



THE ENGLISH BARD AND FRENCH THEORY

Adrian PAPAHAĞI

Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj

Abstract

This essay revisits the question of Shakespeare's contemporaneity in light of the interpretive frameworks that have dominated the last half-century of literary criticism. Beginning with Jan Kott's assertion that Shakespeare is "our contemporary," I examine how the Frankfurt School and "French Theory" reshaped Shakespearean studies through Marxist, feminist, queer, postcolonial, and ecocritical lenses. While acknowledging some of the insights these approaches have brought, I also express scepticism toward their ideological excesses, which often obscure Shakespeare's artistry and meaning. Drawing on examples from the sonnets, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, and other plays, I argue for a return to historical-philological methods and for the cultivation of aesthetic wonder in the study of literature. In an age dominated by radical theory, daring to affirm the banality that Shakespeare was a great artist, not a social fighter or a fierce representative of "patriarchy" may itself be a radical act.

Keywords: *Shakespeare; French Theory; Frankfurt School; queer studies; postcolonial criticism; ecocriticism; historical-philological method.*

SHAKESPEARE OUR CONTEMPORARY

When Jan Kott declared in the 1960s that Shakespeare was "our contemporary," he crystallised a feeling that many directors, critics, and audiences already intuited: Shakespeare continues to speak to the modern condition. Kott was writing in communist Poland, where ideological pressures were immense, and

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therefore he turned Shakespeare into a voice of existential rebellion, grotesque comedy, and absurd cruelty. He argued that Shakespeare's great tragedies and histories resembled the modern theatre of Brecht, Dürrenmatt, and Beckett more than the sentimental moralising of the nineteenth century (103-105) – which is true.

Kott's Shakespeare is grotesque because he subverts absolutes. Where classical tragedy affirmed transcendence, Shakespeare often mocked it; where traditional drama offered catharsis, Shakespeare offered absurd reversals and cruel laughter – or so Kott thought. This grotesque Shakespeare remains recognisable today. Whereas Laurence Olivier's *Richard III* (1955) gave us a villain both charismatic and terrifying, Andrei Şerban's 2019 Bucharest production staged Richard as a grotesque clown-dictator, uncomfortably familiar in a world of resurgent authoritarianism. Yet, only Olivier grasped and staged the *fascinans* and *numinosum* qualities of the English crown, and projected Gloucester's shadow (a veritable Jungian *umbra*) on screen; Andrei Şerban's kings and queens wore black cardboard coronets, which hardly justified the villain's numerous crimes. For the Romanian director, Shakespeare was no longer an Elizabethan author writing about the tragedies of recent English history, but a contemporary of Ionesco, Beckett and of himself.

And yet, the third part of *Henry VI* unveils Richard's ambition in language that is poetic and chilling, rather than clownish and grotesque. In 3 *Henry VI*, Richard declares:

I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown,
 And, whiles I live, to account this world but hell,
 Until my misshaped trunk that bears this head
 Be round impaled with a glorious crown.
 And yet I know not how to get the crown,
 For many lives stand between me and home:
 And I [...] torment myself to catch the English crown:
 And from that torment I will free myself,
 Or hew my way out with a bloody axe. (3.2.168-77)¹

“The English crown,” “a glorious crown” is a heaven that justifies hell. The terms are those of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century political theology, not those

¹ Shakespeare's sonnets and plays are quoted from the latest Arden editions.

of absurdist theatre. Perhaps one should be reminded, from time to time, that Richard III was killed at Bosworth Field in 1485 by the grandfather of Elizabeth I, and barely more than a century had elapsed between that event and the early 1590s, when Shakespeare wrote his play. However much we feel that Shakespeare is our contemporary, strictly speaking he was contemporary with the Tudors, who did not kill for kindergarten cardboard coronets, and whose world was governed by sacred awe and diabolic plots, rather than by a sense of absurd pointlessness.

