# PAST CRIMSON, PAST WOE

*The Shakespeare–Beckett Connection*

*edited by*

Anne Marie Drew

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# GENERAL EDITOR'S NOTE

*Past Crimson, Past Woe: The Shakespeare–Beckett Connection* makes a unique contribution to Garland Publishing's Studies in Modern Drama. In this volume of essays about the Shakespeare–Beckett "connection," Anne Marie Drew has brought together the research of established scholars in Renaissance and Modern drama and observations by theater professionals to illuminate the works of both playwrights in new ways, providing readers with yet another method of understanding them. While Shakespeare's relevance to contemporary theater was first noted three decades ago, the present volume goes beyond what appeared then to be a bleak comparison of Shakespeare and Beckett's despairing world views to a present emphasis on the authors' shared confidence in humanity's capacity to endure.

A professor in the English Department at the United States Naval Academy, Anne Marie Drew has written scholarly articles for *Theatre Journal, Comparative Literature Studies,* and Garland Publishing's *Simon Gray: A Casebook.* She has presented papers at the Beckett Symposium in the Netherlands in 1992 and at the Pinter Festival at Ohio State University in 1991. The recipient of grants for research at the Beckett Archives, the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Covent Garden Theater Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, Drew brings years of study and analysis to her findings in Shakespeare and Beckett. Her ability to synthesize the interpretations of others who share her interest in this fascinating topic will make *Past Crimson, Past Woe* invaluable to scholars and general readers of the playwrights. Perhaps, even more importantly the book leads to an examination of theater itself, its capacity to reflect universal values in seemingly disparate cultures.

Kimball King

# INTRODUCTION

In Adrian Noble's 1982 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *King Lear,* Lear accidentally stabbed and killed his Fool. The death came during the mock trial scene as the jester stood in an ashbin, brandishing a pillow in front of his chest. When Lear decided to "anatomize Regan," he stabbed the Fool's pillow as if it were the hardened heart of his treacherous daughter. The audience knew immediately, as Lear never did, that the Fool was mortally wounded. The loyal servant forced out his last line with great effort, then crumbled into the ashbin. Later, Edgar covered the ashbin with a sheet.

Adrian Noble's symbol of the Fool dead in an ashbin provides a stunning representation of what Herbert Blau calls the "familiar terrain" (125) between William Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett. That terrain has long been discernible to directors and performers. Blau's own work with the San Quentin actors and Peter Brook's 1964 *Lear* were early manifestations of the Shakespeare-Beckett connection. More recently, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, in speaking of her performance as Winnie in *Happy Days,* suggests that "playing Shakespeare for many years before encountering Beckett" may well account for her strong response to the rhythms of Beckett's language. (Ben-Zvi 11)

Beckett's literary allusions provide yet another manifestation of the Shakespeare-Beckett terrain. Let one example suffice here. In a 1975 production notebook from the Old Vic, Samuel Beckett identified the sources of the literary allusions in *Happy Days.* Of the fourteen identified, five are Shakespearean. Certainly, there is critical satisfaction in knowing that Winnie's line "woe woe is me" is her struggling attempt to remember Ophelia's lines and that the name of her lipstick, "Ensign crimson," echoes Romeo's lament as he gazes at the supposedly-dead Juliet's lips and cheeks. Such intertextual matching

simultaneously satisfies a natural, critical curiosity and provides clear evidence that Shakespeare is one of the influences at work on Beckett.

However, any discussion of the Shakespeare-Beckett connection leads us beyond intertextual matchings, beyond bleak images of death in ashbins, to an examination of the nature of theatre itself. In the works of both men we view characters trying to rid themselves of the plague. The "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" that assail Hamlet may not be the same as those that cause Hamm to suffer; the "thousand ills that flesh is heir to" will wear differently on Mrs. Rooney than they will on Gertrude. The questions left unanswered at the end of *The Winter's Tale* will be different from those at the end of *Waiting for Godot.* Nevertheless, as these essays suggest, the slings and the ills and the questions evoke feelings of helplessness that transcend both optimistic bromides and historical markers.

Our particular twentieth-century helplessness in the face of global wars and nuclear threats carries us close to the Elizabethan fear of anarchy and civil war. True, Elizabeth's reign brought with it a stability unknown in the three previous Tudor reigns, but her continual refusal to secure the succession combined with the Catholic threat of Mary, Queen of Scots, created a constant fear of anarchy and revolution. In *Power on Display*, Leonard Tennenhouse alludes to the "peculiar form of anxiety" (23) which flows from continual uncertainty about the succession—an uncertainty that ruined Elizabeth's father, Henry. His severance from Rome cut to the lifeblood of thousands of believers who suddenly found themselves grappling with fear and confusion. The successive coronations of Protestant Edward, Catholic Mary, and Protestant Elizabeth agitated an existence that was already scarred by the constant fear of plague and pestilence.

