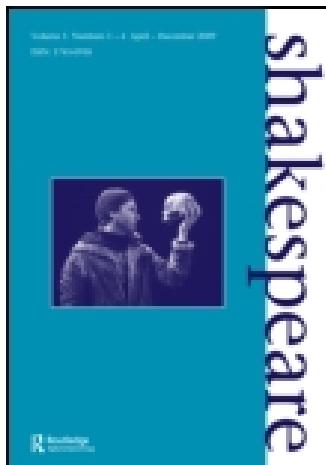


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Shakespeare and the uses of the past: Critical approaches and current debates

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CRITICAL DEBATES AND REVIEWS

Shakespeare and the uses of the past: Critical approaches and current debates

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This review article looks at the ways in which criticism in recent years (2005–9) has engaged with the topic of Shakespeare and the uses of the past. It examines the varying approaches that scholars have taken in analysing Shakespeare's own uses of the past: studies of the interrelations between the medieval and early modern periods; approaches focusing on the workings of memory and trauma; materialist approaches; approaches that seek to interrogate or “queer” notions about temporality; and “presentist” approaches, which seek to understand the past primarily in terms of its impact on the present day. It also considers the uses to which Shakespeare – as a figure from our past – has been put, and the ways in which current political and cultural pressures might be influencing scholarly trends. A series of interrelated questions underlie the account. What is at stake in the ways in which we approach Shakespeare's works? Why does it matter whether we examine the plays and poems primarily in terms of their “original” moment of production or in terms of their meaning or afterlife in the twenty-first century? What is the influence of period divisions – between the “medieval” and “early modern” in particular – within English literary studies? What influence might broader institutional, economic and political debates have on the development of scholarship?

Keywords: *Henry V; King Lear; Pericles; presentism; queer theory; historicism; temporality; memory; past and present; medieval; periodisation*

This review essay was completed in early 2010, at a time when concerns are being raised in many quarters about the future of Humanities disciplines in Western universities, and about the introduction of social relevance or “impact” as a criterion on which research will be judged by governmental and, potentially, other funders. Disciplines such as History, Philosophy and English are being asked tough questions about their social function, accessibility and relevance, and those who work primarily with centuries-old material are perhaps facing greater intrinsic challenges than their colleagues.¹ Since scholarship is not produced in a vacuum, this seems an appropriate point at which to take a look at the ways in which recent criticism of Shakespeare's plays and poems has engaged with issues relating to the “pastness” of early modern culture, and to consider the ways in which current pressures might be influencing scholarly trends.

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Given the potentially vast range of work produced in this area – particularly if we look to the recent interest in early modern historiography and historical thought among literary scholars and historians² – my focus here is relatively narrow; indeed, it is impossible to do justice even to the full range of Shakespearean criticism produced in the last half-decade. I have therefore been selective in my approach, concentrating on a group of prominent areas of enquiry and approaches that highlight key issues that we encounter when considering the topic of Shakespeare and the uses of the past. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate some of the ways in which the treatment of Shakespeare's work is exemplary and also the reasons why its centrality might be in itself problematic. A series of interrelated questions underlie my account. What is at stake in the ways in which we approach Shakespeare's works? Why does it matter whether we examine the plays and poems primarily in terms of their "original" moment of production or in terms of their meaning or afterlife in the twenty-first century? What is the influence of period divisions – between the "medieval" and "early modern" in particular – within English literary studies? What influence might broader institutional, economic and political debates have on the development of scholarship?

In order to introduce some of the issues with which recent scholarship has engaged, and to suggest the complexity of Shakespeare's own uses of the past, I turn briefly to three chorric moments within his plays. First, the opening Chorus of *Henry V*:

O for a muse of fire, that would ascend
 The brightest heaven of invention:
 A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
 And monarchs to behold the swelling scene.
 Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
 Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels,
 Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
 Crouch for employment.
 (*Henry V*, Prologue 1–8)

Second, the Fool's prophecy in the Folio version of *King Lear*:

This is a brave night to cool a courtesan. I'll speak a prophesy ere I go:
 When priests are more in word than matter;
 When brewers mar their malt with water;
 When nobles are their tailors' tutors,
 No heretics burned but wenches' suitors,
 Then shall the realm of Albion
 Come to great confusion.

When every case in law is right;
 No squire in debt nor no poor knight;
 When slanders do not live in tongues,
 Nor cutpurse come not to throngs;
 When usurers tell their gold i'th field,
 And bawds and whores do churches build,
 Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
 That going shall be used with feet.

This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time.
 (*The Tragedy of King Lear*, 3.2.79–96)³

Third, the opening Chorus in Shakespeare and Wilkins's *Pericles*:

To sing a song that old was sung
 From ashes ancient Gower is come,
 Assuming man's infirmities
 To glad your ear and please your eyes.
 (*Pericles*, 1.Chorus.1–4)

Factors such as genre, subject matter, narrative complexity and theatrical context all contribute to shaping the treatment of the past within these plays. Each of them is cast in a different genre – history, tragedy and the mixed mode known variously as tragicomedy or romance – and each of these genres brings with it a different set of conventions and ideologies concerning the past. Questions of national identity and collective memory may come to the fore in the histories; tragedies may focus more of their attention on the individual's place in time and in historical process; mixed-mode plays such as *Pericles* are often associated with nostalgia and the desire to re-inhabit a (real or imagined) past. More specifically, each play engages with a different version of the pre-early-modern past: a historical, late-medieval English past in the case of *Henry V*; a semi-mythical ancient British past in the case of *King Lear*; and a literary and classical past in the case of *Pericles*, in which a character based on the late-medieval English poet Gower narrates a new version of the ancient Greek narrative concerning Apollonius of Tyre.

Similarly, each play presents its interactions with the past in a rather different manner. *Henry V* and *Pericles* share problems of representation – how to capture the scale, grandeur and sheer geographical range of their narratives within the confines of the early modern playhouse – and each play solves the problem (at least in part and, in the case of *Henry V*, at least in one version) through the use of a narrating Chorus. However, whereas the Chorus in *Henry V* debates the capacity of the playhouse to represent the historical past accurately, the Chorus in *Pericles* is concerned with its capacity to represent a fictional narrative – a “song” that has been “sung” many, many times – adequately. In *King Lear*, the Fool adopts the style of medieval and early modern prophecy – signalled, for instance, in the heavy use of anaphora and the insistently rhyming tetrameter – suggesting his connections with a popular history which does not always align neatly with the dynastic history of the play's plot, or with that of *Henry V* and other “history” plays. Although the “realm of Albion” will “Come to great confusion”, the ruler is nowhere named in the prophecy; instead, attention is focused on the great institutions of the law and the church, and on the emblematic representatives of the social and economic groups that make up the nation. The passage is also concerned with the complexities of temporality itself, as the Fool attempts through the glaring social and religious anachronisms of his “prophecy” to satirize a state of events which may pertain in a future which is also the “present” of the play's composition and performance in the early seventeenth century. The speech relies on its audience's historical awareness and its ability to tell past from present, even as the Fool self-consciously muddles these categories. Like Cranmer's predictions about the future greatness of the infant Princess Elizabeth at the conclusion of Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*, about which he declares “the words I utter / Let none think flattery, for they'll find 'em truth” (5.4.14–15), the Fool's lines cast the audience's present as the future.