Although most scholars and directors bestow upon Shakespeare the honour of being our contemporary, others contest his right of residence in our progressive century. Asked whether Shakespeare was sexist, British director Sue Parrish answered:

The short answer is “Yes” and the longer answer is “Yes” [...]. I think that there is a fundamental inequality and difference in the way in which Shakespeare treats his male and female characters. (Elsom 66)

In answering so, Parrish demonstrates that she is her own contemporary, which was not hard to guess. She also demonstrates scarce understanding of Shakespeare’s age, when female characters were played by boy actors, who rarely had the dramatic skills of mature men like Richard Burbage and William Kempe, and consequently received shorter and fewer parts. From an ideological feminist position, Parrish seems to ignore that Shakespeare made Juliet and Rosalind smarter than Romeo and Orlando, and gave them dominant parts, which is anything but sexist.

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL, FRENCH THEORY, AND BEYOND

To understand Parrish’s critique, we must look at the rise of theory in the twentieth century. The Frankfurt School – Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas & co. – emerged from interwar Germany, were exiled during the Nazi period, and flourished in American universities. Their so-called “critical theory” aimed not simply to interpret society, but to transform it, blending Marxist analysis with psychoanalysis and social critique.² In sum, this theory, grounded

² Marxist interpretations of Shakespeare are too numerous (and too tedious) to quote. A minimal list may include Smirnov 1936, Folsom 1965, Krieger 1979, Siegel 1983, Evans 1986, Siegel 1986,

“in the Western European Marxist tradition”, aims “at a critique and transformation of society,” “combines philosophy and social science with the practical aim of furthering emancipation,” and is engaged “with the emancipatory goals of various social and political movements, such as feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and postcolonial/decolonial theory” (Celikates and Flynn).

In the postwar period, French thinkers extended this critique. Foucault dismantled the idea of stable subjectivity by showing how power produces knowledge; Derrida introduced deconstruction, which exposed the instability of language and meaning; Lacan reconfigured Freud into a theory of desire structured by language, while Deleuze exalted difference and multiplicity. These currents – often bundled as “French Theory” – migrated to the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, where they reshaped literary studies. Targets of French Theory (also known as American Cultural Studies), with all their currents (feminism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, posthumanism, canon wars, deconstruction, political correctness etc.), contested

the ‘text’ as the product of an ‘author’ and containing a ‘meaning’, the false neutrality of an ‘imperialist Reason’, ‘universalism’ as a weapon of the West, or else the ‘canon’ as a form of literary colonialism. These terms punctuated a certain political radicalization of academic discourse. (Cusset 8)

The author, his biography, intention and style, the text and its sources, characters, structures, meaning and aesthetic value were increasingly neglected. These notions were replaced by invariably Marxist talk about power, agency, oppression, transgression, subversion, empowering, and all kinds of struggles between classes, sexes (then genders), races, species, and finally of man against nature. As a result, literary conferences today have become more similar to rallies of social and political activists, than to symposia of literary-minded scholars.

As Evelyn Gajowski (7-8) points out, from the 1970s and 1980s onward, critics placed increasing emphasis on “the political dimension of Shakespeare’s texts,” and this trend has not diminished. Instead, it has been combined with an extended and explicit concern with “otherness,” visible in the rise of critical race studies, postcolonial studies, and queer studies. These newer approaches did not

Barrow 1993, Kamps 1995, Kiernan 1996, Howard and Shershow, eds. 2001, Klawitter 2004, Egan 2004, etc.

emerge in a vacuum, but defined themselves against earlier critical practices such as Marxism, new historicism, cultural materialism, feminism, and psychoanalysis. Their central argument was that these earlier frameworks still assumed and reinforced a normative standpoint – that of “white, imperialistic and heterosexual experience.” As Gajowski sympathetically notes, the effect of these interventions was to dethrone the long-standing assumption that the “reader of Shakespeare’s texts, and thereby the constructor of meaning in them, is an elitist white European heterosexual male” (8).

