

Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now

Criticism and Theory in the 21st Century

EDITED BY
CARY DIPIETRO AND HUGH GRADY



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Foreword: "A Bigger Splash"

Terence Hawkes

Aging offers curious pleasures and one of them involves our experience of the past. Like most people, I can remember many events that lodge in the mind with some urgency. Some are more obviously important than others: explosions, accidents, the deaths of presidents and monarchs. Some are wholly personal: births, deaths, songs, books, films, and plays. They all exist in the flurry of circumstances with which experience surrounds us. Then, as the years develop, some that seemed irretrievably personal seem to acquire a specific, nonpersonal dimension. An actor becomes extremely famous, a book gains popularity, a film begins a trend, a politician rises to eminence. Certain events seem to become underlined: they stand out, their progress can be plotted, their lifecycle is fixed, they subside, or ascend, into a quite different realm of being. We are often surprised to discover that they are not simply events that have occurred "in the past": they have become "history."

This sense, that history is made in the collective mind and not by the single percipient, is part of everyone's experience. What we call "history" is transmitted or awarded not while we experience things but much later, subsequently and after we have watched them. The idea is neatly presented in W. H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," as Breughel's painting of the fall of Icarus focuses on that phenomenon. It is clear that the tragedy of Icarus's flight to freedom is barely noticed by anybody as it occurs, and that the moment is only marked in the museum by a painting that depicts the event almost in its absence:

... how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure: the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

The essence of the poem proposes that, until now, we have not been able to articulate what happened then. The “Musée des Beaux Arts,” acting perhaps in the way that art ought to, indicates what the people portrayed in the painting do not see. Their “now” subsequently establishes what we see as the “then.” There is a quite different poem on Brueghel’s painting written by William Carlos Williams, called “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” It navigates different territory, but reaches a similar conclusion:

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was Icarus drowning

We live in a confusing and perplexed world at the mercy of innumerable pressures, but perhaps we can be guided by the example of Icarus. With his “quite unnoticed” splash in mind, it would be foolish to erect a clear and firm notion of what any myth or fable or art can bring to or represent in our culture. In the case of Shakespeare, our sense of the role offered by his theatre and his plays seems almost literally up for grabs. Economic pressures, political processes, educational programs all want a piece of the Bard, and the evidence provided by an anthology called *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now* will do well to respect these claims. To look for one specific symptom or set of concerns that includes all the other claimants would be impossible. However, there is one obvious issue that perhaps prevails and its spoor manifests itself quite distinctly in the current jungle. It is one that unites all the recent and powerful new discourses, all the new readings and reweaving of the work of a playwright from 400 years ago, and in the process it generates various frames of reference that demand attention. It involves the notion of history.

The sense that we *make* history, that we *have* to make it, and that we can therefore hope to choose which histories we *do* make, leads snugly into the issue of how the past and the present coexist in us and how each affects the other. When we consider the notion of Shakespeare's "urgency of now" with which the pieces in the

present volume are concerned, this becomes supremely important. The surface of contemporary consciousness produces many bubbles and all kinds of surprising and apparently unconnected winds burst and whistle through them. Yet it is also true that these dissimilar institutional, economic, and environmental pressures seem to make use of Shakespeare as a distinctive cultural enterprise. Of course, we could treat each of Shakespeare's plays as an independent signifying object in its own right, with its own commitment to an early seventeenth-century process of cause and effect. However, this does not deal with the massive "Shakespeare" role that all of the plays have in our culture. As Hugh Grady and Cary DiPietro argue in the Introduction to this volume, the concern here is with the whole of the "Shakespeare" issue in our society. Given that the theoretical innovations of our world "draw from the discourses of our present historical moment," they feel quite rightly that they need to focus on a movement that most clearly emerged in the wake of the apparent triumph of historicism.¹ The essence of the "urgency of now" is quite clearly focused in what replaced it. They call it "critical Presentism."