For Shakespeare and his collaborators, therefore, the past can be a number of things. It can be historical, mythical or fictional; it may be a site of memory, subjectivity or nostalgia; it can be dynastic or popular in its concerns; the past may even turn out to be simultaneously the present, or even the future. Its configuration may also vary according to the genre in which a play is written, or according to other formal requirements within it, such as the characteristics of a chorus or a prophetic speech. Furthermore, although Shakespeare often foregrounds the alterity of the past, his works also insist on correspondences between past and present, and on occasion collapse the distinctions between them altogether, introducing strikingly anachronistic details or cultural assumptions.

These concerns are mirrored in recent criticism, whether it focuses primarily on Shakespeare's own uses of the past, or on the uses to which Shakespeare – as a figure from our past – might be put. Some of the most prominent approaches include: studies of the interrelations between the medieval and early modern periods; approaches focusing on the workings of memory and trauma; materialist approaches; approaches that seek to interrogate or “queer” notions about temporality; and “presentist” approaches, which seek to understand the past primarily in terms of its impact on the present day. They vary in their understanding of the relationship between past and present, and the place of an individual text in this nexus, but many (if not all) have sought to move beyond, or at least to question and interrogate, the historicism which has formed the bedrock of Shakespeare studies since the early 1980s.

A distinction has frequently been drawn between approaches that are primarily “historicist” in their perspective and those that are primary “presentist”. As Mark Robson notes, we might view historicism and presentism as “two different approaches to the notion of context, which is itself a shorthand for the relation of text to history”. “The former view”, he writes,

treats context from the perspective of a moment of production, thinking of this either as a time of writing, copying or printing, and so on, or else in a more obviously familiar theatrical sense. The latter takes into account the moment of reading, whether in the name of a responsiveness to times present, or as an admission of the ineradicability of reading's own contextual determination. (13)

Much of the material that I will discuss in this essay is not, ultimately, reducible to either of these extremes. However, the approaches that I have outlined above might be said to occupy different positions in the “moment of production”/“moment of reading” axis, and it is therefore perhaps useful to look at each in turn before attempting to draw any broad conclusions.

The last five years have seen a marked increase in critical interest in the relationships between the medieval and early modern periods. This includes the publication of three important collaborations between medievalists and early modernists – Gordon McMullan and David Matthews's *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*, Curtis Perry and John Watkins's *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages* and Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray's *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Performance and Adaptation of the Plays with Medieval Sources or Settings* – and two recent monographs, Katharine Goodland's comparativist *Female Mourning in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama: From the Raising of Lazarus to King*

Lear (2006), and Beatrice Groves's *Texts and Traditions: Religion in Shakespeare, 1592–1604*, which includes a chapter on "Shakespeare's Incarnational Aesthetic: The Mystery Plays and Catholicism". Attention should also be drawn to Ruth Morse's important article "Shakespeare's Ages", which challenges a number of the preconceptions that underlie not only labels such as the "Middle Ages", "medieval", "renaissance" and "early modern" but also our ideas about periodization in general.

Such studies seek to redress new historicism and cultural materialism's tendency to cast the medieval as the pre-modern "other" to a valorized early modern period in which key developments in religious, political and social life, and even subjectivity, are located. As McMullan and Matthews note in their introduction to *Reading the Medieval*, in the early 1990s medievalists such as David Aers and Lee Patterson "took aim not, as might be expected, at old historicists but at cutting-edge cultural materialists, attacking their 'presentist' orientation and their use of an imagined monolithic 'medieval' as a foil for their understanding of the early modern period as the birthplace of individualism" (3).⁴ This challenge has been maintained by medievalists such as James Simpson – whose 2002 monograph "Reform and Cultural Revolution" continues to exert a strong influence – and David Wallace, both of whom contribute to *Reading the Medieval*, and it has been adopted by increasing numbers of early modernists.

For Morse, the widespread shift of nomenclature among scholars of Tudor and Stuart literature from "renaissance" to "early modern" – the latter often preferred by new historicist and cultural materialist critics – is itself a marker of a troubling gap:

Our current shift from renaissance to early modern in English literary studies is testimony to many things, one of which is an intriguing repetition, a polemic which attaches them to us as the locus of our antiquity, and severs us from all medieval history, including literature and art. It is an emulative, competitive attempt at devaluing and erasure, an alibi for ignorance. (265)

In examining and questioning the subdisciplinary divide between medieval and early modern studies, scholars thus ask us to consider precisely what is at stake in notions of period, both our own and those of Shakespeare's day. Do we think of the "early modern" period as a continuation of the "medieval", or as the start of the "modern"? In responding to such questions, scholars have explored continuities between the medieval and early modern (to be found in continued social, political or religious practices, in the continued afterlives of literary and other texts, and in buildings or other material objects); they have bridged customary dividing lines – for instance, 1534 (the year of the Act of Supremacy) or 1558 (the year of the loss of Calais and the death of Mary Tudor); and they have looked at the ways in which isolated traces – textual, material or affective – may appear in the later period.

One of the considerable strengths of McMullan and Matthews' book is its scope: its five sections cover "Period", "Text", "Nation", "Geography" and "Reformation", and contributors consider the reception of medieval authors such as Langland and Chaucer in early modern England as well as the medievalism of authors such as John Bale, John Leland, Marlowe and Shakespeare. Among the collection's stated aims is to acknowledge that "[j]ust as early modern Englishmen and women read and re-read medieval texts, so the culture through which they performed those readings was itself at least as much the product of the medieval as it was of the break with the

medieval that appears, to us, to define it” (14). It also demonstrates the value of “embedded” studies of Shakespeare: illuminating discussions of *Cymbeline* (by McMullan in a wide-ranging consideration of “The Colonisation of Early Britain on the Jacobean Stage”) and *Measure for Measure* (by Sarah Beckwith in “Medieval Penance, Reformation Repentance and *Measure for Measure*”) are juxtaposed with and informed by a broader examination of a range of readerly and writerly activities.

The other two collections focus their attention squarely on Shakespeare. Driver and Ray explain that their book is intended to serve “as an introduction to reading Shakespeare’s plays through the lens of the medieval works that inform them and . . . as a guide to Shakespeare and medievalism in popular culture”. Contributors were asked “to select and examine medieval elements [in Shakespeare’s plays], to explore their filtering through Shakespeare, and then to discuss their impact (or not) on performance” (8). The essays thus draw heavily on stage and (especially) screen performances, and at their best (for instance Driver’s exploration of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Middle English romance, Julia Briggs’s analysis of Shakespeare’s use of Chaucer, and Kim Zarins’ exploration of Caliban’s cultural contexts, entitled “Caliban’s God: The Medieval and Renaissance Man in the Moon”), they achieve a nicely balanced synthesis between adaptation study and performance criticism, while also gesturing at the ways in which medieval-early-modern studies might situate itself in relation to current cultural concerns.