Inevitably, new intersections (e. g. black and queer, feminism and ecology) appeared, and were promptly tested in the field of Shakespeare studies. Ecofeminist readings of Shakespeare, which connect the “domination of women” to the “exploitation of nature,” represent yet another extension of the political lenses through which the canon has been scrutinized.³ In plays such as *The Tempest* or *King Lear*, ecofeminist critics see “patriarchal violence” mirrored in ecological destruction, arguing that Prospero’s mastery of the island or Lear’s rage against the storm encode structures of domination that conflate gender, power, and environment.

After the deconstruction of authors, texts, meanings, whiteness, patriarchy, meaning, power and everything else, even women, gays and marginals deserve to be deconstructed in that they are all humans, and thereby oppressors of nature. Posthumanism thus became the latest offshoot of the deconstruction upheld by French Theory.⁴ One of the main posthumanist critics of Shakespeare, Stefan Herbrechter, writes:

Shakespeare can thus be said to stand at the beginning, or on the threshold, of an emerging Western humanist anthropocentric worldview, while the present (i.e., the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century) can be understood as the erosion, decline or final phase of (humanist, Eurocentric and anthropocentric) modernity. [...] Both Shakespeare’s work and contemporary posthumanism thus deal with the uncertain position of

³ A few examples: d’Eaubonne 1974 (English trans. 2022), Hughes 1992, Laroche and Munroe 2017.

⁴ See, for example, Herbrechter and Callus, ed. 2012, Dionne 2016, Raber 2018, Hoydis 2022.

the human; and both question the idea that there is such a thing as an essential human “nature.”⁵

Such radical readings have not gone without opposition (and the present article is precisely that). From the perspective of Harold Bloom’s polemic against what he called “the School of Resentment,” such readings risk subordinating Shakespeare’s poetic achievement to ideological agendas (Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* 8-9). Bloom cautioned that, when criticism turns literature into a document of oppression, it reduces art to a mere instrument of grievance, losing sight of its aesthetic autonomy and imaginative power. Shakespeare’s genius is not explained through the categories of patriarchy and ecology; to confine him to those frameworks is to diminish the very wonder that makes his plays endure.

FAIR IS FOUL, AND FOUL IS FAIR

I would like to turn now to Shakespeare’s texts, to show how French Theory often misses their meaning by turning them into mere pretexts for social and political rage. Few works better illustrate the impact of critical and French Theory than Shakespeare’s sonnets. As I have shown elsewhere (Papahagi, *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Sonete* 25), Elizabethan sonneteering was a game of manneristic and stylised devotion: thousands of poems were dedicated to allegorical ladies named Idea, Fidessa, Diella, Caelica or Aurora. These women were traditionally depicted as blonde and beautiful, or “fair”, which of course gives way to one of the most common Elizabethan puns. In his sixth sonnet to Delia (1592), Samuel Daniel writes:

Fayre is my love, and cruell as sh’is fayre;
Her brow shades frowns, although her eyes are sunny;
Her smyles are lightning, though her pride, dispaire;
And her disdaines are gall, her favours hunny. (Evans 60)

Hamlet recycles the topos of the “fair lady” in his famous exchange with an utterly disoriented Ophelia:

⁵ <https://criticalposthumanism.net/hamlet-shakespeare-and-posthumanism/> (consulted on 8 May 2025).

Hamlet: Are you fair?

Ophelia: What means your lordship?

Hamlet: That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty. (3.1.103-107)

The tradition of the “fair maid” is not the result of white racism, but of medieval allegory, because, as amazing as that may sound, Shakespeare owed more to Chaucer and Gower than to... Samuel Beckett and Bertold Brecht. For instance, the Middle English poem *Pearl* (ed. Putter and Stokes 2014), composed in the 1390s, associates the whiteness or fairness of Lady Blanche (“a mayden of menske, ful debonere,/Blysnande white was her bleaunt...” – “a maid of very gentle bearing,/ Gleaming white was her dress”, ll. 163-164) to the purity of a pearl (“Perles pyght of ryal prys.../ All blysnande white” – “Wearing pearls of real value... all brilliantly white”, ll. 193, 197), and in a predictable crescendo, to the innocence of the sacrificial *agnus Dei* (“Delit the Lamb for to devise.../ So worthily white were wedes His.../ Of his white side His blod out spreng” – “Rejoice at contemplating the Lamb/ So worthily white were his garments/ Of his white side his blood sprang”, ll. 1129-1137). Of course, whiteness in medieval and early modern literature symbolises purity, not “white supremacy.”

