare that cast the plays in a new light: in 1971 Grigori Kozintsev's *King Lear* brought out the play's exploration of the relation between property and power. Meanwhile, Akira Kurosawa's Japanese *Ran* in 1985 draws on the Noh tradition to foreground the element in Shakespeare's text that links power to performance.[3] Shakespeare is well known in India, though his reputation there suffers from its appropriation for imperialist education in the mission schools. Hollywood loves Shakespeare, as does popular cinema in the UK: there have been at least five films of *Hamlet* since the Second World War.[4] It is hard to believe that any other writer quite possesses this continuing international status, for better or worse. Would *Sophocles in Love* have had the same box-office appeal, I wonder?

If not, why not? That was the question I asked the panel and, indeed, the audience, to consider at ESSE. I was very eager that this should be an interactive event, as far as conditions would allow, on the grounds that I share Polart's commitment to open dialogue. (This is not just liberal: it is also functional. Many of the best ideas have emerged in the course of *dis*agreeing.) I asked the speakers to be provocative and polemical — and brief, so that there was plenty of time for members of the audience to state their views. This was not, it seemed to me, an issue purely for Shakespeare specialists. On the contrary, in different ways it also concerns teachers and students of other literature, as well as cultural critics, cultural historians, analysts of language, and anyone interested in the relationship between art and the society that produces and reproduces it.

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[2] Balz Engler, "Shakespeare in the Trenches", *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 101-11 (p. 107).

[3] Yoko Takakuwa, "(En)Gendering Desire in Performance: *King Lear*, Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, Tadashi Suzuki's *The Tale of Lear*", *Shakespeare and His Contemporaries in Performance*, ed. Edward J. Esche (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 35-49.

[4] Dir. Laurence Olivier (1948); Tony Richardson (1969); Franco Zeffirelli (1990); Kenneth Branagh (1996); Michael Almereyda (2000).

A century ago the question "why Shakespeare?" might have seemed frivolous, because the answer would have been so obvious. One anniversary that has not been widely celebrated this year is the centenary of A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, first published by Macmillan in 1904 and never, as far as I know, out of print since. Steeped in Victorian admiration for Shakespeare's novelistic genius, Bradley did not have to wonder why he singled out these plays: it was self-evident that Shakespearean tragedy demonstrated the timeless truth of human nature in all its rich variety. But since then cultural materialism and various kinds of historicist enquiry have turned some of us into sceptics. Is Shakespeare *really* special, or is it just that we have *made* him special? Could the icon as easily have been Middleton, if an accident of history had not singled out his no more accomplished contemporary? Is Shakespeare actually a black hole, as Gary Taylor argues, sucking in our endless readings and appropriations, but giving back no visible light? Do we really "find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him, or what others have left behind"?[5] Or is there something *there* that interpretation and appropriation work on?

The twentieth century has surely taught us that we cannot hope to uncover a single, timeless essence of any text. This is even more self-evidently the case in drama, where the written text can be no more than a script for performance. Even in the absence of scenery at the Globe, the realisation of the text in performance includes at least visual modes of signification (costume, gesture, movement) as well as aural differences (inflection, the range and contrast of voices). But if drama exists only in performance, which iteration of the play on stage constitutes the "true" one? The very first? Or a later, better rehearsed rendering? Or perhaps "truth" is to be found not in the past of Shakespeare's own moment at all, but in a brilliant modern interpretation? Whichever we might choose, the ephemerality of all performance throws into relief the impossibility of capturing the one "true" production, laying hold of it to uncover a *something* that distinguishes Shakespeare from Middleton — or Sophocles, or Molière.

Does it follow that there are no texts, but only readings or performances, a series of interpretations located in history? Should we conclude from the impossibility of arriving at a single, definitive meaning that "Shakespeare doesn't mean", as Terence Hawkes puts it: instead "*we* mean by Shakespeare"?[6] Not necessarily. The works of Shakespeare and Middleton, or Sophocles and Molière *are* distinguishable. The idea that the meaning of a work comes exclusively from "outside", from directors, actors, audiences, or readers, would surely leave us unable to tell the difference between *Hamlet* and *Antigone*, or between *King Lear* and *King Kong*, come to that. This is not a question yet of value; at the level of plot alone, knowing

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[5] Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London: Hogarth, 1990 [1989]), 410-11.

[6] Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992), 3.

each, we should probably not mistake any one for any of the others. Is that difference, then, identifiable as a *something* inherent in Shakespeare, and if so, is that the place to look in order to account for Shakespeare's iconic status? Or is it, rather, since difference is not a positive quality, but purely differential, that difference itself is what solicits a relation between a signifying object and an interpreting subject? And is it that *relationship* between text and reading that generates an understanding, whether old or new, which is where iconicity emerges?

