DERRIDA READS SHAKESPEARE
EDINBURGH CRITICAL STUDIES IN SHAKESPEARE AND PHILOSOPHY
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Much of this book is the result of conversations about Derrida and the relationship between literature and philosophy, which I have been having almost my entire adult life, starting from when Clare Connors smuggled ‘Aphorism Countertime’ into one of our tutorials. I will always be grateful...
to her for this act of readerly rebellion. Nick Royle patiently oversaw my graduate work on Derrida. My examiners, Peter Boxall and Sarah Wood, raised follow-on questions which I am still thinking about seven years on. I would also like to thank Liz Sage for encouraging me to embark on this project in the first place. Other conversations, too, have borne on it, whether they were held at conferences, symposia, reading groups, meetings, at the pub, over a plate of food, over email or in response to conference papers, articles and drafts. In this sense, I would like to thank: Graham Allen, Alice Andrews, Matías Bascuñán, Andrew Benjamin, Geoffrey Bennington, Matthew Birchwood, Hugo Blumenthal, Tina Chanter, David Coughlan, Pleshette DeArmitt, Sarah Doebbert Epstein, Ilit Ferber, Mauricio Gonzalez, Sam Haddad, Martin Hägglund, Werner Hamacher, Margit Hesselager, J. Hillis Miller, Daniel Hoffman-Schwartz, Peggy Kamuf, Oisín Keohane, Zora Kostadinova, Adam Lipszyc, Martin McQuillan, Sarah Kathryn Marshall, Ronald Mendoza-De Jesús, Simon Morgan Wortham, Forbes Morlock, Michael Naas, Joe Palmer, John Phillips, Juliane Prade-Weiss, Adam Rosenthal, Kas Saghaﬁ, Nassima Sahraoui, Roy Sellars, Mauro Senatore, Shela Sheikh, Timo Uotinen, Francesco Vitale and Richard Wilson. I would also like to thank all those who have helped by simply being lovely: my friends and my family, and in particular my parents, Stef and my sons.
Picture Macbeth alone on stage, staring intently into empty space. ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me?’ he asks, grasping decisively at the air. On one hand, this is a quintessentially theatrical question. At once an object and a vector, the dagger describes the possibility of knowledge (‘Is this a dagger’) in specifically visual and spatial terms (‘which I see before me’). At the same time, Macbeth is posing a quintessentially philosophical question, one that assumes knowledge to be both conditional and experiential, and that probes the relationship between certainty and perception as well as intention and action. It is from this shared ground of art and inquiry, of theater and theory, that this series advances its basic premise: Shakespeare is philosophical.

It seems like a simple enough claim. But what does it mean exactly, beyond the parameters of this specific moment in Macbeth? Does it mean that Shakespeare had something we could think of as his own philosophy? Does it mean that he was influenced by particular philosophical schools, texts and thinkers? Does it mean, conversely, that modern philosophers have been influenced by him, that Shakespeare’s plays and poems have been, and continue to be, resources for philosophical thought and speculation?

The answer is yes all around. These are all useful ways of conceiving a philosophical Shakespeare and all point to lines of inquiry that this series welcomes. But Shakespeare
is philosophical in a much more fundamental way as well. Shakespeare is philosophical because the plays and poems actively create new worlds of knowledge and new scenes of ethical encounter. They ask big questions, make bold arguments and develop new vocabularies in order to think what might otherwise be unthinkable. Through both their scenarios and their imagery, the plays and poems engage the qualities of consciousness, the consequences of human action, the phenomenology of motive and attention, the conditions of personhood and the relationship among different orders of reality and experience. This is writing and dramaturgy, moreover, that consistently experiments with a broad range of conceptual crossings, between love and subjectivity, nature and politics, and temporality and form.

Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy takes seriously these speculative and world-making dimensions of Shakespeare’s work. The series proceeds from a core conviction that art’s capacity to think – to formulate, not just reflect, ideas – is what makes it urgent and valuable. Art matters because unlike other human activities it establishes its own frame of reference, reminding us that all acts of creation – biological, political, intellectual and amorous – are grounded in imagination. This is a far cry from business-as-usual in Shakespeare studies. Because historicism remains the methodological gold standard of the field, far more energy has been invested in exploring what Shakespeare once meant than in thinking rigorously about what Shakespeare continues to make possible. In response, Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy pushes back against the critical orthodoxies of historicism and cultural studies to clear a space for scholarship that confronts aspects of literature that can neither be reduced to nor adequately explained by particular historical contexts.

Shakespeare’s creations are not just inheritances of a past culture, frozen artefacts whose original settings must be expertly reconstructed in order to be understood. The plays
and poems are also living art, vital thought-worlds that struggle, across time, with foundational questions of metaphysics, ethics, politics and aesthetics. With this orientation in mind, Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy offers a series of scholarly monographs that will reinvigorate Shakespeare studies by opening new interdisciplinary conversations among scholars, artists and students.

Kevin Curran
Per Mamma e Papà
CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS SHAKESPEARE’S GENIUS?

Quarrelling Again

The ancient quarrel between literature and philosophy has, it seems, all but subsided and it has become widely accepted that the two disciplines can cohabitate fruitfully. In fact, a glut of work that dwells in the interdisciplinary space between philosophy and literature has been published in the last decade. Despite this, assumptions about the rapport between these two disciplines are taken to task surprisingly seldom, as we still struggle to establish a consensus of what constitutes rigorous interdisciplinary approaches and what these should be aiming to do. Philosophers may now no longer disagree that literature can at times be philosophically valuable, but they do, however, still quarrel about what constitutes literature’s usefulness for philosophy.

Nowhere is the unresolved status of the ancient quarrel felt more than in philosophy’s attitudes towards Shakespeare. Historically, Shakespeare’s plays have had an almost unparalleled grip on philosophers’ imaginations, yet philosophers have not been able to give a clear, let alone unanimous, account of what makes the plays such particularly fertile ground for philosophical rumination. Indeed, what seems to have made Shakespeare’s plays worthy of philosophical
attention has, perhaps, been the fact that they have been written by an undisputed literary genius. Shakespeare’s role within the wider field of literature and philosophy is therefore neither simply exemplary nor exceptional; accentuating some of the widely acknowledged benefits that a serious consideration of literature can have for philosophy, it far exceeds others. We may celebrate Shakespeare as an example of what literature can do for philosophy, but it is the exceptional status of the work that leads philosophers to him in the first place. And yet, the alacrity with which some philosophers turn to Shakespeare might just be as suspect as the stubbornness with which many have insisted that philosophy has nothing to learn from literature.