Driver and Ray’s collection focuses exclusively on Shakespeare’s plays, rendering Perry and Watkins’s volume especially useful for its inclusion of essays on some of the poems (Christopher Warley on *A Lover’s Complaint* and Patrick Cheney on “The Phoenix and Turtle”). Like Driver and Ray, Perry and Watkins stress the on-going role that Shakespeare’s work plays in popular assumptions about the medieval period. Suggesting that “[e]ven if we know that Shakespeare gave the wrong answers, he asked the right questions, or at least asked the questions that still shape our sense of what mattered during the Middle Ages” (3), they take “Shakespeare’s invention of the Middle Ages” as one of their primary themes. They go on, however, to counterpose against it “the seemingly antithetical question of the medieval invention of Shakespeare”, asking to what extent his works display not only the influence of early modern source texts such as the chronicles of Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed, but also “written and oral sources and cultural practices that now strike us as quintessentially medieval” (3). Like Morse and McMullan and Matthews, they are concerned with the problems of periodization, noting that “[t]hinking about Shakespeare and the Middle Ages . . . means thinking about the narratives of transition with which we encapsulate Shakespeare and authorize our own discourse and institutional practice” (5).

In one of the collection’s best essays, “Shakespeare’s Resurrections”, Sarah Beckwith argues that in plays such as *The Winter’s Tale* Shakespeare creates a form of memory-theatre, which is centred not on ghostly revenants, but on resurrection. This “resurrection theater” explores “both penitence and repentance as modes of recollection and redemption”, drawing on “the puzzling, concertedly bewildering resurrection narratives of forgiveness” found in the Gospels, the Easter liturgy and medieval mystery cycles (46). It is, she argues, “key that in this new paradigm in which response, responsiveness, and responsibility are all important, the returning figures are *actual* – flesh and blood. What the play offers us instead of ghost stories is the most spectacular in a series of instances in which the supposed dead appear

precisely to those who have harmed them" (47). In this essay and in her account of *Measure for Measure* in *Reading the Medieval*, Beckwith explores a diachronic and superbly poised approach to Shakespeare and religion, challenging the scholarly tendency to maintain a rigid opposition between a "Catholic" medieval past and a "Protestant" early modern present, a criticism which might be made of some of the essays in Driver and Ray's collection.

Similar attention to the complexity of religious identity can be seen in the work of Goodland and Groves. In *Female Mourning in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama*, Goodland argues that "[t]he grieving holy women of the medieval past, like ghostly figures surfacing through evanescent paint, form a palimpsest for the mourning women on the early modern stage" (1). She considers the ways in which "spectral resurrections of classicized Marian pity" enable early modern writers to play out and work through the "cultural trauma of the Reformation, especially that associated with the eradication of the doctrine of Purgatory, the suppression of Catholic mourning ritual, and iconoclasm against the pietà and female saints" (1). In *Texts and Traditions*, Groves, similarly, explores the ways in which early modern writers, and Shakespeare in particular, took up and made creative use of "relics of medieval religion" (3). Her book "aims to articulate the way that Shakespeare's verbally sophisticated, embodied drama engaged with the religious culture in which both he and his works were embedded" (9); in doing so, it explores Shakespearean drama's engagement with the religious past and its aesthetic expression in the mystery plays. In addition to its contribution to medieval-early-modern studies, the work of Beckwith, Goodland and Groves is particularly welcome as an intervention in the study of Shakespeare and religion, a topic which is beginning to escape its previous dependence on biographical speculation and rigid categorization. As Groves notes, it is necessary "to disentangle the acknowledgement of Catholic nuances in his plays from the search for evidence about the beliefs of the writer himself" (4); it is also imperative that scholars strive for a more nuanced understanding of the workings of religious belief and identity in the period.⁵

As one might expect, scholars interested in the interactions between the medieval and early modern periods have focused much attention on Shakespeare's history plays. In doing so, some explore the idea of Shakespeare as historian. For instance, in his contribution to Perry and Watkins' collection Brian Walsh examines "Shakespeare as historical thinker" (151), focusing on *Henry V* and suggesting that the history plays "tapped into an apparent desire on the part of Elizabethan playgoers to gain an imaginative experience of the 'middle' era" (152). He argues that Shakespeare offers "a consciousness of the past that is defined less by its exemplarity or its place in a typological schema than by the sheer fact of its difference from the present" and that "the distance effect . . . is not pejorative . . . but the affirmation of temporality" (152). For Walsh, therefore, Shakespeare himself adopts a historicist approach to the past.

Other scholars have examined Shakespeare's place within varying historiographies of the period. A cluster of essays in *Representations* by Lorna Hutson, Richard Halpern and Victoria Kahn revisit the relationship between Shakespeare's histories and Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies*; the extent to which the essays return to the unfinished business of new historicism and cultural materialism is underlined by Stephen Greenblatt's presence as author of the cluster's introduction. Elsewhere, Shakespeare's plays continued to be studied in relation to the "new British

history”, which, in the much-quoted words of J.G.A. Pocock, “denotes the historiography of no single nation but of a problematic and uncompleted experiment in the creation and interaction of several nations” (318).⁶ In addition to essays in collections,⁷ important work in this area includes John Kerrigan’s magisterial *Archipelagic English: Literature, History and Politics, 1603–1707*. This is a wide-ranging and self-consciously post-devolutionary account of seventeenth-century literature’s place in “the long, braided histories played out across the British-Irish archipelago between three kingdoms, four countries, divided regions, variable ethnicities and religiously determined allegiances” (2). Its chapters include “Archipelagic *Macbeth*”, in which Kerrigan sardonically concludes that rather than referring to “The Scottish Play” we might refer to “The Archipelagic Tragedy”: “No doubt it will catch on” (114). A chapter on “The Romans in Britain: Wales and Jacobean Drama” includes a sustained discussion of *Cymbeline*, which shares some of its concerns with McMullan’s essay in *Reading the Medieval*.

Other critics have preferred, in contrast, to view Shakespeare’s use of the past as a matter of memory rather than one of history alone. Examples of such an approach in relation to the history plays can be found in two of the best essays in Dermot Cavanagh, Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Stephen Longstaffe’s wide-ranging collection, *Shakespeare’s Histories and Counter-Histories*: Cavanagh’s “History, Mourning and Memory in *Henry V*” and Alison Thorne’s “There is a History in All Men’s Lives: Reinventing History in *2 Henry IV*”. Cavanagh suggests that *Henry V* might more profitably be viewed as not a history play but a “memory play”, a work that is “interested in how the past is created and recreated dynamically from a variety of perspectives” (45); rather than “assuming that it presents a uniform vision of the past”, he stresses “its interest in conflicting processes of remembrance” (32). For Thorne, *2 Henry IV* represents the temporary displacement of “high” political history, centred on issues of dynastic succession, affairs of state and military conflict” by “an oral tradition in which the past is typically reconstituted in anecdotal form through the informal medium of rumour, hearsay, gossip and personal reminiscence” (49). Drawing on Pierre Nora’s concept of “memory-history”, she suggests that in the end “history” achieves dominance “only through deliberate acts of amnesia involving the erasure of that shared fund of cultural memory which binds us imaginatively to the past” (63). Both essays thus weave together ideas relating to multiplicity, collective experience and the workings of memory, suggesting the complexity of these late-Elizabethan texts.