"Why Shakespeare?" seemed to me to include the possibility of raising all those problems, without obliging us to tackle any particular one. In the interest of dialogue, I approached three speakers who would come at the question from distinct perspectives, and on the basis of very different involvements with Shakespeare. Moreover, I positively incited them to take issue with one another. Professor Andreas Höfele is Director of the Shakespeare Library at Munich University and President of the Deutsche-Shakespeare-Gesellschaft. He is a Shakespeare specialist, though in no sense a narrow one. He has published widely on Shakespeare, but also on parody and literary change in the late nineteenth century. In addition, he is an established novelist. Dr Julia Thomas, my colleague from the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory in Cardiff, specialises in the relation between the visual and the written in the nineteenth century. She has already published *Victorian Narrative Painting* and her *Pictorial Victorians* has just appeared. She is currently writing a book on Victorian illustrations of Shakespeare. Professor Claire Joubert is a theorist whose work is normally focused right outside the Shakespeare industry. She is head of the Department of English Literary Studies at the University of Paris 8, Vincennes à Saint-Denis, where she also directs the research programme. She has published widely on twentieth-century literature, including a book, *Lire le féminin*, on Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield and Jean Rhys. I asked them to address the question, "why Shakespeare?" in that order, from their distinct perspectives, focusing on any aspect or implication of the question they chose, and to put a case for about 15 minutes each. Then I gave them an opportunity to comment on each other's positions. And finally, I opened the debate to the audience.

Three speakers, three positions. Reductively in my crude summaries, for Andreas Höfele, if the project is cultural history, why centre on Shakespeare? Answer, because what we find in him is aesthetic energy. For Julia Thomas, Shakespeare's alleged greatness is no more than culturally contingent: it suited the nineteenth century to reinvent him; we reinvent him differently. For Claire Joubert, Shakespeare's texts are *critical* because they can be reinvented for radicalism as well as conservatism. Shakespeare represents the poetic possibility of alterity.

While the speakers exceeded expectation not only in their individual sophistication, but also in their difference from each other, the audience joined in beyond anything I could have hoped for. If the discussion did not exhaust the possibilities, that is perhaps because they are inexhaustible. I do not imagine there could be a single, final answer to the question, but it would

be most gratifying if the publication of the position papers on the Polart website were to enlist further interventions.

Renewable Energy
(Andreas Höfele)

We all know the scene in *Macbeth* where the hero, though keen on becoming king is not so keen on murdering Duncan, and has to be spurred on by his wife to do it. "If we should fail." he says; to which she replies: "We fail."

Editors have run the whole gamut of punctuation on these two simple words. "We fail" full stop (and that's that).

"We fail" exclamation mark (so what!).

"We fail" question mark (what do you mean 'fail'?).

"We" dash "fail" question mark (what a preposterous idea!).

I was reminded of this little marvel of ambiguity as I was trying to come up with a suitable response to the question "Why Shakespeare?" It occurred to me that these two words could be read in as many different ways as well, and that it would probably be a good idea to get some sense of what the question actually was before attempting to answer it. Cannily, our honoured hostess, Catherine Belsey, has chosen not to supply her question with a verb, thus giving it the broadest possible scope. Seemingly straightforward, "Why Shakespeare?" not only allows for an infinite variety of answers ranging from the laconic "why not" or "why indeed" to the more elaborate kind of statement expected of the members of this panel; but it also allows itself to be perceived as several different questions.

One way of reading "Why Shakespeare?" would be as an invitation to look into the question of historical causality. What are the causes – aesthetic, ideological, social or economic – that have gone into the making and ensured the cultural persistence of "Shakespeare". Why did he become, and why has he remained, what Michael Bristol has called "Big-Time Shakespeare" – 'big time' both in the sense of Bakhtinian *longue durée* and in the more mundane terms of a Hollywood-dominated cultural industry.

Another way to read "Why Shakespeare?" is as a summons to clarify our own reasons for "doing Shakespeare" as academic critics and teachers. This question is, of course, not entirely unconnected to the previous one. Its drift varies considerably according to what each of us take to be Shakespeare's role in our contemporary environment. "Why Shakespeare?" becomes quite a different question if we assume that there is a lot – perhaps even too much – of Shakespeare going round, or not much at all, perhaps even too little. Do we think of Shakespeare as an overpowering cultural force of well-nigh hegemonial status reinforced by a hyperactive critical industry producing several thousand new titles every year? Or do we see him as an

endangered species, a doddery oldtimer preserved in his cultural niche while the global bandwagon has moved on to Harry Potter?