When Derrida reads Shakespeare, he is, of course, in illustrious company. In this book, it is not my intention to argue that Derrida reads Shakespeare better than any other philosopher. More than most philosophical engagements with the Bard, however, Derrida’s readings invite us to ponder the conditions of their own existence as philosophical readings. Put differently, although the readings Derrida offers of *Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, The Merchant of Venice* or *King Lear* contain many original and often surprising insights, their most original contribution to the fields of Shakespeare studies and philosophy, as well as that of philosophy and literature, lies in their performance of a different mode of philosophical-literary reading. What I would like to suggest, then, is that the way Derrida reads Shakespeare outlines a new and utterly original way of conceiving of why literature and philosophy would do well to turn to each other. And because it challenges long and deeply held views about Shakespeare and great literary works in general, as well as what contact with ‘literary excellence’ might do for philosophy, the interest of this readerly encounter far exceeds what some may wish to describe as the parochial, and perhaps outdated, concerns of so-called ‘deconstructionists’. In this
book, I will show that the originality of Derrida’s contribution to the intersecting fields of literature and philosophy is in great part a function of Derrida’s incisive critique of our notions of literary genius, and his concomitant invitation to reimagine where the ‘genius’ of a work, and a language such as Shakespeare’s, might lie. The central argument of this book is, therefore, that the way Derrida reads Shakespeare fundamentally unsettles how we have traditionally come to think of the relationship between literature and philosophy, by inviting us to rethink the kind of attention we have become used to give to a canonical work such as Shakespeare’s.

Before turning to the way Derrida reads Shakespeare in earnest in the next chapter, my concern in this first chapter is to set the stage, to sketch out the environs on to which Derrida’s texts on Shakespeare appear – like disruptive spectres. In what follows, I will spend some time considering why scholars might feel that it is at times productive, or perhaps even necessary, to turn to Shakespeare in order to do philosophy. It is not my aim here to give an exhaustive overview of the particular insights philosophers have over the years won from an engagement with Shakespeare. In line with the meta-philosophical, even meta-philosophical-literary, focus of Derrida’s texts on Shakespeare, my emphasis falls on how recent philosophical engagements with Shakespeare are framed. In particular, I am interested in the preconceptions – both good and bad – that the stories that philosophers tell about Shakespeare expose. Indeed, what interests me most is in how far, when it comes to thinking about the relationship between Shakespeare and philosophy, we are still indebted to the idea of Shakespeare’s genius, in this context a byword for the Bard’s almost superhuman insight into the human condition, as well as a marker of literary excellence so superior as to be put perennially beyond the reach of any serious critique. It is in Derrida’s reluctance to subscribe to
such a notion of genius, indeed in his attempt to, to use his own word, *overwrite* what Shakespeare’s genius might be and do, that the most powerful move of the way he reads Shakespeare lies. Whether or not one agrees with Derrida, the originality of his vision of what happens philosophically when we read Shakespeare provides a unique opportunity to reconsider this relationship from afresh and to rid ourselves of the baggage that we bring to Shakespeare. Exit Derrida, then, for now.

*How Not to Read Shakespeare*

Philosophers do not always know what to do with Shakespeare. As much is at least suggested by Martha Nussbaum in a review of three books written on Shakespeare and philosophy – A. D. Nuttall’s *Shakespeare the Thinker*, Colin McGinn’s *Shakespeare’s Philosophy* and Tzachi Zamir’s *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama*—published in May 2008 in the *New Statesman*. Nussbaum characteristically does not mince her words: ‘Philosophers often try to write about Shakespeare. Most of the time they are ill-equipped to do so.’³ Although ‘there is something irresistibly tempting in the depth and the complexity of the plays’, Nussbaum believes that most philosophers ‘lure[d]’ into responding ‘to that complexity with abstract thought’ are ‘for the most part . . . utterly unprepared, emotionally or stylistically, to write about literary experience’.⁴ She continues: ‘armed with their standard analytic equipment, they frequently produce accounts that are laughably reductive, contributing little or nothing to philosophy or to the understanding of Shakespeare’.⁵ Nussbaum has strong opinions on how philosophers fail to think with Shakespeare, but she also outlines clearly how philosophers might do better. ‘Stages of Thought’ names three criteria that a worthwhile philosophical engagement with Shakespeare should fulfil:
What is Shakespeare’s Genius?

First and most centrally, it should really do philosophy, and not just allude to familiar philosophical ideas and positions. It should pursue tough questions and come up with something interesting and subtle – rather than just connecting Shakespeare to this or that idea from Philosophy 101. A philosopher reading Shakespeare should wonder, and ponder, in a genuinely philosophical way. Second, it should illuminate the world of the plays, attending closely enough to language and to texture that the interpretation changes the way we see the work, rather than just uses the work as grist for some argumentative mill. And finally, such a study should offer some account of why philosophical thinking needs to turn to Shakespeare’s plays, or to works like them. Why must the philosopher care about these plays? Do they supply to thought something that a straightforward piece of philosophical prose cannot supply, and if so, what?

One might, of course, not subscribe to Nussbaum’s particular vision of the relationship between literature and philosophy. Equally, we might believe her criteria to be neither exhaustive nor sufficient. But Nussbaum’s review as a whole, and the formulation of these three criteria especially, are useful, because they help us get a better handle on the assumptions that underlie much of our thinking about what literature, and Shakespeare in particular, can do for philosophy. These are, of course, as we shall see, those very same assumptions that Derrida’s way of reading Shakespeare challenges.