The skin and teeth of women in the sonnets are immaculately white, just as their hair is fair and their eyes are celestial; of course, pearls, gold, and the blue of the sky symbolise majesty and purity. Often, these qualities are reunited in a depiction of the woman’s face in the chivalric fashion of heraldry. Such a manneristic *blason* can be found in the ninth sonnet of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*, composed in the 1580s:

Queen Virtue’s court, which some call Stella’s face,
 Prepar’d by Nature’s choicest furniture,
 Hath his front built of alabaster pure;
 Gold is the covering of that stately place.
 The door, by which, sometimes, comes forth her grace,
 Red porphyry is, which lock of pearl makes sure;
 Whose porches rich (which name of cheeks endure)
 Marble, mix’d red, and white, do interlace.
 The windows now, thro’ which this heav’nly guest
 Looks o’er the world, and can find nothing such,

Which dare claim from those lights the name of best,
Of touch they are, that, without touch, doth touch,
Which Cupid's self, from Beauty's mind did draw:
Of touch they are, and, poor I! am their straw. (Evans 7)

Of course, symbolism goes hand in hand with paradox and ambiguity. Sometimes “fair is foul, and foul is fair,” “fair Verona” can be quite unfair to the star-crossed lovers, and “fair Ophelia” is not quite honest when she tells Hamlet that her father is at home. Thus, “fair” becomes a pun, which the Elizabethans use over and over again. The blonde women of the sonnets are often cruel, and thus unfair.

However, for Shakespeare the “*belle dame sans merci*” topos was not enough. His sonnets had to do better than the “centuries of love” (i.e. hundreds of sonnets) composed by his contemporaries. The inaccessible fair maids of the Elizabethan sonneteers are too accessible for Shakespeare. Thus, he turns the maid into someone even more inaccessible: a male. The male retains the unfair fairness of all the Dianas, Caelias, Stellas and Ideas of the age, but grows even more intangible. The ambiguity of sonnet 20 captures this perfectly:

A woman's face, with Nature's own hand painted,
Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion;
And for a woman wert thou first created,
Till Nature as she wrought you fell a-doting,
And by addition me of thee defeated,
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing. (Sonnet 20)

Yet, even this is not enough for Shakespeare. The fair youth is doubled by a dark lady, who is neither celestial nor ideal, but treads on the ground:

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill. (Sonnet 144)

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun [...]
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun [...]
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground. (Sonnet 130)

In the old age black was not counted fair,
 Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
 But now is black beauty's successive heir... (Sonnet 127)

As I wrote elsewhere, one can grasp Shakespeare's destabilising originality starting with the addressees of the sonnets. The fair goddess of other Elizabethan sonneteers is transformed into an angelic, unnamed young man (the inaccessible Idea, the high Petrarchan ideal), and a dark, equally mysterious woman, representing the visceral passion of the fabliaux (Papahagi, *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Sonete 27*). Reducing Shakespeare's artistic sophistication in the sonnets to a discourse about race and gender is, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, to "corrupt without being charming" (3).

The plays extend this ambivalence of black and white, or foul and fair. Comparing Juliet/Jule (which sounds like "jewel") to a "rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear" (1.5.44) has nothing to do with racism, and everything with medieval colour metaphors and allegories. Similarly, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lysander's insults betray no racial undertones: "Away, you Ethiop!", "Out, tawny Tartar, out!" (3.2.257, 263) are ironic, because both youngsters had earlier preferred short and dark Hermia to tall and blonde Helena. Shakespeare is not interested in racial perceptions, but uses the common medieval beauty clichés to create a comic effect.