There is a case to be made for either of these scenarios. If we subscribe to the first, our response to "Why Shakespeare?" will probably exhibit a certain degree of defensiveness, if to the second, a dose of missionary zeal. My guess would be that the more narrowly we focus on academia – and on the discipline of Eng. Lit. within the academy, and on the field of Renaissance Studies within that discipline, and on Shakespeare Studies within that field – the more Shakespeare will seem to dominate the scene, almost to the extent of blocking out everything else. "Why Shakespeare?" may thus very well turn into "Why *always* Shakespeare?" and not Marlowe, Middleton, Jonson, Fletcher and the rest. Typically, the view that there might be too much Shakespeare going round is often expressed by Shakespeareans themselves, people who have actively contributed to Shakespeare scholarship and persist in doing so. Not infrequently, the complaint that there may be too much Shakespeare is presented as a contribution to Shakespeare Studies. The last chapter of Gary Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare* is a prominent case in point. So is Ania Loomba's essay in the volume *Alternative Shakespeares* Mark II. Or take the lesser known essay by Elizabeth Hanson "Against a Synecdochic Shakespeare" to which I will return in a moment. I suspect you have to be a Shakespearean yourself and afflicted with the kind of tunnel vision that goes with the job to convince yourself that the Bard is of vital concern to the contemporary world at large. Even if advertising agencies feel they can count on consumers to recognize a pensive young male staring at a skull as Hamlet, this hardly means that Shakespeare is a powerful presence 'permeating' our culture. We live in a flattened, de-hierarchized cultural landscape where megastars run in the dozens.

Being a Shakespearean of sorts myself and as prone to tunnel vision as the next person, I want to spend the remaining 9 minutes of my talk answering the question "Why Shakespeare?" by responding defensively to the notion that there is actually too much Shakespeare going round.

Elizabeth Hanson expressed that opinion succinctly in a recent (well, fairly recent) essay entitled "Against a Synecdochic Shakespeare". Her argument is this. Although "scholars of English Renaissance Drama have […] come to identify their object of study as an instance of 'culture' rather than 'literature' […], this significant change in professional assumptions […] has not seriously challenged the overwhelming centrality of Shakespeare to the endeavour." This "ongoing […] Shakespeare-centrism is unjustifiable in a criticism that purports to explicate the culture of early modern England rather than just its highest aesthetic achievements."

Hanson clearly has a point. If our critical agenda is set by what Stephen Greenblatt has termed a "poetics of culture"; if, to cite Barbara Hodgdon, the aim of our "interventionary analysis" is to show "how social relations of power are constituted, contested and changed in cultural practice", then we must indeed ask "Why *always* Shakespeare?" If collecting

and assessing data about early modern culture is what criticism is all (or mainly) about, the privileging of Shakespeare over all the other writers of the period – often deplored, never amended – is indefensible: a distortion, almost an act of methodological bad faith under the New Historicist dispensation. Due to the gravity of a single author, it seems, the 'cultural turn' is turned against itself, inadvertently perpetuating a pattern described by Peter Womack: "[Shakespeare's] age *annotates* him: it is not so much that Shakespeare appears as a part of Elizabethan culture, but rather that Elizabethan culture appears as a part of Shakespeare." Although Womack's observation refers to the Shakespeare critics of the later 18th century, the spectre of a pattern established by this very very 'Old Historicism' apparently still haunts the New. There is a broad consensus that it is a good thing, or even indeed a necessary thing, to 'historicize' Shakespeare. But are we equally happy with the 'Shakespearicizing' of history?

The degree of one's discontent with this state of affairs will depend on the degree of one's commitment to a culturalist agenda. While the Old-Historicist model of literature as foreground and 'culture' as its more or less relevant background is now generally seen to be outdated, its simple inversion seems to me equally questionable. And here I come to my defensive part, asking: Do we really want to treat dramatic texts as nothing but "bundles of historical or cultural content" (a formulation I'm borrowing from Mark Rasmussen) – "bundles of historical or cultural content" whose purpose for us as critics is to convey as authentic an image as possible of the culture in which they originated? Are we only looking for documentary value in these texts, their capacity to 'instantiate' an always already prior order of the social, the ideological, the political?

You won't be surprised to hear that my answer is no. If 'doing Shakespeare' is a justifiable activity – and I think it is –, the justification must ultimately be sought in something that is specific to Shakespeare, specific to the fuzzy-edged, fluctuating body of work we subsume under his name. Modifying Stephen Greenblatt's influential metaphor, I would like to call that something not the social but the aesthetic energy of Shakespearean drama.

A known associate of essentialist humanism – and thus complicit in just about every critical malpractice known to man – the aesthetic, for at least two decades now, has had a disastrously bad press. Even to acknowledge its existence, let alone deem it worthy of serious investigation, may elicit anything from amused condescension to icy gusts of disapproval. I suggest we overcome such Pavlovian reflexes and admit the study of what distinguishes the literary text from other texts back into the happy family of permissible critical activities. I suggest furthermore that we don't be unduly discouraged by the proposition that discussing early modern texts in terms of 'the literary' or 'the aesthetic' is a glaring anachronism because the age itself (so it is alleged) knew as little of these categories as Newton did of quantum physics. The same could be said of history, ideology and most other terms in our critical toolbox: they either didn't exist at all or meant quite different

things at the time. And besides, the poetics of the period tell quite a different story. The attempts of Puttenham, Sidney and others to determine the forms and operation of 'poesy' couldn't have been more specifically 'literary' or 'aesthetic' even though they lacked these terms. These early modern theorists were particularly interested in the specific energy of poetry. This, with the Greeks, they conceived as twofold: the power to move, to incite and transmit emotion, and the power to evoke mental images. *Energeia* the one, *enargeia* the other. An engagement with this dual energy – with the emotive and cognitive potential of the text and with the complex verbal arrangements that produce it – is close enough to what I still perceive as central to our job today, both as critics in general and as Shakespeareans in particular.