The kinds of issues raised by Cavanagh and Thorne take rather different shapes in some recent monographs: Thomas P. Anderson’s *Performing Early Modern Trauma from Shakespeare to Milton*, Anita Gilman Sherman’s *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne* and Patricia A. Cahill’s *Unto the Breach: Martial Formations, Historical Trauma, and the Early Modern Stage*. Developing Stanley Cavell’s ideas about scepticism as “a crisis of knowledge” and (in Cavell’s words) “a sort of human compulsion to overintellectuality” (Cavell, xxvii), in *Skepticism and Memory* Sherman argues “that in the course of grappling with sceptical ideas, Shakespeare and Donne give new life to tried and true aesthetic strategies – like mimesis, exemplarity, and pastoral – and in so doing, forge a new and distinctive idiom for memory” (xiii, x, ix). These writers, she suggests, present not only “desperate skeptics”, but also “modes of recovery”: “each, in his different ways, illustrat[es] how to cope with the challenges of scepticism” (x). Two different forms of

memory are involved: while the unreliability of individual memory might exacerbate the sceptic's crisis, collective memory can aid in the recovery process. One of the strengths of Sherman's work is her attention to the "aesthetic strategies" taken by writers, which take the form of narrative and thematic elements, representational strategies and literary genres: "incompatible juxtapositions, framing, countermonuments, and disnarration", exemplarity, pastoral and salvation history. This combination is, she suggests, at the heart of a "skeptical aesthetics", from which a "skeptical ethics ensues" (x, xi).

The image of the countermonument – a form of memorialization that resists the certainties and pieties of the conventional monument – also appears in Anderson's *Performing Early Modern Trauma*, which explores how the early modern historical imagination "does battle with the memory of a traumatic past that insistently presses its claim on the present" (1). His aim is to show "how the belated appearance of the past transforms the present with its insistent return" (6). Examining the works of writers including Holinshed, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton, Webster and Marvell, three chapters focus on royal death as "an event that interrupts the links between past and present"; the remaining two "consider the impact of the Reformation on the temporal order that links past and present" (9).

As reviewers have noted, Anderson's "trauma" is frequently subsumed by broader notions of loss;⁸ in contrast, Cahill's *Unto the Breach* is much clearer about its theoretical underpinnings. Focusing on the representation of militarism in the late-Elizabethan theatre, Cahill brings together a wealth of material drawn from early modern military science and the work of Cathy Caruth and other trauma theorists. Another distinctive aspect is her determination to pay attention to the affective force of her selected plays in performance; she notes that "it seems clear that what theorists have had to say about how individuals and cultures 'act out' in order to 'work through' the impact of extremity may offer a useful model for critical thinking about audience response" (9). Cahill characterizes her approach not as a rejection of history, but an attempt to take seriously Dominick LaCapra's assertion that (in her words) "traumatic representation deals with the profound impact of historical events" (9). Some of the plays that she examines – the Shakespearean ones among them – are set in the past, others in the (then) present; in the context of trauma theory, Cahill writes,

Elizabethan dramas that propose to retell – and revive – the martial events of the past are especially intriguing works, for in many such plays we see a staging both of "ordinary," chronological time as well as of a temporality gone awry, one which suggests that the past does not, in fact, reside in the past. But, as I aim to show, even Elizabethan war plays that do not claim to chronicle the past appear to be vulnerable to traumatic historicity, insofar as their fictions do not seem to be immune to the disturbing matter of Elizabethan military violence. (8–9)

In its attention to the complexity of "traumatic historicity", Cahill's book has much in common with recent attempts to conceptualize alternative and non-linear temporalities. In a stimulating essay, "Anticipating Nostalgia: Finding Temporal Logic in a Textual Anomaly", Linda Charnes summarizes some of the issues at stake. She acknowledges that "[t]he very notion that time – ineluctable force and fact of nature – has a politics may strike us as counterintuitive: whereas politics is a human construction, capable of infinite manipulation by its human creators, time is

something over which we exert no control". However, the human experience of time is more complex; as Charnes argues, "[t]he biggest challenge we face is to realize the fact that different cultures may have entirely different relationships to time and to temporality, and that consequently history, as we understand the term, has more meanings and forms than are dreamt of in our chronology" ("Anticipating Nostalgia" 74).

Perhaps surprisingly, some pioneering work in this area can be found in recent materialist criticism of Shakespeare and early modern literature. Both Philip Schwyzer and Jonathan Gil Harris locate their work in relation to a strand of materialist criticism which was itself a reaction to new historicism's focus on subjectivity; as Harris notes, "[i]f the new historicism of the 1980s and early 1990s was pre-occupied primarily with the fashioning of early modern subjects, a pronounced tendency in the new millennium, evidenced in the turn to so-called material culture, is to engage with objects" (Harris, *Untimely Matter* 1). This materialist turn has been dubbed the "new antiquarianism" by some hostile commentators,⁹ but in an earlier essay Harris suggests that such a label needs to be taken seriously, even literally:

if the "new antiquarianism" is to theorize more comprehensively the material of "material culture," it needs to become, if anything, more antiquarian. For all that the antiquarians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries placed a naive faith in objects as the unmediated residua of the past, they were nonetheless attentive to a dimension of materiality that object criticism has all too frequently overlooked: the diachronic trajectories of things through time and space. ("Shakespeare's Hair" 480)

Materialist criticism, in Harris's view, can therefore be not merely synchronic – exploring the historical alterity of objects and literary texts – but diachronic in its approach to the object *as object*, as something which descends through time and space and which picks up new associations and meanings as it does so.

Responding to Harris's call, Schwyzer suggests that the "new materialism/antiquarianism needs to become, if anything, more *archaeological*". He notes the methodological similarities between some forms of literary and archaeological studies: "[b]oth the exhortation to attend to historical versions of materialism (the way past cultures thought about things) and the growing interest in the object's trajectory (or 'life history') are central strands of 'post-processual' archaeology" (30). Schwyzer's approach is less "antiquarian" than might be assumed, however. He is interested in the ways in which archaeological ideas and motifs in early modern literature "tend to emerge ... in relation to specific political, religious, and cultural crises that call into question the relationship between the present and the past"; such "crises" include "colonial warfare in Ireland ... , the dissolution of the monasteries ... , traumatic shifts in burial practices following the Reformation ... , the rise of the market ... , and the Civil War and Interregnum" (3). Furthermore, responding to critiques of materialist criticism and discussing the need for a balance between historicist and formalist approaches, he argues that

[f]inding the balance in our scholarship would mean, in the first place, respecting the intrinsic duality of the traces we study. It would mean treating them neither as fetishes nor as launch pads, but as entities with a dual nature, as things in the present and witnesses to the past, belonging in different ways to us and to the dead. (26)

Schwyzer therefore posits a diachronic form of criticism, one that is alert not only to the moment of a text's production but also its continued presence in later centuries.