We know, nevertheless, that the problem of history is long-dwelling and we must avoid one major Scylla and one Charybdis. The first is noted by the historian E. H. Carr and is indicated by the magic words used by three generations of historians: *Wie es eigentlich gewesen* (as it actually happened). As Carr indicates, this is "like an incantation—designed like most incantations to save them from the tiresome obligation to think for themselves."² The Charybdis is mentioned by Sir George Clark, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Modern History*. It claims that "since all historical judgements involve persons and points of view, one is as good as another and there is no 'objective' historical truth."³

Of course, certain truths seem inescapable. Still, it is the case that they do not tell us finally "what actually happened" on the one hand, or alternatively suggest that one judgment is necessarily as good as another. The events of September 3, 1939 (the date Britain and France declared war on Germany) seem to represent an evident truth in respect of European and indeed world history. However, there is also a sense in which something much less concrete or objective is also true. A different response, for instance, took place to this event in the United States (which declared war on Germany

on December 11, 1941), and the response of Germany and its allies, including Russia, would also no doubt have been different.

In a different key, many at the first performance of *Hamlet* would have recognized the name of the playwright in question, but the bulk of the audience would never have read any of Shakespeare's works. Most of them could not read.⁴ I always hoped to surprise some of my younger students by suggesting that Shakespeare had never read Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Keats, or Shelley. But the truth is that by now, in the modern world, of course he has. We cannot separate Shakespeare from the literature that came after (as well as before) him in our culture and that makes us respond to him as part and parcel of what that literature in the end involves. This will include both its principles of inclusion and exclusion: what the literary canon requires that we read and what for various reasons it forbids. These constitute the unstated but rigid principles by which what we call literature licenses how we concern ourselves with the world. The same is equally the case if we include major thinkers like Marx or Freud. Shakespeare certainly influenced both of these philosophers and the plain truth is that now they influence him. To deny that is to deny the necessary reverberation and reechoing in that continuing memory vault in which all cultures persist. To accept it helps to initiate the discussion of Presentism.

Presentism presents us with an unending dialogue between present and past, and demands interaction between what we call "facts" from both ends of that 400-year channel of time. The undeniable patterns that the present imposes on the past, its notions "of which literary figures to lionize, which to mythologize, and of what stimulates the desire to make meanings of texts from earlier historical conjectures," assume primary importance.⁵ Major concerns will be with the questions of "place," and of history "in a place," whether this is concerned with space, time, or culture, and there is no doubt that the essays presented here clearly take time to deal with that question.

For instance, in Lynne Bruckner's chapter she indicates that the issue of the environment and its relation to human beings has a crucial role. Nobody is able to legislate for significant environmental change, unless that change leads to further degradation of the world in which we live. This continues a pattern that she observes in *Richard II* indicating how the king mandates the exploitation of natural resources, which shadows the human and nonhuman

worlds. Only at Richard's death does he find the "human humus" from which the plant-like Bolingbroke will grow. From a similar viewpoint, Cary DiPietro's careful essay considers our attachment to "place" and to a sense of belonging to a particular place in the world. His chapter on *The Tempest* poses a crucial question: how does our ethical commitment to the preservation of places of cultural heritage or the integrity of local ecology square with the ways in which theatre functions and perhaps commit us to collapsing geographical and temporal distances in generating a worldview? Interestingly, the theatre's illusion of nearness to place may in fact motivate an "ethic of responsibility" toward ecology, which combines our felt attachment to place with the theatre's roles as a virtual network of global information.⁶

The broader issue of place also concerns Julia Reinhart Lupton. As her essay on *Pericles* observes, the past and present are linked by the play's emphasis on "a church of craft"; that is, "an environment where any and all acts of making have value to our humanness."⁷ In those experiments in living constructed within her shelter—almost an academy—Marina exercises a deliberate form of craftivism designed to secure and transmit a range of knowledges, virtues, and comportments, which foster the possibility of politics. So the play uses culture to embody "the urgency of the now" with particular reference to the present place of performance, in the theatre. *Pericles* thus investigates human efforts to generate political speech out of theological and biopolitical forms of life, and seems to urge drama's commitment to transformation through theatrical making, active audition, and hermeneutic reencounter. As a result, on the stage, Marina becomes almost a priestess of culture.