By this I don't mean that we shouldn't be tracing "the circulation of social energy" as well or that we should neglect the imbrication of the aesthetic with the political. The problem with the term "social energy", and with the agenda it endorses, is that it tends to elide the aesthetic from which it actually derives in the first place. Greenblatt, as he points out, borrows his definition of energy not from physics, but directly from Puttenham, where it denotes the capacity of certain poetic techniques to "inwardly work [...] a stirre of the mynde." I'm not for effacing the social, but for making sure that the specifically literary energy "to stir the mind" does not get buried under it. This energy appears to be infinitely renewable – most astonishingly so in Shakespeare.

Twenty years ago on a hot afternoon of the 1984 International James Joyce Conference in Frankfurt, I heard Jacques Derrida say: "Just as much as we are reading Joyce, Joyce is reading us." I must confess, this made little sense to me then, labouring as I was under the pedantic notion of the sequential order of time. However, I've since come to realize how much sense it actually makes not only for Joyce, but also, and perhaps even more, for Shakespeare. This is not, repeat *not*, to say that he is timeless. But neither does it mean, as Terence Hawkes thinks it does, that what people see in him is completely arbitrary and entirely of their own deluded making, that his text is, in Gary Taylor's words, nothing but "a blank cheque". What it does mean is that Shakespeare's plays offer a rich – and to this date unexhausted – potential for being reinvented; a potential due to their captivating simulations of life, and the irresistibly powerful language that sustains them ("unassailably great writing", as Katherine Duncan-Jones had the audacity to call it about a month ago on a similar panel in Stratford). Such greatness is not to be taken for granted. It is not an inert, trans-historical given, but rather the effect of permanent re-negotiations defining the terms of the poetic, the literary, the aesthetic. Shakespeare has stood up remarkably well to the changing intellectual and aesthetic fashions of the last century. To New-Critical modernists his works signalled a complex unity of design and character; to deconstructive postmodernists, rifts and fissures and the dissolution of the subject. I won't open yet another can of worms by saying that re-inventing Shakespeare always implies a re-invention of the human as well. What I will say by way of conclusion is that "synecdochic

Shakespeare" may not be such a bad thing after all, if we think of it not in terms of documentary representation, but of the cultural productivity and suggestiveness of a richly complex texture of words, words, words.

Who will continue to read us, just as we will continue to read – and thus re-invent – him ?

Why – dash – Shakespeare – exclamation mark![7]

Victorian Shakespeares
(Julia Thomas)

Andreas began his paper with a reference to the famous scene in which Lady Macbeth responds to her husband's words, "If we should fail". Her ambiguous reply, "We fail", could itself be read as an example of what Andreas calls Shakespeare's "irresistibly powerful language", a textual complexity and richness special to Shakespeare that keeps editors in business and allows for Shakespeare's reinvention. My reading of these lines, however, is rather different. At the risk of "Shakespearicizing history", I shall look at how the question "Why Shakespeare?" was articulated and answered in the nineteenth century. The Victorians, of course, did not formulate their idea of Shakespeare's greatness from scratch. As Michael Dobson has argued, Shakespeare was appropriated in eighteenth-century Britain as a distinctly national poet.[8] In the nineteenth century, however, Shakespeare acquired other meanings that were specific to that historical period, meanings that tell us something about the dominant and emergent values of this moment. They also tell us something about Shakespeare. I want to argue that the construction of a Victorian Shakespeare exposes the way in which his

[7] References :
Michael Bristol. *Big-Time Shakespeare*. London: Routledge, 1996.
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Mark Rasmussen. *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.
Terence Hawkes. *Meaning by Shakespeare*. London: Routledge, 1992.

[8] Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Authorship, 1660-1769* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992)

eminence is historically constituted and politically motivated. Shakespeare is the product of different cultural moments. There are no essential characteristics or aesthetic values that determine his greatness. Not even in his words.

The plurality of Lady Macbeth's "We fail" is the result not so much of Shakespeare's remarkable capacity for ambiguity, but of an historical focus on this particular phrase. Of course the words are there on the page and, as such, always have the potential for multiple meanings. But our very stress on them and how they are punctuated, our recognition of their ambiguity, even our bothering to pause on them in the first place, depend on certain cultural assumptions about the play. This ambiguity received virtually no attention from editors until the great eighteenth-century actress Sarah Siddons tried different ways of delivering the lines in her numerous performances, alternating between a resigned "we fail.", a disbelieving "we fail?", and an indignant "we fail!". Siddons had an investment in making the role of Lady Macbeth more prominent and her emphasis on these words was part of an increasing critical interest in Lady Macbeth that focused in particular on the extent to which she influenced her husband's actions. "We fail" could be said with the voice of a dominatrix, intent on controlling her husband; or it might be voiced in the tone of a woman who is willing to do anything to appease her man. Central to this critical interest was the idea that Shakespeare's figures were more than that: they were personalities with feelings, emotions and inner thoughts.