Schwyzer's focus on the complex temporality of the literary "trace" is mirrored in Harris's *Untimely Matter*. Like Schwyzer, Harris responds to critiques of the fetishism of materialist criticism by shifting his attention to issues of temporality; he suggests that while materialist criticism "has tended to transform the 'material' of material culture into a synonym for 'physical' – thereby freezing not just the object in time but also time in the object", the "discourse of the temporally retrograde fetish", often applied by hostile critics, has the side-effect of "work[ing] to displace and dismiss the spectre of anachronism that haunts objects in general" (*Untimely Matter* 7). Harris instead embraces and explores in detail the ways in which the material object is itself anachronistic. Drawing on philosophers of science such as Bruno Latour and Michel Serres, who have argued for the temporal instability of the object, and on Nietzsche's concept of the "*unzeitgemäße*", usually translated as "untimely", Harris develops a "polychronic and multitemporal account of material culture" (24) in which the "theor[ies] of matter" articulated by early modern writers such as John Stow, George Herbert and Margaret Cavendish are juxtaposed with "material" aspects of the plays written for Shakespeare by the Chamberlain's/King's Men, such as acting styles, stage effects and props.

Another aspect of the recent turn to temporality in literary studies has been the theorization of "queer temporalities", notably in the work of medievalists such as Carolyn Dinshaw and Kathleen Biddick, the Renaissance scholar Carla Freccero, and twentieth-century specialists such as Lee Edelman, Elizabeth Freeman, Heather Love and Judith Halberstam. Influenced by queer theory's critiques of heteronormativity, and by postcolonial theorists such as Dinesh Chakrabarty, such critics have explored the possibilities offered by an awareness that time might be conceived of as multiple and non-linear. Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval*, for instance, focuses on what she calls "a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now" (1). For some, such engagements also involve a critique of notions of history and futurity. Edelman, for instance, probes the associations between "time", "history" and "historicism", questioning two central assumptions – "time is historical by 'nature' and history demands to be understood in historicising terms" (Dinshaw *et al.* 181). In his influential book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman acknowledges the extent to which the queer is often seen as antithetical to the "Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism"; he argues that "[r]ather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it" (*No Future* 4). In a recent roundtable discussion in *GLQ* he asks,

But what if time's collapse into history is symptomatic, not historical? What if framing this conversation in terms of a "turn toward time" preemptively reinforces the consensus that bathes the petrified river of history in the illusion of constant fluency? What if that very framing repeats the structuring of social reality that establishes heteronormativity as the guardian of temporal (re)production?

Instead, he suggests, “the logic of repetition, associated with the death drive, though projectively mapped onto those read as queers, informs as well the insistence on history and on reproductive futurism that’s posited over and against them” (Dinshaw *et al.* 181).

One of the first works to bring these ideas to bear on Shakespeare is Madhavi Menon’s *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film*, in which Menon develops models of “homohistory” and “unhistoricism” initially put forward in a 2005 article co-written with Jonathan Goldberg, “Queering History”. *Unhistorical Shakespeare* is not comfortable reading; its importance, however, is undeniable, not only for Menon’s own analysis but for introducing current models of queer temporality into Shakespeare studies. Rejecting historicism’s tendency to cast the past as alien and the present as familiar and stable, Menon critiques both perspectives, characterizing the product as “a compulsory heterotemporaneity” (1). Instead, she posits an “unhistoricism” or “homohistory” which would instead acknowledge sameness: “Neither ahistorical – or somehow ‘outside’ history – nor even anti-historical – or against history – unhistoricism argues that a history based on difference is inadequate to housing the study of desire” (3). As her use of the “hetero-” and “homo-” prefixes suggest, Menon absorbs and modifies queer theory’s challenge to temporal conventions, and she argues that a rigid focus on historical difference has reified theories about sexual identity in different periods – for instance, the familiar model in which a pre-modern instability is succeeded by modern “identarian” sexualities. “[S]exual identity”, she argues, “is always already heterotemporal” (4); instead, “homohistory” resists categories, focusing instead on the “textual, socioeconomic, political, and biological ‘incoherence’ that attends desire” (4). For Menon, Shakespeare represents both a supreme example of “the past-in-the-present, an old author generating new jobs” (5) and a site of resistance:

The urge to map two distinct sexual regimes onto two distinct periods of time extends the same desire for difference that keeps the study of Shakespeare away from the methodologies of queer theory in the mistaken belief that Shakespeare belongs to the past “before” sexual identity, while queer theory affects only more recent texts written after the inception of such identities. (5)

Although its critique of historicism is timely, and its iconoclasm and polemical edge are at times exhilarating, Menon’s book is not without its problems. Critical perspectives do not map onto attitudes towards sexuality as neatly as she sometimes suggests: some historicist criticism may be “homophobic” in that it insists on historical alterity and the difference between the early modern and modern periods, but it does not mean that it is necessarily heterosexist, or that historicism and queer theory are intrinsically incompatible. Indeed, Menon’s assumption that the study of Shakespeare has been kept away from “the methodologies of queer theory” suggests a somewhat partial view of queer theory’s interactions with early modern studies. As Mario DiGangi has noted, Goldberg and Menon’s “Queering History” takes Goldberg’s 1994 book *Queering the Renaissance* as something of a year zero, and excludes much subsequent work – DiGangi criticizes its “adjudication of inclusion and exclusion from the queer critical canon” (142 n. 12). The same inclusions and exclusions are evident in *Unhistorical Shakespeare*, in which Menon briefly cites

Jeffrey Masten, Bruce R. Smith, Stephen Orgel and DiGangi himself, but shows little interest in the specifics of their work; she does not mention the important contributions by scholars such as Alan Bray, Gregory Bredbeck, Alan Sinfield or Kate Chedgzoy, whose 1995 book *Shakespeare's Queer Children* shares many of her concerns. This would matter less if Menon's judgements on the field were not so sweeping. For her, the majority of work is simply not queer enough; "queer scholars of the Renaissance", she writes elsewhere, "are allowed to serve as historians of sexuality, not as queer theorists" ("Period Cramps" 234).

Menon's argument that approaches based on historical difference are intrinsically heteronormative is challenged by DiGangi. He acknowledges the importance of the critique of altericist historicism and its "category-constructing imperatives" mounted by scholars such as Carla Freccero, but nonetheless he stresses "the importance of confronting the disciplinary and professional allegiances signaled by a commitment to 'theory' or 'history'" and suggests that "altericist historicism need not to be construed as antithetical to a queer emphasis on analytic flexibility or political engagement" (140–41, original emphasis). A slightly different way out of this impasse is suggested by Vin Nardizzi, Stephen Guy-Bray and Will Stockton in their introduction to their stimulating collection *Queer Renaissance Historiography: Backward Gaze*:

While history is important to us, we do not use it as a way of ending discussions and ruling out interpretations; we refuse to let our backward gazes be restricted either by the fetishizing of historical accuracy or the needs of contemporary gays and lesbians – needs that have in any case too often been assumed to be monolithic and easily summarized. (2)

Rather than "seeking to replace the conventional emphasis on historical difference with an emphasis on historical sameness", they "collectively seek to adumbrate a literary historiography that takes both sameness and difference as themselves objects of study" (4).