In Nussbaum’s view, something in our philosophical ways of reading Shakespeare has gone awry. If I had to choose one word to characterise the sorry state of affairs Nussbaum’s review describes it might be: imbalance. Each one of Nussbaum’s criteria, indeed, calls for the remedy of a lopsided approach to interdisciplinarity, where one discipline’s insights become subservient to the other discipline’s goals. Her critique thus aims not merely at Nuttall and McGinn (as we shall see, Zamir fares much better) but at the field of literature
and philosophy as a whole. Take, for example, philosophical readings of Shakespeare that do not do philosophy but which bring previously and independently elaborated philosophical themes or insights to the plays. Here, philosophy does not need literature to do its job; rather than an equal discipline, literature becomes, in Nussbaum’s words, the grist for philosophy’s mill. Such philosophical projections also do not tell us anything new about the literary work. In a particularly brusque moment, Nuttall is, for example, criticised for being unable to contribute significantly to an understanding of Shakespeare in general, or the respective plays he is taking on in particular. For Nussbaum, his analysis of the plays speak of a critic ‘who is no longer electrified by the dramas and who finds the task of interpretation rather boring’. His readings also, and this is perhaps the most constructive part of Nussbaum’s critique, do ultimately not answer or even pose the question what precisely one discipline could not do without the other. For Nussbaum, then, the interdisciplinary relationship between literature and philosophy, as it is mostly understood and practised, is not merely out of kilter but also fundamentally unproductive: it does not make anything new happen.

In ‘Adventures of Reading’, Toril Moi asks: ‘What is the point of reading literature if all we manage to see in it is a theory we already know? Why not simply stick to reading theory and philosophy if that’s what we really want to do?’ Like for Nussbaum, for Moi the viability or value of any interdisciplinary encounter between literature and philosophy depends first and foremost on finding a balanced reading approach:

How can we read philosophically without reducing the text to a witting or unwitting illustration of a pre-existing theory? How can we read literature with philosophy in ways that suggest that the writer may actually have something
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to tell the philosopher? And more radically: Is there a way to read philosophically without having recourse to a given philosophy at all? Can criticism itself be philosophy?

Nachträglichkeit is a useful concept to think about the difference between already knowing something (philosophically) before discovering it through (a literary) reading. Sigmund Freud (and the fact that I shall be returning to Freud throughout this book already tells us something about the peculiar kinships of Derrida’s approach to Shakespeare) coins this word to describe a particular psychoanalytic conception of time, a complex and possibly reciprocal movement according to which a past event is reinvested with meaning. The German word nachträglich means ‘later’ or ‘subsequently’, and ‘additional’ or ‘supplementary’, while the German verb nachtragen means ‘to hold a grudge’ – literally, to carry something after somebody. Interestingly, Freud did not himself seem to give the term a great importance, and never dedicates an entire essay to it. The explosiveness of Freud’s concept only goes off nachträglich. In the Language of Psychoanalysis, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis follow Jacques Lacan and render the term as après-coup, a phrase indicating something being ‘too late’ or ‘after the fact’. Like many translations of Shakespeare, this translation has turned out to be itself so seminal as to trigger a third generation of translations or readings: from the German Nachträglichkeit to the French après-coup to ‘afterwardness’, rather than James Strachey’s ‘deferred effect’. Laplanche dedicates some of his later work to the exploration of après-coup. In ‘Notes on Afterwardness’, he suggests that its reinvesting movement can stem from both the past and the present. In a deterministic scenario the past event only goes off, so to say, in the present; in this case the psychic causality between past and present is hence entirely determined by the past. In a hermeneutic scenario
the psychic causality is reversed: the past regains meaning by means of a present reading.¹³

Nussbaum and Moi caution against readings that favour the hermeneutic over the deterministic approach, where, in other words, too great a focus on present philosophical interpretations crowd out a work’s own insight (whatever that may be). Both Nussbaum and Moi wish to replace such partial blindness with an approach where philosophical and literary insights do not merely exist side by side but also augment and merge into each other, perhaps just like past and present mingle in Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*. The mingling of perspectives and modes of thinking is at the heart of Zamir’s *Double Vision*, which Nussbaum reviews favourably. This engagement with Shakespeare meets all three of her criteria: it offers new insights into the plays, it actually does philosophy, and it gives an account for why – and in what manner – philosophy must turn to Shakespeare. Such ‘integrated “philosophical criticism”’, in other words an active philosophical engagement with literary works, can, Zamir writes, ‘substantially compensate for some limitations of nonliterary philosophical argumentation’.¹⁴ Zamir succeeds in ‘allowing the two distinct outlooks of philosophy and literature to interplay’, thus facilitating the emergence of ‘a kind of thought – a form of double vision – that opens up important modes of understanding’.¹⁵ In this perspective, it is only when literature’s and philosophy’s distinct modes of understanding become conducive to each other that doing philosophy with Shakespeare becomes possible.

**Bardolatry**

But why do philosophers read Shakespeare in the first place? Is it because Shakespeare is particularly, or uniquely, useful to philosophers? Zamir chooses Shakespeare primarily because of ‘the gratifying insights that his writings yield
What is Shakespeare’s Genius?

when brought into close dialogue with philosophical concerns’ – because, in other words, the nature of his writing, so different from philosophy, yields insights that it cannot find alone.\textsuperscript{16} Paul Kottman’s acknowledgement that ‘students of the plays invariably find themselves wrapped up . . . in philosophical questions’ because of the dramatic nature of Shakespeare’s work similarly seems to locate Shakespeare’s philosophical value in a more generalised understanding of what distinguishes literary from philosophical discourse.\textsuperscript{17} More often than not, however, Shakespeare is deemed not only to be representative of literature’s value for philosophy, but is thought to far exceed it. In fact, the second reason Zamir gives for focusing on Shakespeare is that his work ‘exemplifies literary excellence’ and that ‘the uncontested aesthetic value of his plays enables investigations into what makes up that value without the need to prove first that it exists’.\textsuperscript{18}

