

ENVISIONING SHAKESPEARE / SHAKESPEARE ENVISIONED / INTERFACES

Helen M. Whall

The word “Shakespeare” might function well as an international Rorschach test. Reactions to that name, a noun which also serves as synecdoche for 38 plays, are as varied and as revealing as are responses to those ambiguous inkblots. Asked to “envision Shakespeare,” the man or woman on many of the world’s streets might describe a bearded man in doublet and hose while others would respond with memories of classroom experiences—some good, some not. Some would recall a school or summertime production while others would groan and say, “I never could understand that stuff.” Some would boast of reading plays with club mates on alternate Monday nights or profess their intentions to read them all in retirement. Few with an education will have no response.

Regrettably, Homer, Virgil, Spenser and Milton have become what Hamlet would call “caviar to the general,” or so it seems in the English speaking world. That singular and collective noun “Shakespeare,” however, continues to draw a nod of recognition. And though the charge is sometimes made that only a Shakespeare industry, led by a cabal of powerful English professors, keeps that poet’s name on course registers and library shelves, all that can be proved is that the phrase “powerful English professors” is an oxymoron. Counter-evidence abounds. Those who fully encounter his plays, no matter what their initial motives, usually sustain their interest, reading and seeing those plays as often as possible. Whether compelled by a curriculum, drawn in by a community theater, or merely rewarded with a stamp of social approval, real people read and attend Shakespeare because they want to. They even go on to read about Shakespeare and his world.

But why? Why Shakespeare? His genius, though extraordinary, does not necessarily dwarf the genius of those who wrote great Western epics. Yet Shakespeare did choose to write drama, the most innately visual and implicitly lively of all literary genres. That choice of genre may well explain why he, like Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, retains currency in the classroom and on the stage—though he, more than his Greek predecessors, also makes appearances in the movies, comic books, TV shows and even the virtual reality of an interactive Arden. That familiarity may well stem from Shakespeare’s own secular, commercial, and populist origins. Despite the efforts of Baconians, Oxfordians, and even some teachers, William Shakespeare remains a genius of the folk. The works now eponymous with his name retain their vitality.

In addition to being alive by virtue of performance, plays are also innately metaphoric—they are texts which explicitly serve as the vehicle for a yet-to-be realized tenor. Shakespeare's dramaturgy, moreover, creates and peoples worlds with a myriad of smaller metaphors, rich similes, and sustained images, all intertwined. His style is so visual, so imaginative, that his appeal even survives translation, though anyone attuned to the instrument we call language should still gasp at his range. The historical moment in which he lived and on which he commented helps assure Shakespeare's globalization. He wrote for the professional English theater even as it was being invented. He turned to classical and native tradition for inspiration yet privileged neither over the other; he experimented by necessity in each play he composed for an eager and restless public. Critics have traced that strain of controlled improvisation over the course of an astonishingly productive career. The inherent openness of his plays has in turn called out to theater professionals everywhere, urging all who stage his texts to take their own risks in performing them, making "Shakespeare," to paraphrase Ian Kott, always for our own times.

Shakespeare's plays also pulse with the life of a city, a nation, and empire in the process of becoming. His subject matter reflects a reality bursting at the seams; old and new ways of thinking and believing briefly co-exist, then jostle for primacy. Nor is the rancorous noise of church and state all that the playwright heard and captured. Writing for a known company of actors, working as an actor himself, Shakespeare gave form and substance to that early modern movement now called "self-fashioning." His plays record a cultural break from the medieval psyche even as they preserve memories of an older allegorical mode. One need not look for now-contested "universals" as an explanation for Shakespeare's long shelf-life. His plays, his long, complex metaphors meant to be performed, capture an era itself so complex that subsequent ages and their agents have inevitably recognized some aspect of his vision as theirs and thought, "Yes, that is a way of putting it."

Always a pragmatic genius, Shakespeare also hedged his bets. Even when theaters closed—and close they did and close they do when rulers fear their people—he had contributed over fifteen hundred words to the English language. Words like "moonbeam" and "eyeball," "alligator" and "assassin." In effect, Shakespeare left a body of dramatic work which asserts the same promise (or threat) that concludes so many of his love sonnets: As long as we have use for words like moonbeam and assassin, so long will Shakespeare be heard and help us see. He is the ultimate artist of the interface.

As the writers in this volume of *Interfaces 25* deftly demonstrate, scholars also vary greatly when asked to respond to a slightly re-fashioned verbal Rorschach: "Shakespeare Envisioned." More analytic by training than the man on the street, more informed by necessity about literature and drama than any woman struggling to survive in a global village, the authors of *Interfaces: Shakespeare*

Envisioned make clear that we have much still to learn not only from an analysis of how the playwright used words to envision reality but also from an analysis of how and why book makers and stage directors, movie producers and mere travelers “in search of Shakespeare” have envisioned him and his work the ways they have. Shakespeare has himself become a text. The authors of this volume, in helping Shakespeare’s readers become more aware of how he has been illustrated, staged, and yes, even appropriated make clear the role a mere artist has played in shaping the very ways *we* envision reality.

Stuart Sillars, with the craft and care of a dedicated scholar, examines how eighteenth and nineteenth century bookmen envisioned one play, *The Comedy of Errors*. Numerous illustrated editions of Shakespeare helped stage his plays on the page, extending his access to a household audience but also radically altering modes of reception. Sillars here presents 20 distinctive images from numerous editions, showing not only how these representations interpret the play but also how interpretation itself is affected by representation, and representation by changes in technology. His insights provoke much thought about the nature of narrative, the limitations of genre, and the ways in which a medium may become the message.

