

On Shakespeare

Mark Fortier

The iconic image of William Shakespeare



**Shakespeare Reproduced:
The Text in History and Ideology**
Eds. Jean E. Howard and
Marion F. O'Connor
New York: Methuen, 1987, 292 pp.

The Shakespeare Myth
Ed. Graham Holderness
Manchester: Manchester University Press,
1988, 215 pp.

"Shakespeare in Canada"
Canadian Theatre Review 54 (Spring
1988), 96 pp.

In his survey of recent "Political criticism of Shakespeare" in *Shakespeare Reproduced*, Walter Cohen argues that ideological criticism is more advanced in Shakespeare studies than in any other area of traditional literary research, and that Shakespeare studies form "the cutting edge of academic criticism in the United States." However, if the effect of this cutting edge is not to be blunted, Shakespeare studies must concern themselves not only with a historical and political study of Shakespeare's texts in their time, but with "Shakespeare" in a more current sense. As Terry Eagleton writes in the "Afterword" to *The Shakespeare Myth*, "Shakespeare is today less an author than an apparatus." Shakespeare is not only a set of literary texts from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but "an entire politico-cultural formation" in the world around us. The Shakespeare apparatus, the Shakespeare industry, "interlocks with almost every major structure of late capitalism." In other words, "Shakespeare" is the name of something which continues to have a political effect in our own day. It is this "Shakespeare" which must be studied if

the full urgency of Shakespeare studies is to be made manifest.

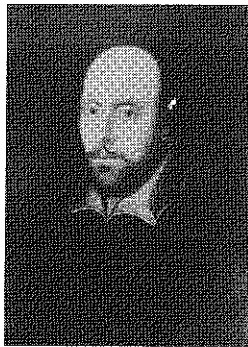
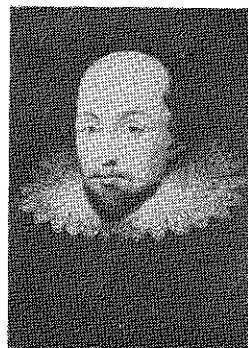
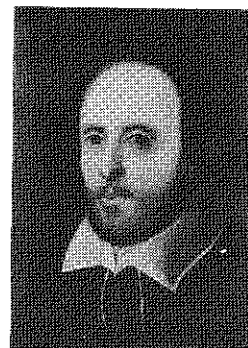
Of the volumes under review, *Shakespeare Reproduced* is the most literary. It takes up the contextual rereading of Shakespeare's plays already underway in such compilations as *Political Shakespeare* (Eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Ithaca: Cornell, 1985), *Alternative Shakespeares* (Ed. John Drakakis, London: Methuen, 1985), and *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (Eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, New York: Methuen, 1985). Here the plays are reputedly set inside their historical context, and yet what seems to happen is rather that the historical context is set inside the plays — hence a symptomatic pattern in the titles of a number of the essays collected here: "class-gender tension in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," "femininity and the monstrous in *Othello*," "gender and rank in *Much Ado About Nothing*," "subversion and recuperation in *The Merchant of Venice*." Perhaps more interesting to a wider audience is the discussion of Shakespeare and higher education in Britain, and especially the United States, which is taken up in the introduction by Howard and O'Connor, and then in the contributions of Walter Cohen, Don E. Wayne, and Margaret Ferguson.

Cohen, one of the most trenchant of current Shakespeare scholars, indicates the work still to be done. While "radical" Shakespeare may be becoming hegemonic at elite conferences, in scholarly journals and in large research universities, this is not the case in the classroom generally, especially at the smaller colleges and universities where those from the working or lower middle classes are likely to be in attendance. Nor has the radical critique of Shakespeare informed a critique of aca-

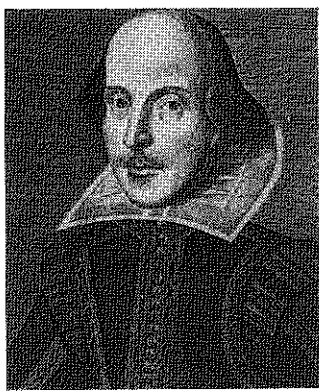
demic and pedagogic procedures, let alone a critique of practices outside the academy. Don E. Wayne argues that the new historicism, the most ubiquitous form of radical critique of Shakespeare in the United States, while it comes out of the activism of the 1960s and that activism's critique of state and institutional power, is blind to its complicity — in its world view, if not its practice — with the corporate power structures of late capitalism in the 1980s. Margaret Ferguson questions the potential of Shakespeare studies as an effective oppositional strategy, and shows that the forces for containing the subversive power of radical Shakespeare studies are truly formidable. Such a bracing awareness, she argues, must inform any alternative pedagogical practice. Howard and O'Connor conclude by calling for studies of "Shakespeare" in advertising, popular magazines, and political rhetoric, for instance: "Ignoring these uses of Shakespeare as trivial or beyond our expertise means acquiescing in the separation of the academy from general culture."

The Shakespeare Myth is explicitly less concerned with Shakespeare's dramatic texts than with such "trivial" appropriations of Shakespeare. The contributors were urged to "look behind and beyond" the plays "and to recognize 'Shakespeare' wherever and whenever that authorial construction is manifested." In fact, the closest thing to a textual reading in this volume is a reading not of Shakespeare's works but of the adaptations of Stoppard, Marowitz, Wesker and Bond. Although scholars of literature may find this approach disconcerting, it opens the discussion into areas which traditional approaches have always elided.