Ideas of literary excellence – from the Latin \textit{excellens}, meaning to be elevated or exalted – are closely bound up with the notion of canonicity. The most notorious advocate of a thinking of canonicity is Harold Bloom, of course, and it will come as no surprise that he places Shakespeare at the very heart of his canon. Shakespeare is thus also at the very centre of the attack on great literature by what Bloom characterises as the ‘School of Resentment’. For Bloom, the ‘School of Resentment’ is a catch-all term for all those scholars who ‘value theory over literature itself’ and who illegitimately bring their own ‘political stance’ to bear on it.\textsuperscript{19} (As I will show in the last chapter, for Derrida, ways of reading are indeed fundamental to taking a political stance, albeit differently from what Bloom imagines here.) Although Bloom is not directly speaking about the relationship between literature and philosophy, there is an echo here of Nussbaum’s or Moi’s lament about the lopsidedness of many philosophical approaches to literature. In what Bloom calls ‘French
Shakespeare’ the philosophy is, for example, placed before the text:

The procedure is to begin with a political stance all your own, far out and away from Shakespeare’s plays, and then to locate some marginal bit of English Renaissance social history that seems to sustain your stance. Social fragment in hand, you move in from outside upon the poor play, and find some connection, however established, between your supposed social fact and Shakespeare’s words.\(^\text{10}\)

Like Nussbaum, Bloom does not believe that such approaches add something to the study of Shakespeare: ‘You can bring absolutely anything to Shakespeare and the plays will light it up, far more than what you bring will illuminate the plays.’\(^\text{21}\)

For these ‘professional resenters’ Shakespeare is ‘only a cultural phenomenon, produced by sociopolitical urgencies. In this view, Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare – his plays were written by the social, political, and economic energies of his age.’\(^\text{22}\)

Despite Bloom’s initial fears for the canon’s fragility and thus the necessity and urgency to protect it tooth and nail, he also believes that the plays’ intrinsic aesthetic value is so beyond question that ‘Shakespeare’s eminence is . . . the rock upon which the School of Resentment must at last founder.’\(^\text{23}\)

Shakespeare is thus Bloom’s trump card, just as he is for Zamir. While for the former Shakespeare is the bedrock upon which the canon will stand, for the latter Shakespeare will silence those who question the value literature might have for philosophy in general. In both argumentative manoeuvres, Shakespeare’s excellence is key. In Bloom’s account, in particular, Shakespeare’s eminence is put so beyond the reach of doubt as to raise the issue of idolatry. Bloom is absolutely unapologetic about his adoration of Shakespeare: ‘Bardolatry, the worship of Shakespeare, ought to be even more a secular religion than it already is.’\(^\text{24}\) For Bloom,
Shakespeare’s achievements are both literary and intellectual. Shakespeare not merely ‘wrote the best poetry and the best prose in English, or perhaps in any Western language’, he also ‘thought more comprehensively and originally than any other writer’.25 Most importantly, however, Shakespeare ‘essentially invented the human as we continue to know and value it’.26 While for Moi an unbalanced approach to literature and philosophy risks perhaps nothing more than futility (although, as we shall see, for Nussbaum the dangers might, in truth, be far greater), for Bloom, overly theorised readings, blind to Shakespeare’s true value, risk losing something far greater and far more precious. When ‘resenters’ put theory before the text, they risk not merely hollowing out Shakespeare but hollowing out something about our very idea of the human. Because who, Bloom, asks, ‘besides Shakespeare can continue to inform an authentic idea of the human?’27

(‘I knew very well there was a ghost waiting there, and from the opening, from the raising of the curtain.’28 Despite my best intentions to defer Derrida until later, he is already here haunting Bloom’s reading of Shakespeare, haunting Bloom’s idea of the human. Although Bloom’s critique of French readings of Shakespeare is primarily aimed at Foucault, ‘Derrideanism’, as he calls it at one point in The Invention of the Human, also falls foul of valuing theory more than Shakespeare. The disagreements between Bloom and Derrida are far more nuanced than they might seem. As Agata Bielik-Robson ponders, might it be ‘a case of mutual misunderstanding, first on the part of self-proclaimed deconstructionists who condemned [Bloom] to psychological fallacy, and then on the part of his advocates, who defended his allegedly old-school humanist approach?’29 Bloom was, in fact, an early supporter of deconstruction and his attack is primarily aimed not at Derrida or de Man or other ‘high-deconstructive giants’,30 but rather at a related ‘ideologically mobilized, academic mass movement’.31 The sea-change
brought on by Derrida’s work indeed laid the foundation for the ‘School of Resentment’ in many ways. As Simon Glendinning notes, deconstruction’s habit to focus on the margins ‘seemed to provide a theoretical reference point for anyone who wanted to pay exclusive attention to non-canonical texts and literatures’, and, I would add, it also gave justification to those who wanted to look at canonical texts differently.\textsuperscript{12} While we might be too quick to characterise Bloom’s view of Derrida as entirely antagonistic, it would perhaps be impossible to exaggerate the differences between their conception of what constitutes Shakespeare’s genius: for Bloom it is Shakespeare the man, perhaps even, to echo Emerson, the representative man; for Derrida it is the Thing Shakespeare. But I am skipping ahead too quickly.)

Surprisingly, perhaps, bardolatry also exists in philosophy. Take, for instance, the common practice of identifying philosophical stances in the plays and then ascribing them to Shakespeare the man himself. In \textit{Shakespeare’s Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays}, unfavourably reviewed by Nussbaum, Colin McGinn attempts ‘a systematic treatment of the underlying philosophical themes of the plays’, including ‘skepticism and the possibility of human knowledge; the nature of the self and personal identity; the understanding of causation; the existence and nature of evil’ and ‘the formative power of language’, which he claims are ‘woven deeply into Shakespeare’s plots and poetry’.\textsuperscript{33} This search for philosophical themes soon gives way to a sort of philosophical man hunt: ‘part of my aim in this book is to work out exactly what his view was, insofar as it is represented in the plays’.\textsuperscript{34} Thus, despite his own initial reservations, Shakespeare gets cast as a ‘“naturalist”’, a ‘clear-eyed observer and recorder, sensitive to the facts before his eyes, not swayed by dogma or tradition’.\textsuperscript{35} There is a similar oscillation in David Bevington’s \textit{Shakespeare’s Ideas: More Things in Heaven and Earth}. Despite declaring at the beginning of
his book that Shakespeare never ‘speaks in his own voice . . . on what we would broadly call his “philosophy”’; he concludes with a chapter perhaps humorously but for that no less remarkably entitled ‘Credo’, which lists a whole litany of beliefs supposedly espoused by the Bard.

