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Passages we live by: Shakespeare in European Culture

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In Shakespeare's *Sonnets* the claim is repeatedly made that poetry is more permanent than monuments, most notably in sonnet 55:

> Not marble nor the gilded monuments
> Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme, But
> you shall shine more bright in these contents
> Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish
> time.
> When wasteful war shall statues overturn, 5
> And broils root out the work of masonry, Nor
> Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn The
> living record of your memory.
> 'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity
> Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room 10
> Even in the eyes of all posterity
> That wear this world out to the ending doom.
> So, till the judgement that yourself arise,
> You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.[1]

The claim,[2] made 400 years ago, has proved impressively accurate-- Shakespeare"s powerful rhyme continues to live, while many monuments of princes and those who may have behaved like them have disappeared or lie in ruins. Why should this be so? This is one of the questions I should like to address. Is it *writing* that gives the poem permanence? Not so. Writing is also a characteristic feature of monuments, and inscriptions become illegible on the "unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time". And we know that manuscripts may be lost, books may be neglected and forgotten. If it is not writing that gives poetry permanence, what else?

But before addressing this question, we should note a complication: The claim of permanence made in the sonnet in one respect is a spectacular failure: It does not fulfil its promise of immortalizing the

young man it addresses. We do not learn enough about him to have a „living record" of him. We do not even know who he is. As Gerald Hammond observes:

> The continual claims that poetry preserves and immortalizes read oddly against the vagueness of its descriptive vocabulary—"fair", "sweet", "lovely", and "beauteous" leave so indefinite an impression that almost any candidate put forward as the historical reality behind the young man can find persuasive support within the collection. In this sonnet there is little more than merely the "gait", but nothing distinct: the reader's impression is of a vague Coriolanus-like figure striding over scenes of desolation. (Hammond 1981: 72)[3]

The very lack of information has led to intense speculation about who the person addressed may be. The fact that such speculation has continued is not a matter of course. It indicates that, even though this poem (and others in the sequence) may not have managed to immortalize a specific person, it has managed to create a quasi-immortal gap that we are permanently invited to fill.

The crucial phrase in the poem then is "the living record of your memory" (line 8). The *record* itself is not any different in its transience from the writing on the monument and the monument itself. It must be *living,* i.e. brought alive, and kept alive--by being read, recited, discussed, referred to. As Sonnet 81 puts it, "where breath most breathes, ev'n in the mouths of men." (line 14). It is this repetition that makes sure that the "stone, besmeared with sluttish time", is swept, kept clean, polished, and the inscription noticed, re-read and re-interpreted—in a process that feeds back on itself and may become self-sustaining. We read the texts that others have recommended to us, we recommend plays we have ourselves seen, etc.

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It is this kind of repetition which raises and isolates texts from their historical and social context. In achieving general significance, the situation to which they once may have referred becomes relatively irrelevant to us. The young man addressed in Sonnet 55 offers a good example of this. It may have been clear to the first readers of the poem who he was. For us this is not a major concern. We are much more interested in what the poem says about the permanence of poetry and in how beautifully it does so.

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Such repetition, keeping the record alive, takes place in mainly three areas:

- performance in front of an audience,
- re-reading and re-interpretation, and
- citation, i.e. quotation and allusion.

With Shakespeare’s plays the *performance in front of an audience* is certainly the most common and the most powerful form of repetition, but it may also have an important role to play with the poems. Performances may of course be recorded, and copies may be watched and listened to again and again in different places. *Re-reading and re-interpretation* probably come second. They are particularly common in an educational context, reading and discussing the works in class at school and at the university. These two areas have been well studied: *performance* in the history of Shakespeare reception in the theatre, and *re-reading and re-interpretation* in the history of Shakespeare criticism. The third, *citation* has long been neglected, even though, or perhaps just because it is such a common phenomenon in various social and cultural contexts, from the solemn public address of a statesman to the light banter in a pub. Citations may influence a culture considerably in how it perceives cultural and social

phenomena. They help us in organizing, articulating and sharing our view of the world. As Harold Bloom has put it in his book *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*, “Shakespeare will go on explaining us, in part because he invented us.” (Bloom 1999: xvii)

The citations will come in four shapes: First, *stories* are perceived as representative of certain patterns of experience (e.g., the Trojan War, the foundation of Rome, but also *the Taming of the Shrew*, the tragic love of Romeo and Juliet or Macbeth’s burning ambition). As such they may achieve the status of 'archetypes' or 'basic stories.' As such they also call for constant re-writings: In the case of *Hamlet* a recent example is John Updike’s *Gertrude and Claudius,* a variation on the history of adultery.

Secondly, *moments* may acquire the status of such cultural significance. I am thinking of Hamlet, dressed in black, holding Yorick’s skull, suggesting the melancholy contemplation of the transience of human life.

