
Book Reviews

Why William Shakespeare is not politically correct

by Mike Minnicino

Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present

by Gary Taylor

Oxford University Press, New York, 1991,
488 pages, paperbound, \$12.75

Polonius: What do you read, my lord?

Hamlet: Words, words, words.

Gary Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare* should be handled with care. Much of Professor Taylor's material is useful, and its development seems reasoned, but the whole represents an effort to entice Shakespeare-lovers down the path to political correctness. And, from that dark night of political correctness, none e'er return with their enjoyment of the Bard intact.

A large part of Professor Taylor's book covers the same ground as two old standbys, F.E. Halliday's *The Cult of Shakespeare* (1957) and actor-director Kenneth McClelland's *What Ever Happened to Shakespeare* (1978). All three tell the story of how a popular Elizabethan actor-playwright, who was not considered particularly brilliant in his day, became not only the "Chief Poet" of the English language, as Keats called him, but also a kind of ideological magnet, compelling 400 years of critics to amend him, reinterpret him, and modernize him according to their own idiosyncracies.

In all three books, there are the familiar tales of how producers after the Stuart Restoration in 1660 felt that Shakespeare was too crude for their dignified age, so they simply changed his plays, giving *King Lear* a happy ending, for instance, or adding a couple of musical numbers for the witches in *Macbeth*. By the 19th century, Shakespeare's genius was fully recognized by many, but this did not stop the wholesale continued mutilation of his work; 1807 saw the immensely popular *Family Shakespeare* by Henrietta and the Rev. Thomas Bowdler, with all the "indelicate" parts cut,

changed, or relegated to incomprehensible footnotes (we still talk of "bowdlerizing"). By the 20th century, Shakespeare had become completely ideologized: He was a proto-Marxist, a proto-Fascist, and an orthodox Freudian. Orson Welles could produce *Julius Caesar* in the 1930s as an anti-fascist play with Caesar dressed as Benito Mussolini, at the same time that Werner Kraus, Hitler's favorite actor, could produce the same play in Berlin, with Caesar as a benevolent *führer* surrounded by jealous traitors.

The musical school

One interesting aspect highlighted by Taylor, and missing from the other two books, is the rise of the so-called musical school of Shakespeare interpretation, started by George Bernard Shaw at the end of the 19th century. Shaw, who was for a time Britain's most important music critic, declared that "it is the score and not the libretto that keeps Shakespeare's work alive and fresh." Shaw insisted that Shakespeare was often an inferior playwright (he rewrote three of Shakespeare's plays—*Saint Joan*, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, and *Cymbeline Refinished*—to prove the point) and that the Bard's true meaning lay not in his stagecraft, but in his honeyed phrases. This became the standard line of the aesthetes of the Bloomsbury group, and their hangers-on like T.S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats. Virginia Woolf wrote that, due to their distance from Western language, the Chinese understood Shakespeare better than English-speakers; Harley Granville-Barker, the leading producer-director of the period, said that he preferred to use French actors in Shakespearean roles since they saw only the "fine sound and poise" of a soliloquy—not the meaning. Granville-Barker called for the "creation of a new hieroglyphic language" of gorgeous scenery and high-flown declamation that would turn a Shakespeare play into a kind of Wagnerian opera made up of overwhelming sensory images.

On reading Taylor's account, I was struck with how influential this Bloomsbury aestheticism remains. Many readers probably share with me the experience of seeing a Shakespeare play turned into a sing-song abstraction by a director who did the play the way he imagined the Royal Shakespeare

Company would do it, and spent hardly a moment to determine what the words meant. The same afflicts our secondary educational system: Shakespeare, if taught at all, is taught like algebra—sure, it's incomprehensible, but it's good for you.