On the other hand, in *Othello*, race and colour are no longer just metaphors, because the protagonist is actually black. Racism is explicit in Iago's graphic depiction of Othello as "an old black ram" topping a "white ewe" (1.1.85-88), and most studies of the play nowadays focus on issues of race and gender.⁶ Ania Loomba, for example, reduces the moral meaning of the play to "racist notions of black inferiority" (42), and to "the operation of patriarchy," which "seeks to extend the control and authority of man as father over women, and white man as father over black men and women" (45).

The Duke of Venice, however, tells Brabantio: "If virtue no delighted beauty lack,/ Your son-in-law is far more fair than black." (1.3.289-91). Thus, Shakespeare turns a blind eye to race (which is more of an issue for us than it was

⁶ A few examples: Jones 1965, Loomba 1989, Loomba 2002, Erickson 2008, Little Jr., ed. 2011, Thompson and Turchi 2018, Akhimie 2018, Thompson, ed. 2021, Dadabhoy and Mehdizadeh 2023, Akhimie, ed. 2024.

in the Elizabethan and Jacobean age), and returns to the symbolic meaning of fair and foul. Iago, not Othello is morally blackened in the play. As I argued elsewhere (Papahagi, *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Othello* 29-30), Iago represents essential, moral, not accidental, bodily blackness. He is the projection of the shadow, the heart of darkness, the repressed darkness of Othello's soul. The little white man, animated by hatred, is the "black man," growing more powerful as the general loses his mind to jealousy. He is left to control the play, and to destroy all that Othello has built: fame, honour, marriage. The faces of white Desdemona and black Othello now become the visible images of their souls. Desdemona is fair, and Othello unfair in every sense of the word ("white", "beautiful", "honest" – "black", "unjust"). While Othello is disfigured by hatred and jealousy, Desdemona participates almost detachedly in the nightmare she is living (Papahagi, *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi: Othello* 52).

LEARNING TO CURSE

If the sonnets and *Othello* invite queer and racial readings, *The Tempest* has become the paradigmatic text for postcolonial criticism. Octave Mannoni's *Psychology of Colonisation* (1950) offered the first systematic account of Caliban as the colonised subject. Later, Stephen Greenblatt addressed the linguistic violence whereby Prospero taught Caliban language, only for Caliban to use it to curse. In Greenblatt's understanding, the colonial master stripped the native of his identity, and obliged him to learn a "civilised" European language, which the oppressed native turned into a weapon. To come to this conclusion, Greenblatt chose to stress the possessive ("your language") in Caliban's lines:

You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language! (1.2.362–64).

However, Greenblatt ignored Prospero's answer (in the First Folio, these are Miranda's lines, but that must be a mistake, for Miranda was only three when she arrived on the island, and can hardly be expected to teach Caliban language):

I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour

One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
 Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
 A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
 With words that made them known. But thy vile race,
 (Though thou didst learn) had that in't which good natures
 Could not abide to be with. (1.2.352–59).

In reality, Caliban could not speak at all when Prospero found him on the island (where, by the way, the former duke of Milan did not come as an invader, but by chance, as an exile, just like Caliban's mother, Sycorax). Caliban's claim to the island is thus rather tenuous. By teaching Caliban language (in general), which inevitably took the shape of Prospero's language, the banished duke lifted the beast to humanity, and enlightened it. Shakespeare's main discourse in *The Tempest* is about nature and nurture, about humanity and beastliness, not about power relations and colonialism. Let us not forget that Caliban is the only villain touched by grace at the end of this play. By acknowledging Caliban ("this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine", 5.1.274–75), Prospero acknowledged his own shadows, the beastliness inherent to human nature, but also the possibility of the human beast to be improved by grace. Where Prospero's art failed, the grace of Caliban's *anagnorisis* has succeeded ("I'll be wise hereafter/ And seek for grace", 5.1.295–296). Thus, the "brave new world" returns to bad old ways of Naples and Milan, and Caliban alone inherits the island of utopia, a questionable paradise. So much for colonialism.