The fleshing out of the lives of Shakespeare's *dramatis personae* that occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might be testament to Shakespeare's skill in writing about human emotions, his proficiency in producing what Andreas has referred to as "captivating simulations of life". But the lengths that Victorian critics went to in order to emphasise this "simulation of life" suggest that it is far from intrinsic to the plays. To take the extreme but perhaps most famous example, the Victorian writer Mary Cowden Clarke supplemented Shakespeare's plays with stories of the childhood of his heroines. Anticipating Freudian psychoanalysis, Clarke's tales accounted for the protagonists' actions as adults. Her Lady Macbeth is doomed from the start. She is born to a mother who yearns for a boy and is only reconciled to her little daughter when she sees her kill a moth. Unfortunately, this is also the moment at which the mother dies, leaving the child in the care of a kindly but ineffectual father. Left to her own devices and with no proper guidance, it is no wonder that the young Lady Macbeth develops an unhealthy interest in pick-axes, cross-bows and other weapons of mass destruction.

The creation of life stories extended not only to Shakespeare's heroines, but also to Shakespeare himself, where it played a significant part in the construction of his greatness. The Victorians filled the gaps in Shakespeare's biography with detailed accounts of what his life must have been.

This nineteenth-century engraving, which was sold as a print, shows Shakespeare at home in Stratford and reciting Hamlet to his eager family. His son, holding the door ajar, is on the verge of leaving when he is gripped by the narrative. Shakespeare's two daughters, spellbound, lean affectionately against their father and Ann Hathaway looks up from her sewing.

Shakespeare's elevated status in the Victorian period was not simply reflected in pictures like this but was constituted by them. During this century Shakespeare provided the main literary source for paintings and engravings, a factor that had as much to do with the generic diversity of the plays as with any aesthetic values. In a burgeoning visual and print culture, it was no accident that the greatest author could be accommodated in all of the main artistic genres. History painting, widely regarded as the highest form of art, looked to Julius Caesar and Henry V; landscapes were peopled with tiny Lears and Macbeths; and tragically beautiful Ophelias and Juliets were the mainstay of Victorian portraits and Keepsake annuals. In the case of genre painting, which came into its own in this period, the walls of the Royal Academy in London were inundated with Rosalinds, dressed not entirely convincingly in boys' clothes, and Falstaffs being bundled into buck baskets.

By making Shakespeare so visually prominent, these images participated in turning him into an icon. But his status was far from unproblematic. The Victorians themselves were troubled by the question "why Shakespeare?" In 1864 a writer in a British journal asked precisely this question. How is it, he enquired, that no two critics can agree on what it is that constitutes Shakespeare's greatness, yet scholars in all civilised nations concede that Shakespeare is a genius? Even within the space of this article, however, Shakespeare's universal appeal is undermined. According to this writer, not all of the so-called "civilised nations" are, in fact, as civilised as Britain. While praise is heaped on Germany for its spontaneous and

enthusiastic love of Shakespeare, and a more muted approval is reserved for Italy, which apparently found it difficult to believe that any author could surpass Dante, by the time the critic gets to France, the knives are out: "The French", he writes, "worshipping in their porcelain temple of pseudo-classic art, swung their censers so vehemently, and raised so thick a cloud of incense to their petty idols, that they contrived, for something like a century, to veil from Europe the greatness of Shakespeare".[9]

Perhaps it is no surprise that the response to "Why Shakespeare?" here is inseparable from geographic and imperial determinants. But there are other, more implicit, answers to this question. As this critic goes on to argue, Shakespeare has his "faults" – his language, in particular, is too sexually explicit – but he is nowhere near as bad in this regard as his contemporaries. It was possible to clean up Shakespeare, to rehabilitate him in the light of middle-class values.

And it is precisely this rehabilitation that is undertaken in the engraving of Shakespeare at home with his family. Despite the odd lute and piece of antique furniture, Shakespeare's home is the ideal Victorian home that was propagated in so many images and texts of the time. By locating this image in the past, however, and a past that is associated with a real historical figure, the values and interests it constructs are to a certain extent camouflaged. This picture gives the impression that the meanings of the family and its concomitant gender roles have always existed. It makes these mid-nineteenth-century domestic ideologies appear transhistorical and transparent, less like an ideal and more like a truthful, mimetic representation. In fact, when this image was reproduced in a popular magazine the editor asserted that "Without any positive knowledge on the subject, we may believe the truth of the representation in the engraving. It is, moreover, quite possible that had some visible or invisible photographer been present to take an impression of the scene, this may have been the truthful one."[10]

And if Shakespeare was a domestic god, Lady Macbeth was a domestic goddess. In the mid-nineteenth century the figure of a demonic and grasping villainess was rejected in favour of a softer, more feminine heroine. Commentators frequently drew attention to the Macbeths' happy marriage and the confidences they shared. Lady Macbeth became a type of angel in the house, a woman whose very existence was defined by her husband and whose ambition, it was argued, was solely for him. By the time that the Victorian actress Ellen Terry appeared in the role in 1888 this idea of Lady Macbeth was cultural currency. Terry played up the tender and feminine side of the protagonist to such a degree that, according to one theatregoer, it was hard to imagine her guilty of any crime at all. The actress began her

[9] "Shakespeare", *London Quarterly Review* (April 1864): 201-34, p. 201.