Reflections on the nineteenth century, suddenly become “two centuries ago,” fill half the pages of this volume. Life as post-moderns seems to have made the life of moderns who looked back at early modern times quite instructive. Who precisely are we now as we move through a millennium well under way if not under way well? Heidi Kolk’s monograph on nineteenth century American “pilgrims” to Stratford-on-Avon illustrates much about Shakespeare’s position in material, not just intellectual culture. The men and women whose words and images she restores to us clarify in a curious way our ongoing fascination with celebrity, our primitive notion that somehow we commune with the dead by walking where they walked, by sitting in their chairs. The stories of Stratford which Kolk recovers from travel writings and popular American magazines document an earnest wish for reality to conform to idealized dreams and an equally determined impulse to demystify and debunk. Though Kolk’s texts are distinctly American and almost poignantly nineteenth century, they provide a cautionary tale to all readers who do not acknowledge the dangers of Bardolatry.

Alycia Smith-Howard, a scholar and theater practitioner, shows us one way to defy the restrictions imposed by Bardolatry. Smith-Howard provides her readers with rare insight into the directorial process, revealing how she prepared herself to experiment with Shakespeare. We learn of her dialogue with the Victorian scholar Joseph Vining, a man who pronounced Hamlet a woman in hiding. After examining Vining’s questionable premises and then considering the many real nineteenth century women who chose to perform Hamlet on a stage which once forbade women to act at all, Smith-

Howard shares with us her vision of a twenty-first century female Hamlet. The resulting improvisation is thoroughly self-aware and thoroughly aware of self as the central theme of what many have found to be Shakespeare's most modern play.

Moving images, however, dominated late twentieth century visions of Shakespeare. Sarah Hautchel not only explores the ways and whys of cinematographic Shakespearean productions, she also debunks any notion that movie realism negates Shakespeare's call to imagination. Hautchel clarifies the role of the "diegetic" in cinema, showing how important off-screen action is to the making of movies, especially movie versions of Shakespeare's plays. After surveying the transformation from bare stage to realistic scenery and then from back lot to "on location," Hautchel lingers over specific films in order to make us contemplate another major Shakespearean theme, the difference between the fake and the real, if not the real and the true.

David Wood and Armelle Sabatier return us to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and address the topic of Shakespeare's relationship to non-dramatic visual arts. Wood dissects the Narcissus trope which, as he demonstrates, kept recurring in the work of early moderns. Never arguing influence, he studies the ways in which two contemporary geniuses—Caravaggio and Shakespeare—came to employ with startling similarity the myth of a beautiful boy in love with his own image. The Caravaggio comparison highlights the visual nature of Shakespeare's imagination while Wood's essay implies that genius may share its own language, one which is neither Italian nor English nor Esperanto.

Armelle Sabatier enters directly into the Shakespearean text looking for modes of expression grounded in visual culture. Having located in *Julius Caesar* and *A Winter's Tale* a pattern of reference to statuary and sculpture that evolves over the course of Shakespeare's career, she speculates on how the plastic arts may have helped develop the playwright's visual vocabulary. Sabatier looks to woodcuts depicting actual statues and to actual statues serving as funerary monuments as possible inspiration for descriptions of "fixity" found in both plays. Her work establishes Shakespeare as a premier verbal-visual artist acutely aware that actors were and were not like clay, just as Queen Hermione is and is not like a statue carved by Giulio Romano. Simile and metaphor remain Shakespeare's métier.

Attila Kiss takes Shakespeare and us back to the twenty-first century. In his essay as much on the "semiotics of violence" as on the semiography of *Titus Andronicus*, Kiss studies striking parallels between our age and that of Shakespeare. He analyzes the *Titus* phenomenon, tracing the ways in which, having been released by Julie Taymor late last century, the brutal images of Shakespeare's most Senecan play have come to speak our reality. His objective is not that of praising some aesthetic of the

violent but rather of pointing out more provocative reasons why we continue to see Shakespeare as “our own,” even in Eastern Europe. Dare we look in the mirror rather than the reflecting pool?

Argued by male and female Shakespeareans at various stages of their academic careers, written in three languages (Stuart Sillars and this editor will verify that American and British are two different English languages) and transmitted from four countries — the United States, France, Norway, and Hungary—these essays not only light up the world of Shakespeare studies, they also demonstrate how Shakespeare has moved beyond moonbeams, alligators and ink blots to become part of an international vocabulary used in the making of meaning.



A Note on Preparing the Text of *Interfaces*: 25

As a journal committed to locating and discussing the interfaces between visual and verbal arts as well as making permeable the borders between disciplines and nations, *Interfaces* poses exceptional challenges to every editor. This issue could not have come into being without the keen-eyed assistance of copy-editor Pamela Reponen. She works with exceptional sensitivity, always determined to make her writers and editors “look their best.” Special gratitude is also due Professor Ambroise Kom for his assistance in editing the French texts in this issue. Mary Morrisard-Larkin, Margaret Nelson and Jesse Anderson contributed their talents and good will to producing the companion CD. Sharon Matys worked her magic to assure that all the images found inside this volume would interface effectively with its well-set words. All who have watched *Interfaces* grow over the last few years owe special thanks to Maurice Gérard, an executive editor who has been known to prod, nudge, corner and even inspire artists until they contribute original work to accompany each volume.

Helen M. Whall

College of the Holy Cross