Thirdly, *figures*, reduced to their most striking traits, may be used in characterizing certain types of personality and behaviour that can be found in one's surroundings (e.g., Don Juan, Madame Bovary, Oblomov, Falstaff, King Lear, or again Hamlet, the philosopher prince).

Fourthly, *phrases and passages* are quoted in conversation and in written texts for their perceptiveness or wit, or simply because they have become common usage (or formulae). Interestingly, the plays seem to be a much richer source for this than the poems--my hunch is that the strict form in which phrases are embedded in the *Sonnets* makes it difficult to separate them from their contexts. Examples from *Hamlet*--the play which we are researching at my university--include

“There is something rotten in the state of Denmark”, “Frailty, thy name is woman”, “with an auspicious and a drooping eye”, or “To be or not to be”.[4]

In the following I am going to concentrate on this fourth type of citations, on phrases and passages, and my interest is obviously not in where they come from but in why they are used, and how they are used. Common motivations for quoting would include the wish to have a share in the cultural authority of the author or the work cited, or the wish to communicate the general context that the phrase calls up. Whether the phrases can fulfil their task will depend on whether the audience recognizes them; indeed, recognizing them may give the audience a sense of belonging to the same community, in itself an important motivation for citing a phrase.[5]

Recognition cannot always be taken for granted. It may be invited by marking off the phrase between quotation marks or by italics, even by mentioning the author or the exact source. But there are also phrases that have become part of the language to such an extent that they have lost all connection with their origin for most people. A case in point is “a foregone conclusion” from *Othello.* In the play Iago uses the phrase to suggest that Cassio has had sexual intercourse (this is the meaning of *conclusion* here) with Desdemona.

Whatever the degree of recognition, whatever the perceived link with the source, the use of such phrases will tell us something about the role authors and their work play in the culture.

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Having argued for such a presence of Shakespeare, you may expect me to explain how this has come about. This is a large topic and I can only give a few hints here.[6] Three phases can be distinguished, which I have labelled *beyond the rules*, *beyond criticism*, and *beyond the*

text. When a new one begins the effects of the previous one do not necessarily disappear.

The early history of European Shakespeare reception in the eighteenth century was closely associated with the attempt to adapt or displace rule poetics. As this was an aristocratic poetics based on hierarchies, using Shakespeare's support in doing so was also a political move.[7] Shakespeare, the son of the Stratford glover, appeared as a middle-class hero, a great autonomous individual. With the help of his model rule poetics was gradually replaced by a poetics of genius. We should note here that it was not primarily the texts of Shakespeare's works that were crucial, but what their author stood for. The definitive shape of the texts was still being established, and in any case, they were often unknown yet. As Péter Dávidházi has reminded us, in many cases Shakespeare began to be revered as a cultural hero *before* his works were even available.

The second phase, which I have labelled *beyond criticism* begins with the triumph of the poetics of genius, with the Romantic enthronement of Shakespeare as the quasi-divine creator. When Shakespeare has acquired this status, it is no longer the critic who judges Shakespeare, but Shakespeare who judges the critic. It is this status that also made him safe as an author under despotic regimes.[8]

Finally, Shakespeare *beyond the text.* In this phase (the one in which we still find ourselves) there is a new critical interest in theatrical production, as first impressively documented in Granville-Barker's *Prefaces to Shakespeare*. It begins cautiously by unfolding the theatrical implications of the text, but also takes for granted that there is more than one possible version of doing a play. In this phase the idea of the single text begins to dissolve. It begins to be accepted that there may be more than one Shakespearean text, for example, due to revision, as this has been documented by recent Shakespeare editions.

To put it provocatively, Shakespeare has acquired a position similar to the one poetry used to have in an oral society (see Engler 1996).

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The history of citation is instructive here, as a cursory check of some names, partly with the help of the *OED*, shows. It suggests that Shakespeare citations of the kind I am interested in began to enter the English language since the second half of the eighteenth century. We should note that the *OED* only lists *words*, not names; i.e. it records the moment when the names no longer refer to a single figure, but to a feature associated with it. Here are a few examples, in chronological order.

Yorick: Hamlet’s words in that archetypical scene with the skull, „Alas, poor Yorick“ were famously taken up by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* in 1761/62 (Second instalment, Books III and IV). They have so much been associated with Sterne’s book that a recent Shakespeare edition adds the note: „The name is so famous that we may forget that this is where it was born.“ (Shakespeare [1985], note to 5.1.152) This raises the interesting issue of the extent to which Sterne’s use of the name may colour our notion of Shakespeare’s figure. In other words, we can see that citation need not be a one-way sign in literary traffic.
Romeo: The first meaning given by the *OED* is “A lover, a passionate admirer; a seducer, a habitual pursuer of women.” Its first occurrence is recorded five years after Sterne, in 1766.