"The call of the contemporary is inescapable," writes Graham Holderness in his



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introduction, and "Shakespeare is, here, now, always, what is currently being made of him." In Britain "Shakespeare" continues to be an effective and pressing ideological state apparatus, disseminated through such industries as tourism, broadcasting, publishing and education. John Drakakis studies the conflicts between the International Globe Trust, which wants to reconstruct the Globe theatre on its original site, and the Southwark Borough Council, which wants to use the land for public housing. In his article on Shakespeare and education, David Hornbrook continues the groundbreaking work of Alan Sinfield in *Political Shakespeare*. Hornbrook notes a strange new twist: while Shakespeare plays a progressively smaller role in the education of the working class, the elite in British "public" schools continue to be well versed in their bardolatry. Hornbrook argues that the exclusion from Shakespeare studies goes hand in hand with an exclusion from access to the managerial class, and that Shakespeare studies — in a radicalized version — should be reintroduced into working class education. *The Shakespeare Myth* also looks at other contestatory practices in which "Shakespeare" as champion of the status quo is taken to task: feminist criticism, popular theatre and adaptation, gay liberation.

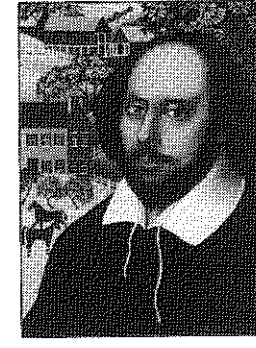
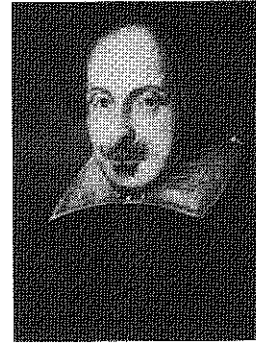
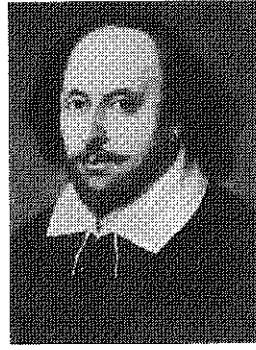
Shakespeare Reproduced is decidedly American in its focus, and *The Shakespeare Myth* is even more decidedly British. This leaves the Canadian reader with little or no specific understanding as to how the Shakespeare apparatus, the Shakespeare industry, the Shakespeare myth, works in Canada in the late 1980s. Northrop Frye's *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* (Markham, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1986), for instance, is a strictly literary analysis of Shakespeare's texts as works expressing universal truth: rather than elucidating the Shakespeare apparatus in Canada, Frye's book must be read as one of its symptoms. The special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* on "Shakespeare in Canada" begins to lay the ground for such an understanding. *Canadian Theatre Review* has recently been moving toward a more theoretically and politically informed critical practice, but it is hampered in this movement by its privileged status as a high-profile, mainstream journal. The "Shakespeare in Canada" issue is only sporadically informed by any self-aware political or theoretical viewpoint. Paul Leonard, for instance, in a review of Shakespeare in Toronto's parks, notes that there is an unquestioned assumption behind these productions that it is good for people to see Shakespeare, that Shakespeare is thought quite naively to carry an absolute value independent of cultural context. Ann Wilson and Steven Bush argue that all productions of Shakespeare, and not just radical adaptations, are political reappropriations. Much of the rest of the volume avoids such affronts to humanist assumptions; however, the articles gathered together are quite useful as the raw material for the production of a fuller understanding of "Shakespeare" in Canada.

There are articles, for instance, on specifically Canadian adaptations of *Pericles* and *Hamlet*. There are articles on regional Shakespeare in Vancouver, Saskatoon and St. John's. Not surprisingly, perhaps, what looms largest in the volume is the Stratford Festival, the linchpin of the Shakespeare industry in Canada. Richard Paul Knowles writes about the impact of the Festival theatre stage on Stratford productions — thereby showing how, in theatre, architecture, rather than dramatic meaning, is sometimes the determinant element. A more political reading of the Festival space could benefit from the details and analysis provided by Knowles. Cecil O'Neal interviews John Hirsch, former Stratford artistic director, and we find Hirsch mouthing the same apolitical and ahistorical platitudes as his British counterparts in *The Shakespeare Myth*. However, while Terry Hands, Michael Croft, and Jonathan Miller are savagely taken to task by Terry Eagleton in the British volume, Hirsch's assumptions remain unchallenged here. Stratford is also the subject of a theatre review of the 1987 season by Ralph Berry, as well as two book reviews by Neil Carson and Anne Russell. What seems lacking in this wealth of information is a materialist analysis which would begin to

see Stratford as an "entire politico-cultural formation."

How, then, does the Shakespeare apparatus function in Canada? Are Shakespeare studies in Canadian universities on the "cutting edge," or are they the castle keep of academic feudalism? If Shakespeare in Britain seems part of living — if oppressive — history and tradition, and in the United States an aesthetic object somewhat apart from lived experience, what role does Shakespeare play for us? The work has not yet been done to allow us to answer these questions, but the works under review at least allow us to pose the questions. Ann Wilson, in her introduction to "Shakespeare in Canada," gives an account of the seemingly unmediated response of Stratford elementary school children to "William's play," *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Wilson concludes, "It is hard not to envy the intimacy of [this] response to Shakespeare's plays." This may be true; but, unfortunately, we can also discern in these children the uncritical humanist responses of tomorrow. Those responses should not be envied, but analysed and countermanded.

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