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GIULIANA IANACCARO

**INTRODUCTION:
EMPOWERING SHAKESPEARE**

When Alessandra Petrina and myself first circulated our proposal for a special issue on “Shakespeare as the Voice of Established Power”, many scholars who answered our call offered to investigate the use of Shakespearean quotations as a cultural weapon against oppression. They chose to interpret the topic we addressed in accordance with the vast majority of literary and cultural studies on Shakespearean adaptations and appropriations of the last fifty years – that is, as powerful artistic means to question, challenge and demythologise oppressive powers in any given time and place. Reading those proposals, we could not escape the impression that most would-be contributors to the volume were rather taken aback by the idea of investigating Shakespeare as a tool of cultural and political domination. Indeed, the image of an intrinsically positive and ethically unblemished literary and moral authority – whatever use we make of it – seems to surface almost automatically as soon as we start discussing ‘Shakespeare’.

In recent years, indeed, a wide variety of critical studies have investigated the use of Shakespeare's works to question and debunk the way in which the political, religious, and cultural establishment has supported its hegemonic agenda for centuries through the voice of the Bard. Shakespeare's plays have catalysed the creative efforts of artists in all fields: stage adaptations, transpositions, parodies, and translations, which have come under critical scrutiny since the 1980s, have often been made to speak the voice of the oppressed and marginalised to react against a dominant, Anglo-centric ideology. Scholars from all over the world have enthusiastically taken up the challenge and analysed this new and unexpected lease of life given to the writer.

However, together with contemporary re-readings of Shakespeare's plays as a way to speak forcefully against oppression, discrimination, and racism, there are fewer (but no less significant) recent critical investigations that take up the challenge of exploring a more dated but persistent phenomenon: the use of Shakespeare's status as a classic within the English, and indeed worldwide, literary tradition in order to impose and enforce political and cultural domination. As an icon of quintessentially English principles and values, Shakespeare has become, very early in the history of British imperialism, one of the essential cultural products of the colonial enterprise within and without the national borders. Before representing vigorously the voice of the oppressed, Shakespeare was celebrated as the ideal spokesman for those who wanted to extol the voice of the English Bard to enforce and justify a white, male, anglocentric/protestant/suprematist discourse.

In due time, the volume took its present shape, and we are grateful to its authors for dealing with quotations in the light of pivotal issues, like the use of Shakespeare as a celebrated source of literary, moral, and political authority; as eminent spokesman for nationalism and military action; as the

‘great educator’ of both Western citizens and colonial subjects; as the reassuring tutelary deity who brings order to a chaotic present; and, finally, as a matchless creative force at the basis of modern language and literature. This short introduction to the volume is meant to go through the various critical issues discussed in the book’s six chapters and make explicit the connections between them.

The topic of Shakespearean quotations as sources of absolute authority – quotations to which, paradoxically, that same authority is repeatedly conferred by the very act of quoting – permeates the whole volume. It is possible to address the issue of the dual nature of quotations by reflecting on the alternative meanings of the phrase “empowering Shakespeare”. With ‘empowering’ intended as an adjective, authority descends from the playwright and informs, as from above, the words of others; used as a verb, that same term underlines the complementary effect that quotations have on their source texts: they empower them by acknowledging their notoriety, their necessity, and ultimately their prestige. In the case of William Shakespeare, this double movement has gone on for centuries, and its effects are still singularly poetic.

With a view to investigating the conservative quality of quotations, Shakespeare’s literary and moral authority have always been in close relation. Given the cultural pre-eminence of the English playwright throughout the centuries, all contributors to the volume have addressed the issue of Shakespeare as a moral guide, both in favour and against ideological and political conformity. In the case of Luigi Marfé’s chapter, which deals with cultural propaganda during the First World War, there is a total correspondence between culture, nation, and the moral standing of the British subjects, who are expected to respond readily and proudly to their country’s call. In fact, Marfé reminds us that besides the British use of Shakespeare to exploit his “symbolic capital” for the purposes of war

propaganda, there were other European countries – first and foremost the German enemy – which retraced the steps of their country’s history through a “nostrification” of the English Bard, and capitalised on a foreign literary tradition made domestic. A similar protean attitude towards the symbolic and moral value of the playwright’s words is shown in Giuliana Iannaccaro’s chapter on early twentieth-century quotations from Shakespeare by mission-educated South African writers. In that case, the link between a foreign, dominant literary tradition and the moral authority attached to it proved indispensable to uphold the missionaries’ claims not only to cultural superiority but, even more importantly, to the necessity of their moralising action. Moreover, together with anglophone missionaries, also their native alumni concurred in the celebration of Shakespeare as the paramount literary model and ethical guide.