Nonetheless, in the understanding of French Theory, Shakespeare's "salvage and deformed slave" has become an "American or African or some other 'slave,' either literally in bondage or bound by cultural chains of language and custom" (Vaughan and Vaughan 278). As Russ McDonald noted, "the colonialist reading in the past decade has demonized Prospero, sentimentalized Caliban, and tyrannized conferences and journals with a new orthodoxy as one-sided as that which it had sought to replace" (17). Harold Bloom further caricatured the present trends: "Our archetypal, politically correct article on Shakespeare these days is likely to be called 'Caliban and the Discourse of Colonialism', or else 'Ariel and the Economy of Exploitation', or even 'Prospero and Mercantilism'" (Bloom, *Bloom's Shakespeare* 242).

THIS TEMPEST IN MY MIND

Ecocriticism has added yet another bizarre dimension to Shakespeare studies. Simon Estok, for instance, uses the term “ecophobia” to describe humanity’s fear of losing control to nature (17-18). Of course, Shakespeare’s plays are filled with moments when natural phenomena overwhelm human order. There are numerous tempests in *Pericles*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *The Tempest*, *Othello*, *King Lear*.

In *Pericles*, Marina is born amid a tempest. However, that tempest is not the punishment for her father’s supposed “ecophobia,” but rather the key to her destiny:

Born in a tempest, when my mother died,
This world to me is like a lasting storm,
Whirring me from my friends. (4.1.18-20)

Tempests in *Pericles* are not the result of global warming, or climate change in the anthropocene, nor do they express the prince’s fear of losing agency over/to nature, to quote the fashionable slang. They are allegories of man’s life, agents of providence that unite and separate the characters. Moreover, as George Wilson Knight noted (229), they function in opposition to music, as chaos is opposed to harmony. After numerous tempests, Pericles and Marina are reunited, and the daughter’s song is echoed by the music of the spheres. Pericles says:

O heavens bless my girl! [Music]
But hark, what music? [...]
The music of the spheres! List, my Marina. [...] (5.1.212-213, 219)

Nature in the romances is both terrifying and generative, destructive yet life-giving. In *The Tempest*, the storm is a projection of Prospero’s anger, and at the same time an element in his benign and providential plan. It terrifies everybody, but it harms no one. It separates the characters only to better reunite them on Prospero’s island. In *The Winter’s Tale*, the sea devours Antigonus, but delivers Perdita to the providential shore of Bohemia (although Bohemia is landlocked). All these tempests are more allegorical than meteorological, and it is more productive to analyse them in contrast to music, as George Wilson Knight did,

which allows one to understand their symbolic nature in Shakespeare's romances.

In *King Lear*, the storm becomes psychological. Lear cries out on the heath:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world! (3.2.1-7)

This storm mirrors Lear's inner turmoil, not his ecophobia, or anxieties about climate change and ecological collapse, as ecocriticism believes.

DISTRUSTING THEORY, AND DARING TO BE BANAL

Of course, one is free to write about race, sex, class, gender, and climate change in Shakespeare, but unfortunately this comes at a cost. And the cost is to miss Shakespeare's meaning in pursuit of contemporary social and political concerns. Harold Bloom's phrase, the "School of Resentment," captures the tendency of ideological criticism to impose political stances onto Shakespeare by means of tenuous connections:

In "French Shakespeare", the procedure is to begin with a political stance all your own, far out and far 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." (Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* 8-9)

In his memoirs, *Errata*, George Steiner also confessed his lifelong distrust of theory:

I have conducted my emotional, intellectual, and professional affairs in distrust of theory. [...] The invocation of “theory” in the humanities, in historical and social studies, in the evaluation of literature and the arts, seems to me mendacious. The humanities are susceptible neither to crucial experiments nor to verification (except on a material, documentary level). Our responses to them are narratives of intuition. In the unbounded dynamics of the semantic, in the flux of the meaningful, in the uncircumscribed interplay of interpretations, the only propositions are those of personal choice, of taste, of echoing affinity or deafness. (5-6)