Although it has a rather different theoretical background, Mark Robson's "Shakespeare's Words of the Future" shares some concerns with the queer temporalities of Menon and others, not least the openness of these critics to anachrony. Robson's essay explores the complex workings of the promise in *Richard III*, "the connections between the act of promising and the realms of subjectivity, law, reason, morality and temporality" (18), and the blurring of two categories of promise: the promise as mark of potential, and as a form of contract. Central to Robson's understanding of the promise is the work of philosophers such as Plato, Nietzsche, De Man and Derrida, and the speech act theory of J.L. Austin; he argues that "the promise as performance disrupts the security of Austin's distinctions between serious and non-serious usage, and takes on a disturbing aspect in terms of the relationship between cognition and act" (21). For Robson, "[t]he promise of truth is co-extensive with the capacity of language to mislead. It is also predicated upon a certain futurity that necessarily opens a space for anachrony" (21).

The work of these critics offers, I suggest, various responses to Linda Charnes' mid-1990s criticism that "[t]oo many scholars of the Renaissance read, in the important injunction to 'always historicise', an injunction to *only* historicise" (*Notorious Identity* 15, original emphasis).¹⁰ In recent years, however, some of the

most strident critiques of historicism have been offered by those who favour an explicitly presentist approach. Prominent work in this area includes two collections – *Presentist Shakespeare*, edited by Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, and *Presentism, Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare*, edited by Evelyn Gajowski – and Continuum's series of short monographs (or “minigraphs”), “Shakespeare Now!”, edited by Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey, which was launched in spring 2007 with Douglas Bruster's *To Be or Not To Be*, Philip Davis's *Shakespeare Thinking*, Amy Scott-Douglass's *Shakespeare Inside: The Bard Behind Bars* and Eric Mallin's *Godless Shakespeare*.

For such critics, the problem with new historicism is not that it was too “presentist”, as Aers or Patterson would have it, but that it was not presentist enough. They argue that a purely historicist approach is fundamentally impossible: for Grady there can be “no historicism without a latent presentism” (“Shakespeare Studies” 115), while Fernie suggests in his essay “Shakespeare and the Prospect of Presentism” that “[t]he present is the inassimilable element in new historicism, it is the obstacle to fulfilment which sustains its desire, and it is becoming increasingly impossible to disavow” (175). Moreover, presentist critics contend that to focus primarily on the moment of a text's production is to obscure its true impact and importance. Grady and Hawkes set out a vision of what a presentist Shakespearean criticism might set out to achieve:

Paying the present that degree of respect might more profitably be judged to be, not a “mistake”, egregious and insouciant, blandly imposing a tritely modern perspective on whatever texts confront it, but rather the basis of a critical stance whose engagement with the text is of a particular character. A Shakespeare criticism which takes that on board will aim scrupulously to seek out salient aspects of the present as a crucial trigger for its investigations. Reversing, to some degree, the stratagems of new historicism, it will deliberately begin with the material present and allow that to set its interrogative agenda. It will not only yearn to speak with the dead. It will aim, in the end, to talk to the living. (4)

The appropriation of Greenblatt's famous opening to *Shakespearean Negotiations* (“I began with the desire to speak with the dead” 1) might suggest that presentist criticism situates itself in opposition to new historicism. This is, in some cases, true, but the real target is recent materialist approaches – either the “new antiquarianism” or the history of the book – which are viewed as fetishistic, empirical and anti-theoretical, and as overly obsessed with facts or objects. Much animus has been aimed at David Scott Kastan's 1999 book *Shakespeare after Theory*, which has been interpreted as calling for an a-theoretical or even pre-theoretical focus on historical points of origin and “facts”.¹¹ This is, however, a misinterpretation of the aim of the book, which calls for a self-consciously post-theoretical examination of the specifics of cultural production and reception¹² even if in practice, as John Drakakis argues, “what is missing is any real sense of the rigorous interrogation of the theoretical postulates that underpin [Kastan's] very deployment of historical detail” (114).

Targeting Kastan enables presentist critics to set up a false division between theory and historicism and, in some cases, they argue – in common with Menon – that historicist approaches are intrinsically conservative and/or heteronormative. In their preface to the “Shakespeare Now!” volumes, Fernie and Palfrey argue that an aversion to the “obscure jargon and complacent self-regard” of theory “has further encouraged a retreat into the supposed safety of historicism” (ix). Similarly,

Gajowski asserts that “the present as well as the past has been unpoliticised or, more accurately, drained of the political content that originally animated new historicism, cultural materialism, and feminism alike” (7). Unsurprisingly, the creation of this dialectic opposition between theory and historicism allows the annexation to presentism of any theoretically orientated criticism. Grady and Hawkes argue that “several modes of critical practice already in existence, such as feminist criticism, post-colonial criticism, and performance studies, can be said to be presentist in principle if not in name” (5), whereas for Gajowski, “[i]nsofar as feminist and queer literary theory and criticism are discursive practices that are rooted in and are informed by early twenty-first century political, economic, and social practices, they are inevitably presentist in nature” (2).

In these ways, critics run the risk both of caricaturing “historicism” as a reactionary and a-theoretical monolith, and of subsuming all criticism of which they approve into an equally undifferentiated “presentism”. This is, however, a false dichotomy, especially when the object of study is a body of plays and poems written around four centuries ago. Historicist and presentist approaches may be to some extent incompatible, but it is also impossible simply to choose one over the other. As Robson suggests, “[p]ure presentism is no more viable than a critical approach entirely purged of anachronism. And yet these are the ghosts (or are they dreams?) that haunt any reading of the early modern” (28).

Additional factors also suggest that presentism is at least to some degree in thrall to a universalist impulse explicitly rejected by critics such as Menon. Grady and Hawkes see presentism as having an important role to play in refocusing attention on the aesthetic aspects of Shakespearean texts, something which has often been neglected in historicist criticism. “In particular”, they write, historicist scholarship’s rejection of the aesthetic

has obscured how the works function for us in the present. For even though the immediate social context of the plays has disappeared, they evidently continue to speak to us with urgency and insight. One of a number of directions a presentist criticism will take will be to focus on this phenomenon and thus attempt to come to terms with a play’s paradoxical presentness. (4)

Such a perspective avoids engagement with recent attempts to develop a critical model which is alert to the historical contexts *and* aesthetic qualities of literary texts, a “historical formalism”, as it has been defined by Stephen Cohen.¹³ More seriously, however, a historically deracinated focus on the aesthetic qualities of a text, narrowly defined, can have unintended consequences. In his own contribution to *Presentist Shakespeares*, Grady writes, “A work of art always exists in the present to the extent that it remains a work of art” (“Hamlet” 161). Similarly, Fernie quotes approvingly Jacques Derrida’s characterization of *Hamlet* as a “masterpiece” and suggests that “[t]he gap between Shakespeare’s historical dimension and the present helps constitute literature as a present experience of historical difference but, insofar as it is singular and creative, the Shakespearian text is also irreducible to history” (169, 175). The aesthetic value of a text – its status as a “work of art” or a “masterpiece” – gives it a trans-historical authority denied to the play or poem which is not accorded that status.