Even the most level-headed philosophical examinations of Shakespeare’s plays, where no overt attempt is made to identify the man’s own beliefs, tend towards a sort of ‘identity philosophy’ and Shakespeare gets recruited as the unwitting pre-cursor of this or that philosophical school. While Millicent Bell acknowledges that ‘what he is “trying to say” in his plays is hardly distinguishable in the chorus of ideas that his poetry and dramatic structures make us hear’, she goes on to offer a sceptical Shakespeare, ‘a doubter of many received views about humanity and the universe’.

In *Shakespearean Metaphysics*, Michael Witmore first resists labelling Shakespeare as anything other than a Shakespearean, but nonetheless notes that his metaphysics can be explicated ‘with the help of other writers in the metaphysical tradition’, because ‘his metaphysics shares a common thread of interest’ with Whitehead, Bergson and Spinoza. Another example is Julia Reinhard Lupton’s wonderful *Thinking with Shakespeare*, in which she argues for readings of Shakespeare that resist ‘turning into what Ian Kott calls “costume drama” . . . constrained’ not merely by a strict historicisation but also ‘by the corsets and laces of their own apparatus, whether the interpretation is flooded by too much context or left high and dry by too much concept’. For Shakespeare to truly be our contemporary we must not merely situate his work in our now, we must also allow ourselves to think with him about issues that concern us now, and to do so in a manner in which our engagement with conceptual (or philosophical) and the textual (or literary) aspects of the text pull our thinking in the same direction. *Thinking with Shakespeare* is in this
sense less concerned with ‘reconstructing the significance of Shakespeare for later traditions of thinking or staging his uncanny echoing of current events’ than with excavating those ‘constellations’ or ‘ensembles of meaning, character and setting’ that ‘persist, that appear in, before, and after Shakespeare’. What Reinhard Lupton is after is thus ‘a kind of thinking with Shakespeare’ which ‘not analyzing Shakespeare per se, but following the rhythm and images of thought in Shakespeare in order to achieve original interpretative ends, eff[e]ct a kind of renaissance in and through them’. For Reinhard Lupton, then, a philosopher would do well to turn to Shakespeare not because his plays are a ‘thesaurus of eternal messages’, but because they are able ‘to establish real connections with the successive worlds shared and sustained by actors and audiences over time’. For her, thinking with Shakespeare is ‘ideally, not to instrumentalize the plays in the service of an ideological program (as one drives in a nail “with” a hammer), but rather to think alongside Shakespeare about matters of shared concern (as one speaks “with” a friend)’. This approach to Shakespeare is framed by Hannah Arendt’s notion of the table as a place that ‘affords conversation among equal partners’. Arendt, in fact, very much sets the table of Reinhard Lupton’s thinking with Shakespeare, also in the sense that throughout the book Arendt is Reinhard Lupton’s and Shakespeare’s equal partner in thinking.

What to do with these by no means exhaustive but I believe rather representative philosophical portraits of Shakespeare the sceptic, the metaphysician or the Arendtian? Their diverse and contradictory nature shows that, although, as Agnes Heller writes, ‘no one will solve the riddle of the sphinx called Shakespeare’, most are not able to resist at least trying. If the challenge for Reinhard Lupton has been ‘to approach the texts with a light touch, using frameworks provided by Arendt and her readers in order to respond freshly to the
texts rather than simply discover my preoccupations there’, it remains unclear whether maintaining such a light touch is at all possible.\(^47\) Although books such as *Shakespeare’s Guide to Life* which search the sonnets and the plays for philosophical tenets or ‘wisdoms’ to be transformed into readily available and easily quotable, and thus marketable, snippets are, of course, much less sophisticated than McGinn’s, Bevington’s or Nuttall’s well-informed studies, they do in a very real sense share something in common: the desire to go back to the man Shakespeare. As in Henry James’s short story ‘The Birthplace’, there is a persistent desire to anchor the value of the work in the man who wrote it, perhaps in the belief that *man* is able to produce such a work.\(^48\)

Marjorie Garber has written incisively on the mechanisms of self-validation that underlie our collective tendency to quote Shakespeare to clinch an argument. We have a ‘penchant for quoting Shakespeare out of context, as a testimony simultaneously to the quoter’s own erudition and the truth of the sentiment being uttered’.\(^49\) Chopped up into small, palatable nuggets of wisdom, Shakespeare is used to give a certain unquestionable ring of authority to one’s statement: ‘Shakespeare said it: therefore it must be true. True, somehow, to human nature, whatever that is. Universally, transhistorically true.’\(^50\) It would be overly simplistic to ascribe this tendency, whether within or outside philosophy, to a mere narcissistic desire to find our own beliefs confirmed and thus validated by none other than Shakespeare. There is more going on here. Shakespeare emerges from many of these philosophical readings as infinitely wise and prescient; he not only knows better, but he repeatedly anticipates the history of ideas. Ralph Waldo Emerson famously noted that Shakespeare’s achievements are so great that he transcends the horizon of human understanding: ‘now, literature, philosophy, and thought are Shakespearized. His mind is the horizon beyond which at present we do not see. Our ears are educated to music by his rhythm.’\(^51\)
Bloom agrees: ‘He is a system of northern lights, an aurora borealis visible where most of us will never go.’ Millicent Bell, too, places Shakespeare far beyond the human horizon: ‘I began to suspect, as some others have, that Shakespeare’s was one of those rare minds that get around to the other side and see the moon’s other face, where, until space travel, no crater had a name.’ But it is precisely in testing and widening the limits of human achievement that Shakespeare’s work tells us something about what it means to be human: ‘The plays remain the outward limit of human achievement: Aesthetically, cognitively, in certain ways morally, even spiritually. They abide beyond the end of the mind’s reach; we cannot catch up to them.’ It is precisely in exceeding the human that, the astral imagery Bell and Bloom use suggests, Shakespeare becomes our perimeter. Unlike Neil Armstrong, whose small step became humanities’ ability to not only name but walk the moon’s craters, Shakespeare’s extraordinariness becomes ours. It is in Shakespeare’s ability to transcend humanity that he becomes, to use Emerson’s word, representative, or Garber’s turn of phrase, ‘the abiding, ventriloquized voice of us all.’

