

Preface

Why are Shakespeare's plays still performed so frequently? Why are they read at school? Why taught at university? Why are there even courses in business schools in which management techniques are taught with the help of Shakespeare's plays?

There is a correct and generally acceptable answer: they are great plays. But what do we mean by this adjective? And what are the conditions for greatness? If we look at the history of criticism we can see that these conditions have changed over time. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the reasons given first would be his insight into human nature, and his genius in creating individual characters. In the twentieth century it was the brilliance of his stagecraft, his perfect manipulation of conflict, or, possibly, the structuring of all the linguistic elements into one complex, ideal whole.

Not only historically there have been differences of opinion: readers, theatre and film audiences, academic critics, and directors have often given different answers to the question of Shakespeare's greatness. And people in different countries have often looked at his plays in a different manner.

This study brings together essays focussing on how Shakespeare's works have achieved their status as classics and by what means they have managed to keep it.

The processes involved follow certain patterns. On the basis of Nietzsche's notion of "monumental history" in *The Use and Abuse of History* Aleida Assmann has conveniently described the following three steps:

- (1) Selection and extraction of an object, event or person from its social and historical contexts, which also means extinguishing these contexts from memory.

(2) Translation of the object, event or person from a small scale to a large scale, i.e. making them *great*.

(3) Translation of the object, event or person from the particular to the general, turning it into an encouraging example, an inspiring model to be imitated and emulated. (Assmann 38)

It is important to note that the object, event or person does not stand at the beginning of these processes, but is embedded in previous knowledge, in expectations, all those factors that make us turn to it: with a text they may include the recommendation by a friend, a review we have read, films we have seen, music we have heard, quotes we have recognized, monuments we have seen, public celebrations we have attended or read about, etc., and, yes, lectures we have heard. Because the text is not the first and only source of what we call a work I am therefore avoiding the term *reception* and speak of *construction* and *production* or *re-production* instead.¹ The rhizome of a mushroom may be a more useful metaphor than that of the source (see essay 18).

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Central to the argument of the essays collected here is a pragmatic notion of the literary classic that I developed in my book on *Poetry and Community*.² After a discussion of different notions of the classic, it concludes with a summary, which several of the essays collected here refer to, and which may be said to constitute their origin. The classic is

a work of literature that has left the book; it has become a defining part of those people's minds to whom it is a classic.

A classic may be present in people's minds and their language in three forms. First, stories from it are perceived as representative of certain patterns of experience (e.g., Oedipus's or Telemachus's search for his father, the Trojan War, the foundation of Rome, Faust's quest for knowledge, Captain Ahab's struggle with the white

¹ I shall return to this process in terms of anthropology in essay 8.

² Still available from Stauffenburg-Verlag, Tübingen (978-3-923721-20-7).

whale, etc.) As such they may achieve the status of “archetypes” or of “basic stories,” which gives them the strongest possible underpinning. Secondly, figures, reduced to their most striking traits, will be used in characterizing certain types of personality and behaviour that can be found in one’s surroundings (e.g., Falstaff, Don Quixote, Madame Bovary, Oblomov, etc.). Thirdly, phrases and passages are quoted in conversation and in written texts for their perceptiveness or wit, like epigrams, or simply because they have become common usage (or formulae). Quotations, after all, are proverbs with an author. Recognizing the reference makes us take sides: We either feel ourselves to belong to the same community as those who have made it, or we feel excluded. (Engler 55).

More specifically:

The presence of phrases, figures and stories, often dissociated from their authors, in the minds of people forming a community, which I have defined as characteristic of the classic, is what we find in an oral culture and its poetry. That is, we there hear stories that have mythical force, presenting heavy figures that serve as models of behaviour, and doing it in language that tends to be formulaic. The claim put forward here is that *what we commonly call a classic is nothing but a work of literature that exists in an oral version, and as such defines the group that accepts it as significant*. What is unusual about our classics is that they also exist in written versions, which are both different and by definition the same as their oral counterpart. It is this double existence of the classic, oral and literate, that makes possible the process of continual re-interpretation [...]. (Engler 56–57).

Since formulating this definition and applying it to an early 20th century American poet in *Poetry and Community*, my interests have increasingly branched out to include two contributing areas: (a) physical monuments and the rituals of commemoration that keep their meaning alive (see especially the section “Monumental Shakespeare”) and (b) the use of quotations, as documented in the *HyperHamlet* project (see section “*Hamlet: Passages We Live By*”). The present collection therefore also

documents how my interests have developed over the past thirty years.² In some cases, I turned to issues before they entered the mainstream of research and led to more detailed studies and more refined methodologies. I have decided to leave them largely as they were first published, but removing errors, perceived infelicities and disturbing repetitions.³ Two additions, essays 17 and 20, may also have turned the collection into a semi-personal book.

Many of the essays collected here have been published in scattered places, in Britain, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Romania, Ukraine, and the United States, and I am grateful for the permission to include them. Six essays appear in English for the first time.

Many people have inspired and helped me in many ways over the years and my debt of gratitude cannot be settled by mentioning them here. My special thanks go to Péter Dávidházi who patiently reminded me that I should prepare such a collection.

Originally, I wanted to indulge my interest in the media by making the book all by myself, to learn about all the steps involved. I got as far as doing the layout when I was saved from my hubris by the enthusiasm and experience of the enterprising small publisher Bruno Oetterli Hohlenbaum of SIGNATHUR and his friend Jürgen Gutsch. Many thanks also to them.

Balz Engler

Assmann, Aleida. "Plunging into nothingness": The politics of cultural memory." *Moment to monument: The making and unmaking of cultural significance*. Ed. Ladina Bezzola Lambert and Andrea Ochsner. Bielefeld, New Brunswick, NJ: Transcript, 2009. 35–49. Print. Cultural studies v. 32.

² To document how my arguments have developed over time I have ordered the Acknowledgements chronologically.

³ I have also standardized the edition referred to, the Norton Shakespeare, 3rd ed.

Engler, Balz. *Poetry and community*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verl, 1990. Print.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Use and Abuse of History*. London: Macmillan, 1957.
The Norton Shakespeare. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. 3rd ed. New York:
W.W. Norton, 2016. Print.