More recently, Tom McAlindon formulated his own list of objections to radical criticism:

First of these is the fact that it disallows in the student the sense of wonder, excitement and admiration which his plays inspired in me from my own undergraduate days to ‘the pupil age of this present twelve o’clock’. The radical attitude to Shakespeare (characteristically and slightly dubbed ‘the Bard’) varies from suspicion to condescension and even outright hostility, reflecting the determination not to be daunted by his great reputation or seduced by ‘the aesthetic dimension’. It sees him primarily as a social thinker submerged in his own historical moment, and not as a great artist whose imagination and craft gave enduring life to his characters and their experiences. His art, both tragic and comic, is effectively ignored, and if passing reference is made to it, it is usually to characterise it as a dangerous distraction. (1)

I apologise for these long quotations, but they express my mind with eminent clarity and superior authority. Needless to add that I share their reservations. When students are taught to read *Hamlet* only as an allegory of political power, *The Tempest* as an illustration of colonialism, or *Othello* only as a case study in racism, they miss the text’s intellectual architecture, and the wonder that many of us felt when we first encountered Shakespeare. The playwright’s artistry, his imagination, his ability to create characters of enduring vitality – all these are obscured by ideological frameworks that reduce him to a mouthpiece for causes he never intended.

So what is to be done? First, we might “dare to be banal,” and to read Shakespeare in the good old ways of criticism before Marxist theory turned

literature into an ideological battlefield. In an age of theoretical oversophistication and ideological radicalism, to affirm simply that Shakespeare wrote great plays, and to analyse what makes them great, and what they mean is not trivial but courageous. As the subtle Romanian thinker, Alexandru Paleologu, once wrote, repeating first truths can be a daring act.

Also, returning to the good old historical-philological method offers a sobering alternative to radical ideology. David Scott Kastan has reminded us that theory

cannot, in its own terms, offer convincing alternatives. Theory can complicate and contest the categories of analysis, but the clarification and correction of those categories, the necessary specification of 'the processes by which meaning and value are produced and grounded,' can come only through historical scholarship. (21)

Finally, one should not forget that literary studies are dealing with works of art, not with pieces of political propaganda. Oscar Wilde's dictum still holds: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." (3). Aesthetic criticism can restore that sense of awe that we felt when we first read Shakespeare's sonnets, or *Romeo and Juliet*. Even though it does not turn readers into self-righteous social activists, it may help them become "cultured human beings," liberated from vulgarity – which is the purpose of liberal education and of reading great books, as Leo Strauss argued (3-8).

For me, this is not a retreat into naïve aesthetics, but a reclamation of what matters most. Shakespeare endures not because he confirms fashionable theories, but because he exceeds them. He is our contemporary not by fitting into our categories, but by asking questions about human nature that exceed political or ideological contexts. As I reflect on Shakespeare in an age of theory, I see that the latest critical developments have produced more losses than gains. We may have learnt to read the plays and sonnets with an eye sensitive to race, gender, sexuality, colonialism, and ecology, but we risk to misunderstand them, and to lose the sense of wonder they elicit.

In the end, my position is simple: theory has its place, but it must not eclipse, adulterate or hijack the text. Shakespeare was, above all, a great writer – a master of language, drama, and character. For all the storms of criticism that rage around him, he remains our contemporary because he transcends the categories we insist on imposing on him. To recognise this may be banal, but in our time, it is also daring.

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BIONOTE

Adrian PAPAHAGI is professor of medieval and early modern English literature at the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj. He earned his PhD in medieval studies from the Sorbonne, and was a research fellow at New Europe College, Bucharest, and at the Warburg Institute, London. His recent publications on Shakespeare include *Providence and Grace: Lectures on Shakespeare's Problem Plays and Romances*, Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2020, and eight volumes in the series *Shakespeare interpretat de Adrian Papahagi*, Iaşi: Polirom, 2020—, which aims to analyse Shakespeare's complete works.

E-mail: adrian.papahagi@ubbcluj.ro