Each time we celebrate Shakespeare we celebrate human genius and thus ourselves. More than this, Shakespeare becomes the means by which we shore up our idea of ourselves. These are precisely the walls of certainty that Derrida’s way of reading Shakespeare assails.

“Who’s there?” (Hamlet, I, i, 1). Re-enter Derrida, again.

Reading Derrida Reading Shakespeare

At the beginning of ‘Let’s Start Again’, Sarah Wood suggests that we cannot start again without also listening to the other words folded up inside this monosyllabic word:

v. i. to shoot, dart, move suddenly forth, or out . . . to break away: to make a sudden or involuntary movement as of surprise or becoming aware: to spring open, out of place,
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As soon as we start, the start runs away with itself, taking us to places we did not anticipate. To start is always to make an incision and, at the same time, to allow yourself to be wounded by whatever will start and shoot off. Starting is not easy. I recognise my anxiety in Sean Gaston’s deceptively titled Starting with Derrida. If anything, Gaston’s book, as well as the significant number of other introductory books on Derrida, makes you realise that you will never finish with starting with Derrida, never finish with wondering how Derrida starts. We cannot start, Wood reminds us, without starting again. (As we shall see, every start shoots off a teleiopoetic arrow, blurring the possibility of any linearity between beginning and end. And, as we shall also see, this is precisely the movement that is contained in Derrida’s thinking about the ‘re-’, the essential repeatability of the act of reading, which haunts this reading of Derrida reading Shakespeare.)

So, let’s start then, again, as it is customary to do in introductions, with something like the end. Derrida’s writing on Shakespeare is neither prolific nor systematic. In his published work, Shakespeare is only referred to in seven pieces: ‘Aphorism Countertime’, ‘My Chances’, Specters of Marx, ‘What is a “Relevant” Translation?’, ‘The Time is Out of Joint’, Geneses, Genealogies, Genre, and Genius and “This Strange Institution Called Literature”. There is something of what ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’ calls the ‘palintrope’ in Derrida’s writing about Shakespeare. When writing about Derrida, it is perhaps particularly appropriate to start with the end, because palintrope is at work within these texts. It is, for instance, at work in the strange preface to Specters, the ‘Exordium’, as well as, on a purely syntactical level, the
knot of reported speech that kicks it off: ‘I would like to learn to live finally [je voudrais apprendre à vivre enfin].’\textsuperscript{60} Similarly, ‘Aphorism Countertime’ begins with its hypothesis and conclusion: ‘1. Aphorism is the name.’\textsuperscript{61} Here, words and themes are always forwarding and rewinding to somewhere else in the text or stretching their antennae to a different part of Derrida’s oeuvre. As Derrida writes in ‘Living On: Border Lines’: ‘Each “text” is a machine with multiple reading heads for other texts.’\textsuperscript{62} As Gaston points out, when reading Derrida we thereby not only start with the end, but this work is always starting \textit{again} differently, thereby ‘startling’ itself and losing its ‘logos’, frustrating, in other words, any desire to hold, understand or define it once and for all.\textsuperscript{63} Derrida’s work on Shakespeare, too, is palintropic in the very sense outlined above: in resisting a linear account, in starting and restarting again differently with Shakespeare, it loses its \textit{logos}, and we lose the very possibility of gathering these disjointed and disjointing texts together. It is, however, precisely in this impossibility of offering a simple, linear answer to what he does to Shakespeare (and the other way around) that the thrill and the promise of the Derridean act of reading lies.

How would Derrida fare by Nussbaum’s criteria? As I will show, Derrida’s works on Shakespeare \textit{do} philosophy, illuminate the plays, and give reasons why the philosopher should care about Shakespeare. For him, literature is not a simple reflection of the ‘philosophy’ espoused by its author. He ‘offer[s] some account of why philosophical thinking needs to turn to Shakespeare’s play, or to works like them’.\textsuperscript{64} More importantly, he does not see literature merely as a repository for convenient illustrations philosophers can draw on. Not interested in claiming Shakespeare as a Derridean \textit{avant la lettre}, he is instead concerned with showing how an engagement with Shakespeare can open a sort of thinking that cannot simply be put into the service of \textit{one}
programme of thought. As I will show, this thinking is not rooted in a quasi-religious trust in Shakespeare’s wisdom or his supreme ‘humanness’; it is rather a thinking which, being inaugurated by a reciprocal textual haunting, a transposition or dissemination, and the uncanny, transformative afterlife of the Shakespearean idiom, explodes traditional philosophical or literary paradigms. In this view, Shakespeare, like other great works of literature, in the end resists even being fully subsumed by Derrida’s own ‘programme’.

Interdisciplinarity is on everyone’s lips. In a recent and important contribution to the thinking of (and beyond) interdisciplinarity, Peter Osborne has suggested that, rather than the transformative and transgressive programme that it is often celebrated to be, it is a simple extension or modulation of disciplinary hegemony. For Osborne, the discipline of “English” (or, in the USA, Comparative Literature) is an example of such a ‘hegemonic form, incorporating whole hosts of new theoretical developments from without into radically expanded versions of their former selves’. Put differently, in most cases interdisciplinary approaches do not query but reaffirm the orthodoxies of dominant disciplines. The demand to be interdisciplinary is therefore the demand to transgress – only not ‘too flagrantly’. More importantly, most interdisciplinary approaches do not query the deeply embedded certainties that underpin the ways we think in and beyond disciplines, but also about ourselves.