However, Taylor differs drastically from the other two cited authors in what he deduces from this historical material. He describes how the decision to revive Shakespeare in 1660 after the Cromwellian ban on plays, was made by circles around the Royal Society, a group of pro-monarchy scientists and scholars which was founded in the same year as the Restoration; the Royal Society selected those plays which fit their own political agenda, occasionally amending the text to better fit the purpose. "Shakespeare was back," says Taylor, "along with the monarchy, the House of Lords and the Anglican Church." This politicization, claims Taylor, has never stopped: "Some considerable proportion of Shakespeare's current international reputation is the fruit not of his genius but of the virility of British imperialism, which propagated the English language on every continent." Because of this, Taylor concludes his book, Shakespeare has become "a singularity . . . a black hole . . . a mathematical point in space, having no length, breadth or depth" which "no longer transmits visible light." The only hope for Shakespeare is a criticism which is full of "doubt . . . skeptical . . . suspicious of power."

Notwithstanding his incompetent definition of a singularity, Taylor utterly confuses the politics of the matter because he cannot see—as the Royal Society clearly did—the relationship between language and freedom. Take the example of William Davenant, the most important producer of the Restoration period, and the first to take great liberties with the originals. Taylor describes how Davenant changed Shakespeare's vocabulary in plays like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*: For instance, where Shakespeare said "perpend," "bray out," and "affront," Davenant substituted "consider," "proclaim," and "meet." Taylor concludes: "All these expressions, which Davenant thought unintelligible to his audience, are considered unintelligible to readers by modern editors, and our editorial glosses sometimes unwittingly echo Davenant's revisions. What later editors and commentators will put in footnotes—paraphrases that explain Shakespeare's meaning—Davenant simply sticks into the dialogue itself. The gloss replaces the text."

Nonsense! Halliday, among others, goes into hilarious detail, documenting the depredations of Davenant and his Restoration colleagues. One short example should suffice. In the last act of *Macbeth*, the usurping murderer is receiving a series of disastrous battle reports; the last messenger arrives, and stands speechless before Macbeth, who turns and says

The devil damn thee black, thou cream-fac'd loon!
Where gots't thou that goose look?

This, I contend, is perfectly understandable to both Restoration and modern audiences, and wonderfully suggests the psychological state of both Macbeth and the messenger. Davenant reads the line

Now Friend, what means thy change of Countenance?

Davenant wasn't changing vocabulary; he was changing meaning.

Shakespeare used the conscious interplay of poetry and stagecraft to make a dialogue with the minds of his audience. Like Dante and Cervantes, he was creating a language in order to communicate concepts. His own neologisms and novel usages fill a book; we still have the option of his shortened "lament," in place of the previous "lamentation," or his "import," rather than "importance," plus hundreds of other such. He used words as a musician, not in Shaw's Wagnerian sense, but lawfully changing the tone and rhythm to serve the play's concept; Don Armado may say "infamonize," for he is a pompous fool, while Hermia is "bedabbled [not 'dabbled'] with dew," because the forest in which she is trapped, is enchanted. Sometimes, certainly, Shakespeare's creation derives from a problem in scansion, but often it is pure genius, and it is one of the many reasons we can dip into a Shakespeare play again and again, and come away with fresh insight each time.

Only half the story

Professor Taylor gives only half the story of the Royal Society's revival of Shakespeare. This self-styled "invisible college" was not simply a group of gentlemen scholars; they were conspirators who worked to make England safe for monarchism, by controlling not only all scientific investigation, but also by legislating the way in which Englishmen could think and speak. Within a few years, the Society became little more than an intellectual goon squad, enforcing the fraudulent theories of Sir Isaac Newton; the truest history of the institution is still to be found in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. It was the Royal Society which first created the rules of English usage which readers still must memorize in school: the "proper" use of shall and will; the fact that sentences have subject, object, and predicate (borrowed from formal logic, in emulation of Aristotle). Shakespeare and his contemporaries used the double negative for emphasis; the Royal Society ruled that it should not be used, never.

Technically, it is true that the Royal Society was behind the revival of Shakespeare. But, they amended him to make him "politically correct" for Restoration Britain. Their ultimate end was to eliminate the creative freedom which Shakespeare demonstrated—nay, flaunted—in his use of language. The Royal Society invented the line that Shakespeare was his words, and, that those words were archaic and had to be modernized. That line has stuck; it is no coincidence that

the Bloomsbury Fabians, with their need to create a “new hieroglyphics” for Shakespeare, called themselves the “new invisible college.”