However, this volume does not offer a "Presentism" that collapses past and present into a transcendent timelessness. In fact, it acknowledges the process and the practice of what dialogue with the past actually entails. Essentially, it offers a demonstration of a process rather than a theoretical manifesto, a series of gestures that allows the critic to lay his cards on the table, while at the same time showing in surprising ways how "the political unconscious" works in particular situations. Indeed, "making meaning," as I have characterized this activity elsewhere, requires the active preservation of the scholarly critic, alive to contemporary social, political, and cultural concerns and with a capacity that extends far beyond the restricted and

restrictive ideological business of mobilizing "judgment."⁸ In this respect, Charles Whitney's chapter adds a necessary economic gloss to the notion of place. It links the early modern assault on commons rights to today's assault on the environmental commons, juxtaposing the present historical moment to the moment of *As You Like It*. Whitney traces parallels between today's so-called New Economics, which is strongly inflected by green tendencies, and traditional, morally inflected economic attitudes and practices of the early modern period.

It is important that the realm of the aesthetic takes up two of the essays in this volume. Hugh Grady's chapter is quite specific, saying that the interpretation of Shakespeare is always closely linked to the aesthetic practices and assumptions of the interpreter's era, and it is hard to disagree with that. Approaching the subject historically, he argues that aesthetics now seems to be secular, in that it includes the political. This has an impact on such Shakespeare plays as *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*. Grady makes the point that in both of these works, Shakespeare implies a concept of the aesthetic as an aspect of an emerging secular modernity, one that uses death and mourning as resources to create tragic and tragi-comic beauty. Meanwhile, Mark Robson urges that within Shakespeare's texts an aesthetics of dissociation prevails. Characters remark on something as extraneous or outlandish and the effect is a process of formal estrangement, in which the presentation of that content is itself strange. In the case of *Julius Caesar*, this is most obviously conveyed as a relation between time and death, in which the emphasis is placed on a "trembling" between predictability and unpredictability. The frequent invocation of omens, portents, dreams, soothsaying, and so on marks a desire to master the future that is repeatedly frustrated. The oscillation between the known and the unknown—for characters and for the audience—takes on a particular political charge with the play's staging of debates over sovereignty, legitimacy, and the mechanics of power. The numerous strategies that characters and the play offer for controlling—or failing to control—the future are related back to a consideration of the structural and formal openness of Shakespearean drama itself.

Given this shifting between known and unknown, the question of what we think of as the fundamental rock of the Shakespeare experience, the text of the plays, naturally also draws considerable

Presentist attention. We know that playscripts began as handwritten authorial papers and that these, or copies of them, must have been licensed by the state censor. We know that someone must have written out single actors' parts, with each containing just the speeches spoken by one character plus the cues. Perhaps the songs were written out on further pieces of paper and taken away for setting to music, and "letters"—and other documents to be read aloud as part of the action—must have been copied out to make properties. The more we think about it, the more it seems that the artistic unity of an early modern playscript disappears before our eyes and in its place emerges a collection of mutable fragments leading semi-independent lives in the textual economy of the early modern theatre. As Gabriel Egan observes, this is disturbingly well suited to our dominant post-theoretical, post-modern, Presentist taste for the fragmentary over the coherent, the mutable over the stable, multiplicity over singularity. However, Egan's essay explores some of the consequences that develop when editors are willing to emend, finding the paradoxical effect that radical textual interventions may produce conservative readings and conservative editing may produce radical readings.