This point of view is problematic for a number of reasons. Not least, it takes the status of Shakespeare's plays and poems as "works of art" as self-evident, eliding the role that historical factors play in the construction of aesthetic taste and the processes – described in detail by scholars such as Jonathan Bate, Michael Dobson and Gary Taylor – through which Shakespeare was canonized as the "national poet". Moreover, to "aim scrupulously to seek out salient aspects of the present as a crucial trigger for [one's] investigations" (as Grady and Hawkes put it, 4) is to risk re-inscribing contemporary assumptions about the respective worth of works within the Shakespearean oeuvre into critical practice. Recent explorations of currently neglected plays – such as Sherman's splendidly nuanced analysis of *Henry VIII* in *Skepticism and Memory*, which explores the way in which the play "dramatizes a skeptical view of the past through archival collage and glaring elisions that foreground the experience of truth" (xiii) – suggest that this would be a mistake. The presentist critic may find him- or herself in the uncomfortable position of upholding the conservative hierarchies of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary canon, and of devaluing other, less canonical, authors or texts. Kiernan Ryan argues that we need to respect the fact that a play such as *Troilus and Cressida* was "never at home in its own time", and to explore the ways in which it was "not merely out of sync with its time, but so far ahead of its time that it took three centuries for the theatre and for critics to catch up with it" ("Troilus and Cressida" 164, 170). This is an unexceptionable goal, but if critics should take care not to be confined by their understanding of the issues and concerns of Shakespeare's day, they need equally to avoid being trapped within those of their own.

As this might suggest, the prominence of presentist criticism in Shakespeare studies, and a widespread anxiety about the validity of historicist approaches, is a product of a very particular cultural and political moment, one in which the status of Shakespeare as a representative of a past age has become the subject of controversy. In his book *English People*, described as an "ethnographic" study of academics working in English departments in the UK, Colin Evans quotes one young lecturer as saying "It's nice to be a Shakespearian because that's the battleground" (134). The interviews for Evans's book were carried out in the early 1990s, in the context of prolonged debate about the teaching of English – and, in particular, the place of literary theory – in higher education. In 2011, Shakespeare may once again be the "battleground", but the terms of engagement have shifted, as Humanities disciplines find themselves subject to criticism from various political and institutional vantage points.

It is nothing new for English studies to feel beleaguered. As Rick Rylance – now the director of the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) – noted, "[a] common image of English is that it is an agglomeration of parts – even, in extreme versions, a fissiparous non-subject, spawning itself through its fragmenting bits, and perpetually, even gleefully, 'in crisis'".¹⁴ However, there appears to be an increased urgency in the pressures that are currently being brought to bear. Researchers in many Western countries are facing an intensified call from governments and other interested parties for their work to demonstrate relevance and "impact". The US-based scholar Michael Bérubé begins a recent opinion piece in *Times Higher Education* with the words, "Assessment and impact: these are the new watchwords in higher education", while both of the UK's governmental funding

streams for Humanities research are being refocused around “impact”, defined by the AHRC as “the ‘influence’ of research or its ‘effect on’ an individual, a community, the development of policy, or the creation of a new product or service. It relates to the effects of research on our economic, social and cultural lives” (AHRC, *Impact Summary*, 2).

If we take the UK as a case study, governmental support for research in the Humanities is provided through two streams: funding councils for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland¹⁵ allocate Quality Related (QR) money directly to universities to support research, while the AHRC provides funding for specific projects through competitive schemes. Although these streams appear to be independent, they are in fact closely interrelated. The amounts allocated through QR money are currently determined through periodic national audits of research output, the Research Assessment Exercise (1986–2008) and its successor, the Research Excellence Framework. Much of the research entered will have been funded through AHRC support, and external grants (including those provided by the AHRC) have played an increasingly prominent role in assessment criteria.

In the model for the Research Excellence Framework presented for consultation in September 2009, 25% of the assessment for each unit (i.e. a department or research grouping) was based on “impact” (Higher Education Funding Council for England, “Research Excellence Framework”). Many respondents called for this figure to be reduced,¹⁶ and the Framework itself may be modified; however, the external assessment of research and the requirement to demonstrate its cultural relevance are highly unlikely to disappear. Similarly, applications submitted to the AHRC’s funding schemes must now include an “Impact Summary” and an attachment describing the research’s “Pathways to Impact”. Although the AHRC claim that “[e]xcellent research without obvious or immediate impact will continue to be funded by the AHRC and will not be disadvantaged as a result of the introduction of these sections in the application forms” (AHRC 2), UK-based scholars will increasingly be encouraged to conduct research which can be linked to the impact agenda.¹⁷

My aim here is not to imply that scholars should not be accountable to funding bodies, that there is no imperative for them to communicate with the public at large, or that we should return to some (largely imagined) halcyon past in which scholarship was free from outside interference. However, the impact agenda poses an obvious challenge for early modern studies, as it does for all scholarship which takes as its object of study the events or products of times past. Some subdisciplines, such as scholarly editing, digital humanities and performance studies, will potentially benefit. Editions often appeal to both academic and non-academic readerships, and they perform valuable work in making texts available to non-specialists; digital humanities projects may also appeal to non-traditional audiences, while performance scholars often take current practice as their object of study. It is not surprising, therefore, to see examples of these kinds of research included among the “examples of impact from AHRC-funded projects” on the AHRC website (see *Pathways to Impact*).

Within more traditional literary criticism, however, the approach with the clearest affinity with the impact agenda is presentism. Presentism, as Hawkes and Grady suggest, “will deliberately begin with the material present and allow that to set its interrogative agenda. It will not only yearn to speak with the dead. It will aim, in the end, to talk to the living” (4). Although these critics may not share former AHRC

chief executive Philip Esler's desire to encourage researchers in the arts and humanities to work with partners to produce collaborative research that "adds to our quality of life and prosperity" (10–11), presentist criticism is focused, in its own way, on forms of social, political and economic impact. It is perhaps, therefore, unsurprising to find that some scholars see presentism as a way of preserving Shakespeare for future generations. Linda Charnes asks,

How will we explain to new generations that a figure such as Shakespeare, for example, is still relevant in a world changing at an astonishing pace? How will we make our case if we devote ourselves solely to fine-tuning our estrangement from Shakespeare's era – if we neglect contemporary culture because we believe the past is only valuable on and in its own terms? In a nutshell, why do we fetishize our ability to imagine ourselves into Shakespeare's past, but feel so little responsibility for imagining ourselves into Shakespeare's future?