I understand Osborne’s call to the transdisciplinary rather than the interdisciplinary as a call to question what modes of thinking an engagement with literature can afford, rather than simply putting them in service of a new master. This transdisciplinarity is perhaps what Martin Heidegger had in mind when in What is Called Thinking he called for philosophy not as a research programme but as a handicraft. A research programme is predetermined: it might not know what answers it will find but it knows the realm in which
these answers will appear. The frame for thinking is set at the beginning. In contrast, thinking-as-handicraft does not yet know what awaits it; it does not yet know what horizons will border it. It follows the logic of ‘start’. Derrida’s way of reading Shakespeare shows us that the value of literature for philosophy lies in its ability to surprise us and to fissure any certainty that we might bring to it. What we call literature is philosophically important because it remains, to use Frank Kermode’s beautifully apt phrase, ‘strange, sublime, uncanny, anxious’.67

Although this project is the first to consider Derrida’s readings of Shakespeare at some length, it joins an already considerable and ever-growing number of studies on Derrida and Shakespeare. Shakespeare studies has long registered Derrida’s work but I will here keep company mostly with scholars who look at this relationship from the other side of the disciplinary divide.68 Among them are Derek Attridge, Peggy Kamuf, Nicholas Royle and Sarah Wood, as well as, of course, Hélène Cixous, on whose ‘Shakespeare Ghosting Derrida’ I shall draw repeatedly. I focus on this segment of work on Derrida and Shakespeare because it more easily opens avenues to thinking about the how rather than merely the what of Derrida’s engagements with the plays.

This book is about how Derrida reads Shakespeare. It is not primarily about what he finds in Shakespeare. I will address the philosophical and literary insights that spring from their encounter, but my main concern will be to gain a clearer understanding of textual practices and conceptual models that underlie Derrida’s way of approaching Shakespeare. Although the how and what of an act of reading, particularly an act of reading such as Derrida’s, can never be easily separated, it is in the how of Derrida’s reading of Shakespeare that his challenge to traditional ways of conceiving of the relationship between literature and philosophy lies. This approach is also justified by Derrida’s way of
engaging with literature. Derrida is always drawn to texts that ‘bear within themselves’ the question of what literature is and what we should be doing with it.\textsuperscript{69} Despite the generality and ambitiousness of this underlying question, Derrida does not shirk engagement with the singular particularities of the Shakespearean play he reads. It is as if, for Derrida, each of the plays he reads poses this question anew:

What is fascinating is perhaps the event of a singularity powerful enough to formalize the questions and theoretical laws concerning it. No doubt we shall have to come back to this word \textit{power}. The \textquote{power} that language is capable of, the power that \textit{there is}, as language or as writing, is that a singular mark should also be repeatable, iterable, as mark. It then begins to differ from itself sufficiently to become exemplary and thus involve a certain generality. This economy of exemplary iterability is of itself formalizing.\textsuperscript{70}

As I have suggested, philosophical readings of Shakespeare have a tendency to focus on whether a particular philosophical tenet is present in or illuminated, perhaps even foreshadowed, by Shakespeare. The biggest temptation to resist when writing a book on Derrida and Shakespeare might therefore have been to argue that, depending on where one’s allegiances lie, Shakespeare is really a Derridean or that Shakespeare said everything Derrida says better and before him to boot. As it turns out, the hurdle to clear was quite another one. The principal challenge of writing this book has been how to do justice to Derrida’s habits of reading, without aping, simplifying or formalising them, without, in short, losing their quicksilveryness. The aim is also to write about how Derrida reads Shakespeare, how he dodges philosophical bardolatry for something altogether more alive and motile, without falling into a hagiographic register of a different sort.

The more time I spend in the company of Derrida and with the texts he wrote on and with and in the company of
Shakespeare, the more I realise that trying to write about only one of these texts is all but impossible. Even when I speak of one of his texts on Shakespeare, of a single theme addressed in it, an isolated word or sound, another of his texts (whether on Shakespeare or something else) will always be resonating just out of our earshot. The mission is to impose an order on to this intricate net of harmonies, resonances without muffling them, which would amount to a kind of embalming, a deadening. It seems nearly impossible to render the performativities of Derrida’s acts of reading in the constatives that straightforward academic prose demands. I am, of course, not alone in having this difficulty. Derrida faced a similar one when writing *Dissemination*, for example. As the translator Barbara Johnson remarks, ‘to perfectly disseminate the exposition of dissemination would require a kind of textual mastery that would belong among the recuperative gestures that dissemination undercuts’. Derrida’s readings of Shakespeare, indeed the role Shakespeare comes to play in his writings, undercuts our desire to master either discourse. However, although it disseminates, Derrida’s writing on Shakespeare neither shatters nor scatters. It does not, as many would have us believe, dissolve into the thin air of mystification or obscurantism. Dissemination does not mean dispersion, and with every cross-reference, resonance and echo, his writing, which is also always an act of reading, hurtles itself ever more violently towards us and therefore towards the ‘to come’, which thus becomes the vanishing point of his rendezvous with Shakespeare and with literature.

Perhaps all one can hope for in thinking about Derrida is to put reading heads into motion. Rather than aspire to an unattainable textual mastery, I have therefore resorted to a more palintropic, and hopefully more resonant, mode of exposition. The impossibility of, at least for me, talking about the palintropes of Derrida’s acts of reading Shakespeare in a linear fashion is marked throughout by inserting
comments (parenthetical and other) which point backwards and forwards to nodal points in the argument, where different strands criss-cross and intersect. Although none can serve as a master-term to unlock what is at stake in Derrida’s reading of, and writing with, Shakespeare, I also use a series of what Derrida in ‘Différance’ calls ‘nonsynonymous substitutions’ and which surface in Derrida’s Shakespearean reading acts to guide me. In response to Derrida’s acts of reading, themes and figures like contretemps, the time is out of joint, arrows (flèches), peepholes (meurtrières), porpentine, chance and frequencies emerge to illuminate different aspects of the way Derrida reads Shakespeare. According to the logic traced by these ‘nonsynonymous substitutions’, neither can supplant nor supersede the other. Indeed, for Johnson, the merit of Derrida’s writing lies ‘in its inscription of the ways in which all theoretical discourse – including its own – for ever remains both belated and precipitous with respect to the textual practice it attempts to comprehend’. Reminding ourselves of the particular character of these acts of reading – of their openness to what is uncanny, anxious and surprising, and their willingness to find affirmation in such radical openness which, as I will suggest, amounts to a different kind of readerly mastery – is finally, I believe, also the best strategy to give Derrida what is his due, and nothing more. What follows is a brief road map to the rest of the book.