Marfe’s and Iannaccaro’s case studies can also be put in dialogue addressing the question of nationalism. Germany appropriated the English playwright’s words to sustain its belligerent cause in the Great War, thus glorifying the nation in the name of a literary tradition that was not the country’s own (although previously acquired through the reading of the great Romantics). Similarly, coeval South African writers used Shakespeare in the name of their occupied land, and Herbert Dhlomo, the author addressed in this volume, was particularly keen on ‘ventriloquising’ his cherished English literary source to shape and justify his vision of a peaceful South African nation to come, liberated from violence, discrimination, and oppression. Dhlomo, in addition, wrote almost exclusively in English because his nationalistic drive was more important to him than supporting native languages. The linguistic colonisation that centuries of anglophone domination had bestowed on the country could at least be exploited to achieve what, according to many South African intellectuals, would otherwise have been impossible: that is, the shaping of

a nation sharing one common language, which made it possible not only to communicate among different ethnic groups but also, for the people, to feel part of a new whole. The issue of language as an element of national cohesion and nationalistic pride connects us to Iolanda Plescia's chapter, in which the question of Shakespeare as "the father of English" is investigated from a revisionist perspective: the myths of Shakespeare's matchless lexical inventiveness and of the exceptional size of his vocabulary are peculiarly resilient, in spite of the quantity and quality of studies that have problematised both assertions. Undoubtedly, the propensity to attribute (also) a linguistic pre-eminence to the most celebrated English playwright goes hand in hand with what Plescia defines as a "narrative of greatness". If the early modern period is to be considered as "*the* period in which English 'came into its own'", then the myth of Shakespeare as a "primary cause of change" perfectly fits the need of a prestigious forefather; indeed, that myth has fed the nationalistic agenda for a long time, and still proves very hard to dismiss.

Luigi Marfé's and Maria Grazia Dongu's chapters are closely related from another viewpoint: both discuss the exploitation of the Shakespearean icon in the context of the Great War. If Marfé, as mentioned above, studies the practice of quoting Shakespeare for political and military reasons, Dongu's essay investigates the friction between war propaganda – celebrating an idealised Britannia which defends itself from evil – and the ensuing reflection on the reality of war. In Virginia Woolf's and Frederic Manning's war novels, the role of Shakespeare as the great demystifier of deceptive ideologies is counterbalanced by the side effects that quotations from his plays have on the reader: at least temporarily, the fragments singled out from the Bard's plays and recontextualised in the narratives do stand for the voice of established power, reminding the reader of Shakespeare's pivotal role in enforcing the British subjects' ready response

to their country's call. The same happens in Andrea Peghinelli's discussion of the much more recent *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, a play written by Tim Crouch in 2012. Indissolubly related to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the twenty-first-century play radically appropriates and recontextualises Shakespeare; by so doing, it also celebrates it in its orthodox form. In Peghinelli's words, "the incidence of certain quotations – whether intentional, casual, or disembodied – emphasises the conservative authority of the Shakespearean text and therefore its capacity to provide iconic models of symbolic or political signification".

There is a last aspect related to Shakespearean quotations that connects the volume's chapters: namely, the image of the English playwright as the 'principle' that brings order to a chaotic present. In Dorothy Sayers' literary world, investigated by Alessandra Petrina, chaos intrudes suddenly on an otherwise ordered universe in the form of murder. In accordance with the conventions of early twentieth-century detective fiction, only the specially gifted (and well-read) investigator will finally be able to put things back in their place by restoring law and order. In the case of Sayers, literary authority and detective ability are even more closely associated: a sophisticated knowledge of literary classics, over which William Shakespeare predictably towers, helps the detective to interpret the signs that murderers leave behind; in Petrina's words, "Shakespearean quotations in general are often the clue to the crime, or to the identity of the culprit". Moreover, Sayers uses the playwright's icon as an "infallible compass in the detection not so much of crime, but of the principle of right and wrong". Thus, the figure of Shakespeare as a moral guide – discussed at the beginning of this introduction – resurfaces here in the form of an ethical compass present both within and without the literary world. Sayers uses Shakespeare to convey to her readers an underlying moral message that concerns not only fiction but also life; similarly, as we have seen, the

relevance of Shakespeare as a moralising force appears in Marfé's, Dongu's, and Iannaccaro's chapters. Going back to the question of order and chaos, Tim Crouch's contemporary dramatic world is also morally confused, and Peghinelli makes clear that the recourse to Shakespearean quotations helps the audience to confront the critical issues of the play; these have to do first and foremost with the concepts of authority and authorship, both of which are problematised by the character of Cinna. The task of finding answers to the play's questions is entrusted to the young audiences for whom it was written, who are, in addition, personally involved in the performance. Peghinelli remarks that only a few fragments of the source text survive in Crouch's appropriation; nevertheless, "Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is still *the text* from which the protagonist quotes – and sometimes misquotes – at topical moments, thus preserving its authority as a model and its iconic power".

The contributors to "*A Glass of Godly Form*": *Shakespeare as the Voice of Established Power* successfully remind us of the conservative nature of quotations in an age that has been working on adaptations, transpositions, parodies, and appropriations on an unprecedented scale. Together with the reinvigorating power of derivative texts and their remarkable capacity to challenge religious, political, and cultural establishments, the other side of the coin – the use of well-known literary sources to enforce domination – still persists. In the case of Shakespeare, the creative force of his literary production is such a worldwide phenomenon that it is impossible to keep track of its daily growth. And yet, quotations from his plays 'strike back' and legitimate power at the same time: they can speak forcefully against oppression *and* support established authority, even unintentionally. Indeed, each line from Shakespeare, 'casual' and decontextualised as it may be, takes us back to those myths – of greatness, of origin, of unchallenged authority – we still live by.

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