The same methodology, revamped with Marxist terminology, is the basis of efforts by modern, politically correct university instructors to “deconstruct” Shakespeare—efforts which Taylor would applaud as “skeptical . . . suspicious” criticism. For these modern theorists, even Shakespeare’s words are untrustworthy (bourgeois overreliance on words for rational discourse is called “logocentrism”), and must be analyzed as mere signposts for class oppression, racism, and phallogentrism. Here is the belief structure behind the current campaign on many campuses to end the student requirement to read “DEMs” (“Dead European Males”) like Homer, Chaucer, and Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* are politically incorrect, and can be omitted, because they include stereotypic treatment of Jews and black-skinned people. The fraud in this, of course, is that if the principles of justice and leadership which Shakespeare intended in those plays were understood and universally applied today, then there would be no anti-Semitism, nor no genocide of darker-skinned peoples by the usurious International Monetary Fund.

Is Shakespeare, then, to be taught “translated” into modern English, or reduced to data that only confirm the student or instructor’s prejudice? Or, are students to be challenged to recreate the principles by which Shakespeare sought to freely communicate the concepts of love, justice, and leadership which make up the subject of his plays? All Renaissance thinkers, including Shakespeare, understood that language is not merely a plenum of usage; it lives and grows with the nation-state for which it is unifying factor. As a nation crumbles, so too its language. As Western civilization fell into the Dark Ages, and the majority of the population became illiterate peasants, local languages disappeared, replaced by a few hundred words of slang vocabulary—nothing more was needed to grunt one’s way through a short, brutal existence. When Europe began to restart technological and social progress, especially after 800 A.D., languages had to be completely rebuilt, borrowing heavily from Latin, which was kept artificially alive in the monasteries. This was commonly understood as late as 1847, when James Fenimore Cooper warned that the increasing use of slang by America’s newspapers threatened to overwhelm literate language, and was becoming “the great and most powerful foe of justice” in the United States.

Today, English dies by inches each day. Rather than reverse the process, we make a virtue out of horrible necessity, as in the case of “black English,” where a deformed and shrunken usage brought about by centuries of racist policies is blessed with academic legitimacy. If we believe, as a nation, that the most potent concept we expect our students to ever communicate is, “You like fries with that?” then we need not teach Shakespeare.

Sacred art: What the West owes the East

by Nora Hamerman and
Warren A.J. Hamerman

Transfiguration: Introduction to the Contemplation of Icons

by Maria Giovanna Muzj (translated by Kenneth D. Whitehead)

St. Paul Books and Media, Boston, 1991
179 pages, illus., hardbound, \$19.95

The issue of religious imagery is one of the most heatedly debated in the history of Christianity, and indeed of all the “religions of the Book,” which include also Judaism and Islam, both of which rejected all representation of the human form in worship as idolatrous. This revolt was to erupt again in the Iconoclastic Controversy which swept through the Byzantine Empire in the 8th century, and in radical Protestantism in 16th-century Western Europe. Yet, the highest achievements of Western art grew directly or indirectly out of the “icon,” the notion of a sacred picture which is not to be worshipped in itself, but instead, is intended to provoke a contemplation of the invisible universe through the medium of the visible.

It seems that it was in Constantinople, seat of the Eastern Roman Empire and the Orthodox Church, that the earliest canons of Christian art were developed, establishing whole classes of images called “icons.” This little book by Maria Muzj, who teaches at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, reproduces and explores 32 of the most important surviving examples of icons, each representing a type of image. The series begins with images of Christ, God in human form, variously shown as the Almighty (Pantocrator), the Savior (Soter), the Master and Judge, and so forth; the Virgin Mary and Child, also in a series of set forms of which the “Virgin of Tenderness” is repeated over and over again in Greek, Italo-Byzantine, and Russian and Polish icons; the *Deësis*, or prayer, which consisted of the image of Christ seated on his throne with his Mother on his right and St. John the Baptist on his left, both in an attitude of supplication, which became an integral part of church architecture from the 7th century onward. Finally, Muzj introduces the major narrative themes of the New Testament and related stories, such as the Annunciation, Nativity, Baptism of Christ,