Through a reading of ‘Aphorism Countertime’ and ‘The Time is Out of Joint’, Chapter 2 – ‘Deconstructing (with) Shakespeare’ – gives a succinct overview of Derrida’s thought. By means of a discussion of the role the ‘textual’ has had in previous accounts of the relationship between literature and philosophy – most importantly in Nussbaum’s critiques of Butler and Derrida – this chapter will also address common misconceptions about ‘deconstruction’ and its relation to literature. The last section of the chapter draws on Derrida’s ‘Signature Event Context’ to illuminate Derrida’s notion
of Shakespeare as an iterable signature, which is crucial to understanding his often seemingly irreverent approach to the Bard.

In Chapter 3 – ‘Flèches and the Wounds of Reading’ – I suggest that any attempt to delineate a primacy or hierarchy between Derrida and Shakespeare is foiled by Derrida’s notion of the palintropic unfolding of time and textual transmission. I discuss the latter through an analysis of the striking resonance between his image of Shakespeare shooting arrows at us in *Specters of Marx* and Friedrich Nietzsche’s ‘teleiopoetic’ arrow in *Politics of Friendship*. In the second half of the chapter, I juxtapose the image of Shakespeare’s arrow with *Monolingualism of the Other*’s account of how Derrida is wounded by the arrow (flèche) of the French language in order to formulate Derrida’s understanding of reading as an event, and as a wound. I then go on to demonstrate that Derrida loves Shakespearean drama not despite but because of its Englishness. Indeed, what enflames what he calls his violent and jealous love of the Bard is in fact Shakespeare’s idiom, the very materiality and body of Shakespeare’s English. Brought into conversation with his understanding of the wounds of reading, most beautifully described in his work on Paul Celan, Derrida’s play on Shakespeare’s arrows therefore also alters what we may think of as the body, and hence also the genius, of a text.

‘Porpentine’, Chapter 4, considers the importance and function of Shakespeare’s idiom in Derrida’s work on Shakespeare – and beyond – through an analysis of the ‘performatively performative translation’ of the word ‘porpentine’ in *Specters of Marx*. I begin by arguing, through a juxtaposition of his parenthetical non-translation of Hamlet’s porpentine in Act I, scene v with Karl Marx’s translation of Hamlet’s mole in ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire’, that, like Marx’s translation, Derrida’s interference is performative but that, unlike Marx’s, it retains its English idiom even in French.
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Drawing parallels between Shakespeare’s porpentine and the poetmatic hedgehog at the heart of ‘Che cos’è la poesia?’ and ‘Istrice 2: Ick bünn all bier’, I go on to suggest that, for Derrida, the idiom’s translatability is dependent on its idiomacity, on the singular signifier–signified combination which would appear to escape translation. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ‘What is a “Relevant” Translation’, a text which also includes a reading of The Merchant of Venice, and specifically with an analysis of the philosophical significance of the homonymic and paronomastic effects brought into play by the frequent parenthetic insertion of untranslated Shakespeare into Derrida’s French.

Chapter 5 – ‘Giving the Greatest Chance to Chance’ – turns to the role of chance in the way Derrida reads Shakespeare. It begins with a consideration of Derrida’s extremely brief and enigmatic mention of King Lear in ‘My Chances/Mes Chances: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies’. Here, I ask what chances Derrida takes, or almost takes, with Shakespeare. I show that in proposing but failing to read King Lear beyond Freud’s reading of the play in The Theme of the Three Caskets (1913) and Heidegger’s treatment of Moira in ‘Moira (Parmenides, Fragment viii, 34–41)’, Derrida is for the greatest part concerned with querying the idea of mastery that characterises Heidegger’s and Freud’s stances as readers. In the second part of the chapter, I explore the complex dynamics between Freud’s instrumentalisation of the chances of reading and his desire for mastery by tracing his seemingly fortuitous uses of Shakespeare in the interpretation of his ‘Non Vixit Dream’ in The Interpretation of Dreams. In the chapter’s last section, I turn to Derrida’s inheritance of Freud and his understanding of literature’s ability ‘to give the greatest chance to chance’, as well as his radical commitment to the uncanny mastery of the text as a counterpoint to ideas of Shakespeare’s supremely human genius.
Chapter 6 – ‘The Politics of Re-reading’ – thinks about the political aspirations of Derrida’s work on Shakespeare. I argue that any misreading of *Specters of Marx*, and what Derrida is doing with Marx, is also based on a misunderstanding of the role the Shakespearean references play in this text. We cannot, I argue, understand Derrida’s re-politicisation if we do not understand it as an act of re-reading, which in the essay ‘Marx & Sons’ is also comprehended in terms of ‘differential tones’. Taking Derrida’s aural hint, I propose the term ‘frequencies’, as it emerges in *Specters of Marx*, in order to show how the Thing Shakespeare also works ‘philosophonically’. With a reading of how Derrida plays on the appearance and disappearance of Hamlet’s Ghost in *Specters*, and more precisely of how he paraphrases one reappearance as ‘Re-enter the Ghost’, I argue that it is precisely in this ‘re-’ that we can hear the ‘political’ tones of Derrida’s reading resonate.

The conclusion returns to the question of what Shakespeare’s genius might be.

**Notes**

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4. Ibid. 367.
5. Ibid. 367.
6. Ibid. 367.
7. Ibid. 367.
8. Ibid. 368.

10. Ibid. 19.
13. Ibid. 264–5.
15. Ibid. xv.
16. Ibid. xiii.
20. Ibid. 9.
21. Ibid. 9.
22. Ibid. 16.
25. Ibid. xviii.
26. Ibid. 290.
27. See Dominic Pettman, *Human Error: Species-Being and Media Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 12–19, for an incisive account of Bloom’s vision of Shakespeare as the midwife of ‘the human’.
30. Ibid. 77.
31. Ibid. 76.
34. Ibid. 15.
35. Ibid. 15.
37. Ibid. 213–17.
41. Ibid. 18.
42. Ibid. 20.
43. Ibid. 18.
44. Ibid. 23.
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45. Ibid. 13.
50. Ibid. 155.
53. Bell, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Skepticism*, x.
64. Nussbaum, ‘Stages of Thought’, 367.

Ibid. 7–8.


Ibid. 42–3.


Derrida, *Dissemination*, xxxiv.