As late as 1585 outlawed Jesuits in England could command exorcism audiences that numbered in the hundreds. Stephen Greenblatt explains in *Shakespearean Negotiations* the fascination such rituals held for a populace that had been ostensibly Protestant for decades (94). While Greenblatt warns that such historical incident should not serve as a "well-lighted pigeonhole," his argument suggests that such interest in demoniacs and the Catholic ritual of exorcism belies any tidy understanding of the world as an intrinsically ordered one.

Certainly Shakespeare's theocentric world was ordered in a way that ours is not, and that very theocentrism, however muddled, could serve as an existential anchor; but the perfect love, the perfect faith that

casts out fear is known to only a few sainted souls, no matter what the century. Individual helplessness in the face of overwhelming and mysterious odds is terrifying. Faced with the possibility of annihilation or loss of control, human beings try to accommodate the fear in any way that they can. Their dramatic portrayal of this fear forms a central link between the worlds of William Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett.

This connection is argued by Jan Kott in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, wherein Kott categorically claims that Beckett and Brecht are closer to Shakespeare in spirit than any other playwrights in intervening centuries. Kott accepts as a given that Shakespeare's vision of the world is similar to that of the absurdists. While anyone studying Shakespeare and Beckett must begin with Kott, I am not ready to accept the dark vision which allows him to dismiss Touchstone and Feste as "jeering and bitter" (163) and to ascribe desperation as the motivation for much of human endeavor.

Undoubtedly, the works of Shakespeare and Beckett cry out against any optimistic bromides; however, it is myopic to ignore the glints of life in their plays. In her study, *Beckett's Critical Complicity: Carnival, Contestation, and Tradition*, Sylvie Debevec Henning states that "Beckett should not be . . . considered an embittered, simply negative, opponent of the Western tradition" (6). John Russell Brown identifies the sheer endurance that allows the characters of both playwrights to "live in their imaginations on the brink of extinction, saying as much as they can, and more than they could" (43). In identifying the mythic patterns in Beckett's plays, Katherine Burkman writes of the "meanings that linger in the mythical fragments" and "the creation of new myths" (13). Early on, Martin Esslin noted "how rich [Shakespeare's] plays are in precisely the same type of inverted logical reasoning, false syllogism, free association, and the poetry of real or feigned madness that we find in the plays of Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter" (49). Discussing Beckett's style in *Samuel Beckett's New Worlds: Style in Metafiction*, Susan Brienza recognizes that Winnie's fragments in *Happy Days* and the classical allusions of the narrator in *How It Is* span the centuries, creating a "timeless narrator who can represent all human beings and all writers" (95). Ruby Cohn identifies the "quest for being" that marks the Shakespeare–Beckett connection (230).

Still, the glints of life manifest in the Shakespeare–Beckett connection cannot mask the eternal uncertainties found there.

Sometimes it is Krapp's near-fall on a banana skin or the vaudevillian techniques of the one player in *Act without Words I* that graphically remind us of the precarious nature of human existence. Boethian Fortune and relentless Time, which in Shakespeare demonstrate the potentially pawn-like nature of our lives, in Beckett's hands become the inquisitor's voice of Bam in *What Where* and the inescapable camera (E) in *Film.* In the works of both playwrights we encounter characters who struggle to solve the riddles, multiple and horrid as those riddles may be. We meet characters who fight to finish their stories, even if the stories do not yield the desired endings. In the midst of terror and bone-wearying exhaustion, one hears the indomitable human spirit, fighting back against the plague: "I can't go on; I'll go on."

* * *

In the first essay William Hutchings argues that the "frequently bleak metaphors for the human condition" and the "often grim laughter" which characterize such plays as *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, and *Measure for Measure* are congruent" with the world view that is so inimitably Beckett's own." Hutchings' maintains that "Beckett's use of the later works of the Shakespeare canon provides a new perspective on crucial moments of the existential absurd."

Verna Foster in "'A sad tale's best for winter': Storytelling and Tragicomedy in the Late Plays of Shakespeare and Beckett," accepts Isaak Dinesen's view that "any sorrow can be borne if a story can be told about it." Thus, Foster identifies the tragicomic links between Shakespeare and Beckett when she writes that Shakespearean and Beckettian storytellers "narrate tragic events but in the telling modulate them towards comedy and by their presence reassure the audience of some more consoling resolution than the story itself seems at first to offer."

Ann C. Hall's "'Though women all above . . . Beneath is all the fiend's': Female Trouble in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*," demonstrates the critical surprises that sometimes result from a comparison of these two authors. Hall discovered that the "representation of female difference in both plays does not uphold the traditional, patriarchal stereotypes of female behavior." One might think, Hall argues that Lear's "oft-quoted

condemnation and obsession with female genitalia" and Winnie's buried sexual organs indicate that women "remain stuck in patriarchal mud." Not so. Hall maintains that the "seemingly misogynistic representation of female genitalia and desire" in these plays actually questions rather than endorses marginalization and oppression of women.