"Every generation", she continues, "has its cultural and historical traumas; but in the current state of the world, not to mention higher education, it seems especially urgent that the work of literary study interface with the present in its immediacy." ("Shakespeare" 65).¹⁸ What is actually at stake here? Does Shakespeare need scholars to protect him from "a world changing at an astonishing pace", or is the threat actually one faced by the academic critic?

Although Charnes's "for example" suggests that a range of early modern writers might have been chosen to exemplify her fears about cultural obsolescence, very few other early modern writers have the sustained history of reception and re-appropriation necessary for a presentist approach of the kind outlined by Grady and Hawkes. In *Shakespeare in the Present*, Hawkes is similarly disingenuous when he argues that

a bland, unthinking confidence that the contours of the past will neatly match those of our own day ... is not in question. A newly committed, self-consciously "presentist" literary criticism stands as something of quite a different order, particularly ... when it focuses on work that is already assumed to have a degree of current cultural centrality, such as the plays of Shakespeare. (22)

Although Hawkes and other presentist critics aim to interrogate the cultural standing of Shakespeare, an impact-oriented early modern studies would, like this model of presentism, focus on work "that is already assumed to have a degree of current cultural centrality". If Shakespeare is once again the battleground, it is not due simply to the intrinsic value or complexity of his work, but because it is amenable to the impact agenda, and useful to scholars who feel vulnerable in the face of politicians' increasingly pragmatic approaches to higher education. Shakespeare risks becoming the acceptable face of the past – always already in tune with current debates, and endlessly malleable – while the neglected and the obscure are pushed even further into the margins of the critical tradition. A purely presentist, impact-oriented early modern studies might not be the site of renewed radicalism demanded by critics, but a politically and aesthetically conservative haven for canonical authors: elite, white, and resoundingly male.

Despite my scepticism about the uses to which presentist criticism might be put, I have considerable sympathy with its basic premise. It is, after all, impossible to fully

disentangle past and present, even when studying the texts produced by women and men who died four hundred years ago. Furthermore, for a critic to ignore the contemporary uses to which these texts are put – for example, on page, stage or screen; by writers, educators or politicians – is to elide at least part of their ongoing life and critical engagement. The meaning of a text cannot be reduced solely to that which it might have held at the moment of its “original” writing, performance or reception. Similarly, to avoid the use of theoretically informed approaches on the grounds of anachronism, or to look to a text’s historical context for solid answers – as opposed to possibilities and further questions – seems self-defeating or self-deluding. As Marjorie Garber has written, arguing for the importance of anachronism, fantasy and the a-historical in literary history, “there are some things history cannot do, and those things are – I want to suggest and in fact to insist – at the core of literary enterprise” (208).

It is, I suggest, more productive to resist an easy dialectic between historicist and presentist modes of criticism, to resist corraling Shakespeare away from either his contemporaries or his successors, and to resist separating the aesthetic into a distinct field of enquiry, detached from political and cultural concerns, and focused merely on assumptions about the literary text as “work of art” or “masterpiece”. We need, perhaps, to be smarter and more innovative in our response to the impact agenda and in our uses of the past, to find ways in which a multifaceted early modern studies might address “impact” while nonetheless retaining its intellectual edge. We should aim to create a criticism that is genuinely diachronic, alert not only to the uses to which a writer’s work might be put in the centuries after his or her death, but also to the ways in which early modern writers themselves deployed and adapted existing texts, discourses and conventions. Rather than insisting on rigid chronologies or temporalities, it may be more productive to explore the multiple and fractured relationships between various temporalities, and between multiple versions of the past, present and future; to acknowledge, in Kathleen Biddick’s phrase, a “temporality that is not one” (104). Finally, we need to read more – more primary texts; more secondary and contextual material; more theory. After all, the last thing that Shakespeareans need is to read only Shakespeare.

Notes

1. For recent discussion pieces on the challenges faced see Bérubé; Collini; Overy; Protevi; Worley. Jonathan Bate’s edited collection, *The Public Value of the Humanities*, is also an important intervention. Although some of its findings are debatable, Patricia Cohen’s *New York Times* article “In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth”, summarizes some of the perceived problems facing the Humanities in the US.
2. For recent accounts of early modern attitudes towards history see, among others, Woolf; Grafton; Kewes.
3. These lines appear only in the Folio version of the play.
4. McMullan and Matthews have in mind Patterson’s “On the Margin” and Aers’s “A Whisper in the Ear of the Early Modernists”.
5. For further critiques, see Callaghan; Beckwith, “Shakespeare”.
6. For critical accounts see Baker and Maley (1–8); Kerrigan (21–30).
7. See, for example, McMullan; Perry; Holland.
8. See Hirschfeld; Silverstone.
9. As early as 1996, Hugh Grady wrote that he was “convinced that elevation of the trend towards contextualism and ‘local’ historical readings to the level of *disciplinary re-*

- quirements would amount to disciplinary suicide, eventual irrelevance, and a new antiquarianism” (*Universal Wolf* 23). For an important critique of materialist approaches to early modern literature, first published in 2001, see Bruster.
10. The “injunction” is, of course, Frederick Jameson’s – the first words of *The Political Unconscious* (ix) – although Jameson’s view of what historicizing actually involves is more complex than some of the uses of this slogan might suggest.
 11. See, for instance, Grady and Hawkes (1–2); Menon (*Unhistorical* 2–3, 52–55).
 12. In his own words, Kastan mounts “an argument for the necessity of returning literary studies to history, albeit a history that must itself be inflected by the theoretical initiatives that I’ve been discussing, aware that the approach to the past can neither be value-free nor immediate. . . . If theory has convincingly demonstrated that meaning is not immanent but rather situational, or, put differently, that both reading and writing are not unmediated activities but take place only and always in context and action, the specific situations, contexts and actions – that is, the actual historical circumstances of literary production and reception – cannot merely be gestured at but must be recovered and analysed” (17, 31). Reviewing the book, Kiernan Ryan claims that it “conveys the impression of good old-fashioned scholarship crouching behind a theoretical rationale that has little purchase on its true concerns and frequently becomes redundant” (Review 289–90).
 13. See Stephen Cohen’s “New Historicism and Genre: Towards a Historical Formalism”, and his edited collection, *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism*; see also Mark Rasmussen’s edited collection *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements*. The 2007 plenary panel at the Shakespeare Association of America, featuring papers by Lorna Hutson, Heather James and Adam Zucker, was titled “Historical Formalism”. For an incisive critique of criticism’s failure to attend properly to form see Ellen Rooney’s essay, “Form and Contentment”.
 14. See also Harpham, who notes that “[t]alk of a crisis has been around for so long . . . that it has become simply incorporated into the most accustomed ways in which humanities scholars understand themselves and their work” (22).
 15. These are: the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).
 16. See Higher Education Funding Council for England, “Research Excellence Framework Consultation Outcomes”.
 17. For debates and critiques see Collini; British Academy; Corbyn, “Thousands”, “REF Rivals”, “Research Intelligence”; Riesz.
 18. See also Charnes (“Anticipating Nostalgia” 73).

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