[10] "Shakespeare and his Family. A Sketch by the Editor", *Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art* (January 1866): 128-129, p. 128.

performance by taking out and kissing a miniature portrait of her husband. After proclaiming that she would dash her baby's brains out rather than give up her deadly plan, this Lady Macbeth was seen to wipe an involuntary tear from her eye.

The Victorians appropriated Shakespeare as one of their own and this appropriation went hand in hand with his canonisation. His greatness was culturally contingent, produced by a complex network of representations – images, commentaries, performances, editions – that read the playwright and his plays in the light of middle-class ideologies. This is not to say that these ideologies went uncontested, or that the Victorian response to the question "Why Shakespeare?" was ever monolithic or transparent. What I *would* say, however, is that if Shakespeare's value is constituted at different historical moments then these moments allow for plural, even contradictory, Shakespeares. While the Victorians cleaned up Shakespeare's act, our own culture has made him decidedly dirty, with recent films showing drug-taking Romeos and Juliets, nymphomaniac Ophelias, and the bard himself indulging in extra-marital affairs. Shakespeare, it seems, is not the stable, self-evident or fixed signifier that the question "Why Shakespeare?" implies. If we do not take account of his multiple and fluid identities, if we do not ask those other questions – what Shakespeare? Whose Shakespeare? – then, in the words of Lady Macbeth, "we fail".

English or the Language of Shakespeare
(Claire Joubert)

Why Shakespeare ?

The question is certainly provocative, and playfully so. It is also a little mischievous, as it prepares for us the trap of the question-demanding-an-answer format on the typically answer-less issues that concern the anthropological. I have embraced the challenge for the joy that comes in such moments of re-problematising: Catherine Belsey's question points to the stiff-jointed habits of enquiry which keep us in old ruts, and jolts us out into a cheering comedy of problematics, to find freedoms from the reifications of thinking. The answer to such a question on the questions that constitute the Humanities, like that given to the Sphinx by Oedipus, can only be: *man*. The human, *as* the ever inchoative question which makes up the human. Not an answer therefore but, to use a term Andreas was interested in, the "energy" of questioning. The historicity of meaning.

Rather than look for an answer therefore, what I want to do here is take the measure of the mischievous question's critical power. In particular I want to be most attentive to the potential that is released when it exposes to view the other trap which we have laid out for ourselves: when it reminds us of just how impossibly rigid and reductive are the bare dualistic terms in which much of our contemporary debate on value is conducted, locked as it is between the *all* of dogmatic absolute and the dizzy *nothing* of relativism. In

this case, between Shakespeare's distinction as intrinsic, essential quality, and as historical fluke. This we can take as a simple expression of the deadlock which post-Theory anguish leaves us with – once we have agreed both on the need for general historicisation and on the dangers of linguistic scepticism. But Harold Bloom has warned us: "This is the dilemma that confronts partisans of resentment," he writes – "resentment" here meaning anything that tries to historicise the "universal judgement" of "aesthetic value" – "either they must deny Shakespeare's unique eminence (a painful and difficult matter), or they must show why and how history and class struggle produced just those aspects of his plays that have generated his centrality in the Western Canon." He goes on to hope: "Shakespeare's eminence is, I am certain, the rock upon which the School of Resentment must at last founder".[11] It is because such an alternative is an unbearable denial of the political that we need to find ways to retrieve the full complexity of the issue of value which the poem opens out, and which such dualism sets out to mask. Bloom uses the celebration of the "poem", as "the *isolate selfhood*'s aesthetic value" [emphasis mine], to block the critical play of inter-subjectivity in discourse, and to legitimate radical authoritarianism. But a dilemma is always a screen problem. Our aim must be to identify what the stakes are about literary and cultural value that are being screened when Shakespeare is hijacked for the polemic clash of aesthetics *vs* politics, literature *vs* culture – words *vs* history, or value.

In the same way, and I should make this clear from the start, I can more or less say that I don't know the first thing about Shakespeare – and indeed I owe my non-specialist's place on this panel to this very reason; but I am, as a poetician, interested in not secondarities maybe, but the discursive alterity of origin. In the poem's trans-subjective and trans-historical power to traverse the textual icon with the historicity of semantic value. Shakespeare interests me as what Mallarmé has called a *poëme critique*[12]: a corpus of texts that is discourse enough, poem enough, to retain its discursive power as question, in the present of enunciation, with each reading, each performance, and each translation. Shakespeare is "our contemporary"[13] less because he has kept his value for us, maybe, as because the question of his literary value is a crux for our contemporary debates – both on the most practical of our issues within the discipline of English, and on their widest political implications. As test case for all contemporary thinking about literature, he draws us not in the timelessness of the canon, nor in his own century, but to the edge of our own

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[11] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1994, p. 25.