Against this background, more than one notion of "staging" is discussed in this volume. Of course, this sort of commitment has a long history. More than 40 years ago in the 1960s, John Barton and Peter Hall committed themselves to a kind of "Presentism" in the staging of their significant production of *The Wars of the Roses*. As Peter Hall put it, "There is no such thing as a perfect and enduring interpretation, or one that lets 'the play speak for itself,'" adding "what follows is therefore an expression of what we found meaningful in the 1960s in Shakespeare's view of history. Its value is ephemeral, and its judgments are inevitably... of the decade which produced it and us."⁹ It is true that you cannot simply let a Shakespeare play "speak for itself." Other issues will have their say. Worse, all public discourses can find themselves recruited into the same narrative when one mode of discourse tips into another. They may seem to speak different things, but in effect they all seem to say the same thing. This is the sort of area when the aesthetics of a production, as well as the staging, becomes of great interest to the Presentist critic, particularly when the public discourses surrounding a production begin to infiltrate and even take over the production itself. For instance, when the subterranean movements of the John Profumo–Christine Keeler

affair surfaced in London in 1963–4, it produced a major scandal. John Profumo was the highly respected Member of Parliament for Stratford, no less, and his activities must certainly have generated a kind of public concern with heresy and revolution to which *The Wars of the Roses* would also have felt vitally connected. Certainly, most Presentist critics, particularly those concerned with the process of "making meaning," would think that worthy of notice.

The fact that public discourses may find themselves inhabiting a similar narrative to a play also sparks W. B. Worthen's essay, which looks at a delightful literary reconstitution or even a dramatic recrudescence of *Romeo and Juliet*. In a production by The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, two actors perform the play not simply, but rather in the form of the story of the play as it is recalled by eight participants, something that leads to what might be called a different shaping of history. In short, The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma offers a *Romeo and Juliet* that addresses the spectral status of Shakespeare as literary dramatist, and it indicates the social consequences of the principal paradigm that sustains a "literary" conception of drama in performance. In a casual, often embarrassed, even irritable discourse, it uses the performance of the play as a mode of inquiry into contemporary US culture. Like Mark Twain's comic version of *Romeo and Juliet*, it offers contemporary American speech to evidence a newly democratic, demotic Shakespeare. This newly formed Shakespeare's language is "imprecise... repetitive, slangy, cool rather than learned... and full of ums, ands, ahhs."¹⁰ As a result, The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma explores a widespread legitimation crisis, having to do with the relationship between Shakespeare's authorial inscription, his writing, and the forms of its cultural transmission—as literature, as theatre, and in contemporary pedagogy. Worthen takes an important Presentist concern with the political sense of a "ministerial" notion of theatre, in which performance essentially restates, "edits" or "interprets," literary drama by other means. He assesses the widespread publication of "modern" or "popular" translations of Shakespeare's plays and concludes that the concept that this offers mere "interpretations" of the text must surely be untrustworthy.

Most Presentists would agree heartily with this: "All history is contemporary history," as the Italian historian Benedetto Croce said. Indeed, it is on the battleground of the present, with all of its subterfuges, its deviations, its conflicts, and its resolutions, that the future

will be ultimately secured. Inherent in the activities of Presentism in this volume is a manifesto for future action that challenges both the mystifications to which literary texts have been subjected and many of those demystifications that have claimed to liberate it. Thus, it is important that we should also take up the part played in Britain by different non-English races, which have always occupied an important, sometimes even central role in the country's history and so impinge on its role in the present.