Hamlet: Here the *OED* records: “The name of the prince of Denmark who is the hero of Shakespeare’s play of this name, in allusive phr[ase]. *Hamlet without the Prince (of Denmark)*: a performance without the chief actor or a proceeding without the central figure”. 1775.

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Collecting and interpreting such material permeating cultures is an important task—for reasons to which I'd like to turn in conclusion. When sketching a project we are working on, *Hyperhamlet*, I should like to discuss three issues: the access to possible material, the definition of its scope, and the importance of context.

Until recently collecting citations was a laborious process. The data in the impressive volume of references to Dante in early English books, prepared by Jackson Boswell (Boswell 1999), were still collected manually—the author going through individual books at the Folger Shakespeare Library looking for mentions of Dante. But these conditions are changing. Increasingly texts are available in electronic form, often free on the internet, and may be searched electronically. It may be possible to locate certain phrases in seconds which it used to take days to find. They include not only works of literature, but also other books and newspapers (I had a student write a paper on the use of Shakespeare quotations in a Swiss national newspaper). Research of a kind has become possible that earlier generations could only dream of. But these databanks have to be used with caution. We must not forget that they do not record words, but combinations of letters, spaces and punctuation marks. Spelling and punctuation have changed over the centuries, and citations are not always in exactly the same words. Indeed, misquotations may be of particular interest. In the case of Shakespeare even the copy texts may have changed with succeeding editors—indeed, one of our interests may be in the texts that were commonly cited in a period.[9]

Having determined the phrases we have not finished our work, on the contrary, it is then that we can seriously start with it. They have to be contextualized, and their use interpreted if we want to find out about their role in culture.

If we study the citation of Shakespearean material (of the four different types I have mentioned) with the electronic assistance first available to our generation, we will be able to see more clearly what it is that gives Shakespeare the status he has in our culture, and how he has acquired this.

If we study citations in different languages and cultures we may be able to compare them, to perceive similarities and differences between them—with Shakespeare and his works as the *tertium comparationis*, as it were. We will notice, for example, how important Shakespeare has been for the emergence of modern culture in various parts of Europe. We will notice how on different paths, often via France or Germany, Shakespeare has entered these cultures and helped to shape them. We will see what they have in common, but also what is specific to them.

As students of English, rooted in a non-English speaking country, we can uniquely contribute to building such an awareness of community in difference, because we are usually familiar both with English and our own culture. And even if we do not actively contribute to such a project in the narrow sense, we are of course contributing to it, because whenever we discuss Shakespeare we are also citing him.

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[1] The Shakespeare edition that will be quoted throughout this study is the Norton Shakespeare 1997.
[2] Shakespeare uses the *aere perennius* motif in doing so, a motif from classical literature (e.g., Ovid, at the end of his *Metamorphoses;* Horace, *Odes* III.30.1-9) which I cannot discuss here.
[3] I wonder what makes Hammond think of Coriolanus. Is it Shelley’s sonnet “Ozymandias” which has a similar motif?
[4] This was one of Hitler’s favourite phrases; he liked to say that something was a “Frage von Sein oder Nichtsein” for the German people.
[5] This is an effect described in Bernard Darwin‟s preface to *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. He says about a Churchill speech in 1941: “When the Prime Minister said that there were some lines that he deemed appropriate we sat up rigid, waiting in mingled pleasure and apprehension. How agreeable it would be if we were acquainted with them and approved the choice! How flat and disappointing should they be unknown to us! (xiii) See Engler 1990: 55.

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[6] For a fuller discussion see my article “Constructing Shakespeares in Europe” in *Four Centuries of Shakespeare in Europe*. Ed. by A. Luis Pujante and Ton Hoenselaars. Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 2003, 26-39.

[7] This point is explicitly made by Voltaire: Corneille “était inégale comme Shakespeare, et plein de génie comme lui; mais le génie de Corneille était à celui de Shakespeare ce qu'un seigneur est à l'égard d'un homme du peuple né avec le même esprit que lui.” [was uneven like Shakespeare and full of genius like him; but Corneille’s genius compared with Shakespeare’s is as a lord with respect to a man of the people born with the same intelligence] Voltaire, "Observation sur le *Jules César* de Shakespeare" in Voltaire 1964, 192.

[8] As impressively documented in the collection *Shakespeare in the New Europe*, edited by Boika Sokolova and Derek Roper.

[9] Another problem concerns the scope of the material we collect. We may be tempted to key in phrases like “to be or not to be” (hoping that the search engine we use does not automatically exclude form words) or “with an auspicious and a drooping eye” (which may be easier). But this will only turn up citations of the kind that *we* consider interesting. Other periods may have considered other phrases worth citing. The only way of solving this problem that I can see is a programme that patiently compares texts with each other and throws up clusters of words that recur with a higher than usual frequency. The study of phraseology in linguistics may also turn out to be useful here.