[12] Stéphane Mallarmé, while characterising the outbreak of the "vers libre" and the prose poem in previous decades, in the bibliography of his volume *Divagations* (*Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 1576).

[13] Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1965), London, Routledge, 1997.

subjective and social becoming.[14] He is our question (one of our questions): both a question for us, and the question of what we are. This again is what I want to gain from Catherine Belsey's question and from this debate: to measure the force of Shakespeare's poetic criticality, as the discussion of his work throws into relief our own epistemological and political stakes. Why Shakespeare? Because he is, as poem, not the unshakeable bedrock of our culture but one of its live critical forces. Because he presents the question of the discursive historicity of value to our theories and to our experience of culture.

And indeed one thing is clear: the three us, with our very different standpoints, have identified the same issue as carried in the Shakespeare question for us now: the issue of literary value. And the same sensitive spot touched upon: the current anxiety about the cultural turn, within English studies (with their interwoven concerns for language, literature and culture), but also far beyond that. The proposal for a poetics of culture which I want to present here is put forward with the urgency of several interrelated epistemological and political issues in mind: not only the rivalries of cultural studies, literary criticism and literary theory within English, but also the political relevance of English as a critical discipline – in a global context where the politics of language(s) are taking on such a determining role as geopolitical debates are being recast in cultural and intercultural terms. My position is that a rethinking of culture through the cricitality of the poem is sorely needed to counteract the absolutes of identity politics and, for instance, the freezing of political becoming in scenarios of civilisation clashes. And the case of Shakespeare is a godsend if we want to observe this critical interplay of cultural with literary value: with the force of semantic and axiological historicity in language.

For, contrary to Ben Jonson's pronouncement, what we now consider as the classic among classics was not always "for all time", as Julia has reminded us: Shakespeare's works had to die in the eyes of English culture before he could be reinvented as the Bard, and cultural core of English nationhood. It is as this plain instance of the historicity of value that he makes visible the discursive process through which a literary work becomes of value to a society, to the point of incarnating its political identity, and trans-historically so – which is the opposite of eternally. The question is that of the dynamic tie which binds together language, art and the political to make up the cultural life of peoples. My hypothesis is this: it is *as poem* – as

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[14] Contrary to Bloom's view that "he renders you anachronistic because he *contains* you". Bloom's canonised Shakespeare is, characteristically, made into a totality that guarantees against criticality: "you cannot subsume him. You cannot illuminate him with a new doctrine, be it Marxism or Freudianism or Demanian Linguistic skepticism. Instead he will illuminate the doctrine, not by prefiguration but by postfiguration as it were: all of Freud that matters most is *there in Shakespeare already*, with a persuasive critique of Freud besides. […] *Coriolanus* is a far more powerful reading of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* [sic] than any Marxist reading of *Coriolanus* could hope to be" (*op. cit*., p. 25, emphasis mine).

poëme critique – that Shakespeare is of such cultural value. Not a product of culture, as in Julia's terms, but a producer of culture, and of nation – of nation-*s*. Not the product of 16th century England, or even of the other periods that might have reinvented him, but a producer of the subjective and political present, in the 16th century *and* in the 18th, the 19th centuries, and singularly, in the decades since the creation of English as university discipline. As poem, he is the producer of a critical people: the public that his works invent. Not a positive group of individuals, but a deictic complex of subjective and inter-subjective modes. What Deleuze and Guattari have called an *agencement collectif d'énonciation*. There is much paradoxical de-historicisation in the historicist concept of culture, and to me this stems from ignoring the discursive activity of the poem when we try to theorise the relations of history to language, and to account for linguistic cultural objects. Shakespeare is *our* history, rather than just *history*, because history only ever makes sense in the discursive present. History happens through the historicity of language, which the poetic keeps on its toes – because (this is in answer to Andreas) a poem is what is most *discourse* and least *words* in language. This is why art is not a part of culture, along with all other types of artefacts, but its critical "energy".