In "No Safe Spaces: Private and Public Violability in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and Beckett's *Happy Days*," Jeanne Colleran and Maryclaire Moroney demonstrate the "complete and final concealment" that surrounds women for whom there are "finally, no safe spaces, nothing privately or publicly inviolable."

The next two essays, Victoria Sullivan's and my own, comment on thematic links between pairs of plays. In "Clowns, Fools, and Blind Men," Victoria Sullivan examines the structural and spiritual affinities which link *King Lear* and *Waiting for Godot*. As she examines the multiple pairings in both plays, Sullivan identifies a permeating sense of ennui and despair. However, in Lear's universe as well as Godot's, there is a sense of survival which cannot be negated.

In "No Deposit, No Return: The Cap and Bells in *Hamlet* and *Endgame*," I argue that Hamlet and Hamm's acceptance of their own mortality flows, in part, from their ridicule of and engagement with Polonius and Clov, their "foolish inferiors." Both the Danish Prince and his modern namesake try to impose order on existential chaos by engaging in folly. The dramatic representation of that engagement forms one part of the Shakespeare–Beckett connection.

The psychology of despots is examined by Robert Anderson and Steven J. Rosen in "Beckett's Hamm and Shakespeare's Richard III: A Couple of Canettian Autocrats." Using the work of Nobel Prize winner, Elias Canetti, Rosen and Anderson identify several links between Hamm and Richard—for example, their mutual petulance and self-pity; their demand for horses; their oscillation between megalomania and paranoia, and their "demand to be centrally situated."

Laura Marvel's essay, "The Failure of *Telos* in *King Lear* and *Endgame*," is closest in spirit to the work of Jan Kott. Marvel sees in Lear and Hamm two characters "who desire but are denied an ending." Both plays, she claims, "share a surprisingly tragic vision precipitated by the failure of *telos*."

Kellie Harrison Bean sees a similar bleakness of vision in *Hamlet* and *Endgame*. Her essay, "The End Is in the Beginning: Story

Telling in Shakespeare, Beckett (and Stoppard)," deals with the inevitability of human suffering as it is mirrored in the "irresistible oedipal desire for discovery and closure drama insistently encourages us to believe we can satisfy." No matter how many times we try to tell our stories, Bean argues, such satisfaction is not forthcoming.

In "Critical Figures: Shakespeare, Beckett, and the Survival of Theatre," Judith Roof suggests that comparing Shakespeare and Beckett reminds us that "theatre transcends time, and more important, surmounts the dehumanizing forces that reduce the world to commodity exchange, produce sterility, and render artistic vision null and void." Analyzing the ways in which dramatic theorists use the "icons" of Shakespeare and Beckett, Roof argues that both playwrights are the same: "transcendent figures whose transgressive work captures the universal nature of both theatre and humanity."

The last two essays by the director Dwight Watson and the actor Edward Atienza bring the discussion on to the boards, as the authors describe the vital connections that become apparent in rehearsal and performance. Watson takes us inside his productions of *The Tempest* and *Waiting for Godot*. With stories of Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, and Bert Lahr, Atienza shares the insights of a lifetime spent playing Shakespearean and Beckettian roles.

As the first collection of essays devoted solely to a discussion of the Shakespeare and Beckett connection, this volume continues and shapes a discussion that began, perhaps, with Jan Kott and Martin Esslin—it is a discussion that will carry us well past crimson and certainly past woe.

Anne Marie Drew
Annapolis
February 1993

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# "AS STRANGE A MAZE AS E'ER MAN TROD": SAMUEL BECKETT'S ALLUSIONS TO SHAKESPEARE'S LAST PLAYS

William Hutchings

Had it not been first applied to certain of Shakespeare's later plays by William Witherle Lawrence in 1931, the term "problem comedy" would surely have to have been invented for those of Samuel Beckett. Like Shakespeare's "so-called gloomy comedies" (Lawrence viii), Beckett's plays—from the initial "tragicomedy" of *Waiting for Godot* through the briefest late "dramaticules"—are often morally perplexing and intellectually discomfiting, evoking not only bewilderment among theatergoers who approach them unawares but also critical controversy even among those who are more familiar with his works.[1] Yet while the affinities between Shakespeare's tragedies and Beckett's works have long (and rightly) been noted, the presence of the later plays has received less attention—though the frequently bleak metaphors for the human condition, the often grim laughter, and the preoccupation with death and worldly "last things" that characterize such plays as *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, and *Measure for Measure* are certainly congruent with a world-view that is so inimitably Beckett's own. Through methods ranging from direct quotation to more oblique allusion and "glosses," Beckett has incorporated specific Shakespearean analogues from the "problem" plays and *The Tempest* directly into his own best-known plays. Frequently, he has made literal some of the most bleak metaphors from Shakespeare's works—images in which, notwithstanding the palliative effects of the more traditional "happy endings" and/or rhetorical melioration, an essentially absurdist