In short, we should not forget that Britain has certainly, since well before the Middle Ages, never been a simple funfair for the "English," but always a racial playground. A large number of those citizens involved in the relatively new entity called "Britain"—a massive ideological project that obsessed Tudor and Stuart politicians—either spoke odd varieties of English or were chiefly proficient in languages in addition to English. England was only one of the four civilizations that made Britain: the others were Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

To take merely one example, Shakespeare's Henry V proudly confessed that "I am a Welshman" and later "I am Welsh, you know, good countryman" (*Henry V*, 4.1.52 and 4.7.103). The actors who performed the plays would have contained at least two players who in fact speak Welsh on stage, Owain Glyndwr and his daughter, Lady Mortimer. The text of *1 Henry IV* indicates a completed interchange with her father: as the text says, "*Glyndwr speaks to her in Welsh, and she answers him in the same*," followed by three full speeches in which "*The lady speaks in Welsh*" (3.1.192–206), culminating in her singing of a "*Welsh song*" (238). The whole passage, in a language that is completely different from English, may take about ten minutes. Indeed, there was a time when prophecies about the return of the Welsh hero-king to rule over the whole island of Britain almost seemed about to come true. Henry VII was certainly a Welshman. He packed his court with his countrymen, named his eldest son Arthur, and took care to observe St. David's day. As the lineaments of the Tudor dynasty unfolded, Welsh speakers poured into London. As Gwyn A. Williams puts it, "An integrated Britain becomes visible first in a major migration of the Welsh to the centre of power," the process reaching its climax in the reign of Elizabeth I.¹¹ Under Elizabeth, denounced by A. L. Rowse as "that red-headed Welsh haridan," the "remote and distinguished past" of the Welsh effectively made available—at least in influential intellectual terms—some sort

of underpinning for the new "British" national identity. For English speakers, of course, that meant coming face to face with an almost unacceptable "given": it runs full tilt into a material human world that seems wholly other. Worse, shockingly, it is one that claims rights to the same island.

The current rise of nationalist sentiment throughout the world makes this issue very much a Presentist concern. However, since we began with the high-flying Icarus, then perhaps we should finish with him. Many poets have written about Icarus, and about Brueghel. However, one of the most interesting notions is contained in a disturbing painting—whose subject is not necessarily Icarus at all—by David Hockney. Deliberately pointing to the absence of any real sense of history, it suggests someone diving into a pool in California in which any semblance of an individual has been wholly removed. All we now see is a violent motion of the water. Perhaps we will rush to supply a figure, to make it indicate a person or an event. But the artist does not. The painting's title is the real clue about what Icarus seems to be representing for a world afflicted with multiple opportunities for meanings, from which, for a split second, it is required to make history. Here is history immediately before history is made: it is as if Icarus (if it is he) has only just entered the water and we know nothing about him or any of his adventures. We respond, stunned, to this "urgency of now." It is a fine example of a moment where Presentism astonishingly begins to drench us with the enormous—though brief—display of its powers. Its title seems wholly suitable for my foreword for this volume. It is called, simply, "A Bigger Splash."

Notes

1. Many people currently seem to be writing about history and Presentism with discernment and I daresay that I quote from some of them without overtly meaning to. In this paragraph, I'm quoting from DiPietro and Grady in their Introduction to this volume, p. 3, though also with reference to, amongst others, John Drakakis, "The Critical Process of Terence Hawkes," forthcoming in *Poetics Today*.
2. E. H. Carr, *What Is History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 8–9.
3. See *The New Cambridge Modern History* 1 (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press 1957), pp. xxiv–xxv.

4. It is as well to remember that the Elizabethans did not know themselves as "Elizabethans." The word "Tudor" was probably never used in that time to refer to Tudor monarchs.
5. Drakakis, "The Critical Process of Terence Hawkes," p. 11 (manuscript). I'm also using terms proposed by a variety of critics.
6. DiPietro, Chapter 6, p. 86.
7. Lupton, quoting the Church of Craft mission statement (online), Chapter 3, p. 60.
8. In my *Shakespeare in the Present* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 3–22.
9. John Barton and Peter Hall, *The Wars of the Roses* (London: BBC, 1970), pp. viii–ix.
10. Worthen, Chapter 7, p. 150.
11. See Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales* (London: Black Raven Press, 1985), pp. 121–3.

Acknowledgments

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