In the same way, a (non-historicist) poetics of culture will argue that it is not English that makes the British people, but, quite literally, "the language of Shakespeare". Not the English language, but the poem, as historicity of English national culture. Mother poems, rather than a mother tongue, as the critical, counter-nationalistic forces which drive the historicity of cultural identity. This is in discussion with F. R. Leavis, who interests us here for many reasons: not only because our worry about the state of English (both as epistemological practice *and* international communication language) is still framed within much of the coordinates that he established for the discipline, despite the advent of literary theory and now of anti-theory ; but also because of his energetic, but painfully misguided attempt to critique, and check, the modern modes of mass culture, by promoting the cultural force of literature as "living principle" at work in language.[15] At this juncture, it matters to us to identify where Leavis goes wrong in his account of the "creative" intrication of language, literature and culture, and what it is that deadens his critical intention. Anti-aestheticism was the motivation for his disciplined attention to the particulars of poetic language, considered not as collections of words but as complex verbal wholes whose organic character implied their continued "living force today". His central admiration of Shakespeare's continuing "creativity" was instrumental in making him the keystone of our canon for the discipline and for British culture – and this is another, by no means insignificant reason for "why Shakespeare". But it was also instrumental in the evolution of the concept of poetic organicity into the

[15] F. R. Leavis, *The Living Principle. "English" as a Discipline of Thought*, Oxford, O.U.P., 1975.

nationalistic, counter-historical, and radically anti-critical concept which made him eventually so enraged and so powerless in front of the modernity of culture. Shakespeare was organicity itself for Leavis both because he belonged to an age that hadn't yet suffered the "dissociation of sensibility" and was still rooted in the organic link with nature, and because of his essential genius. This allowed, at the end of the day, to hold as unproblematic, and indeed *natural*, the questions of linguistic creativity and of the artistic trans-subjectivity which makes the life of a culture. The recourse to Shakespeare decriticised the issue of the link between literature and culture, and glorified the rootedness of his verbal creations as the basic safety-catch that ensured the wholeness of English culture as natural totality – against, for instance, the degeneracy which Joyce's multilinguistic inventions threaten English language and culture with, in what was to become *Finnegans Wake*.[16] Leavis's absolutist outlook cannot accommodate the cultural criticality of Joyce's poetics of the people, which undoes the rhetoric of both colonialism and the various voices of Irish nationalism as it explores the alterity of the English language, working at the voices of Dublin and beyond that at the whole discursive and prosodic history of Europe; "forging", as Stephen Dedalus puts it, "the uncreated conscience of [his] race" as critical people. Shakespeare is used as absolute to safeguard against the becoming-people that is opened up by such modernist politics of enunciation.

This is why if we want to keep the *poëme critique* in Shakespeare active for us, and the concept of culture a critical one in contemporary society, we need not only to steer the theorising of culture carefully away from the historicism that will dilute the question of art and discursive value in history, but also to disengage the theorising of the poetic from the reduction to textualism, be it aesthetic, semiotic or organic. We need to keep the space open with the critique of the mutually-exclusive totalities of language and history, and find ways to tap the subjectivising, socialising force of the poem as the modernity of culture.

One impressive instance of Shakespeare's cultural criticality is the striking role he has had as catalyst in several major cultural upheavals in Europe – in the massive translation campaign of his plays and poetry which fuelled Germany's cultural drive towards its own national unity in the 18th and 19th centuries, but also, contrary to the opinion of the critic Julia was talking about funnily enough, in the determination of France's new sense of national identity after the Revolution. It was, in Stendhal's terms, a matter of

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[16] See Leavis's opposition of the two modes of linguistic invention, Shakespeare's, organic, and Joyce's painfully artificial and dead, in "Joyce and 'The Revolution of the Word'", in *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher. Essays and Papers by F.R. Leavis* (posth.), G. Singh ed., London, Chatto and Windus, 1982, 121-128. This opposition is the opportunity for Leavis to express some of his most explicit nationalistic and anti-critical views of language, literature and culture as he unfurls the concept of organicity back to its essentialist, natural roots.

Romantic Shakespeare against Classical Racine for the invention of a new cultural order,[17] and Vigny, who translated several plays, wrote that translating Shakespeare required a knowledge not of the English language, but of "le Shakespeare", as a language apart: it is "the language of Shakespeare", as alterity at work within English, which was bringing France to its own cultural modernity.[18] Victor Hugo underpins the *Préface de Cromwell*, his manifesto for Romantic drama (1827), with the Shakespearean reference, and it is the occasion of his own son's translation of the complete works (1864) which leads him to compose the 1864 essay *William Shakespeare* as buttress in his canon-making pronouncements about Romanticism's new contract of literature with society. Rarely was French culture more sharply present to its own cultural and political becoming than when worked at with the force of this alterity – which is not historical, not linguistic but, specifically, poetic.

Rather than a *problem*, the state of English – academic discipline and national and international language alike – can be a problematics for us if we let the question of the poem analyse our thinking about language and history, culture and art. The poetic trans-culturality of Shakespeare's plays is powerful enough to turn a dilemma into the infinite anthropological possibility of value.

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[17] Stendhal, *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823 et 1825), Paris, Pauvert, 1965.
[18] Alfred de Vigny, *Le Journal d'un poète*, [année 1828], *Œuvres complètes*, t. II, Gallimard , « Pléiade », 1948, p. 1099) : « DE SHAKESPEARE. – Il ne suffit pas d'entendre l'anglais pour comprendre ce grand homme, il faut entendre le Shakespeare, qui est une langue aussi. Le cœur de Shakespeare est une langue à part. »

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