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Monika Sosnowska

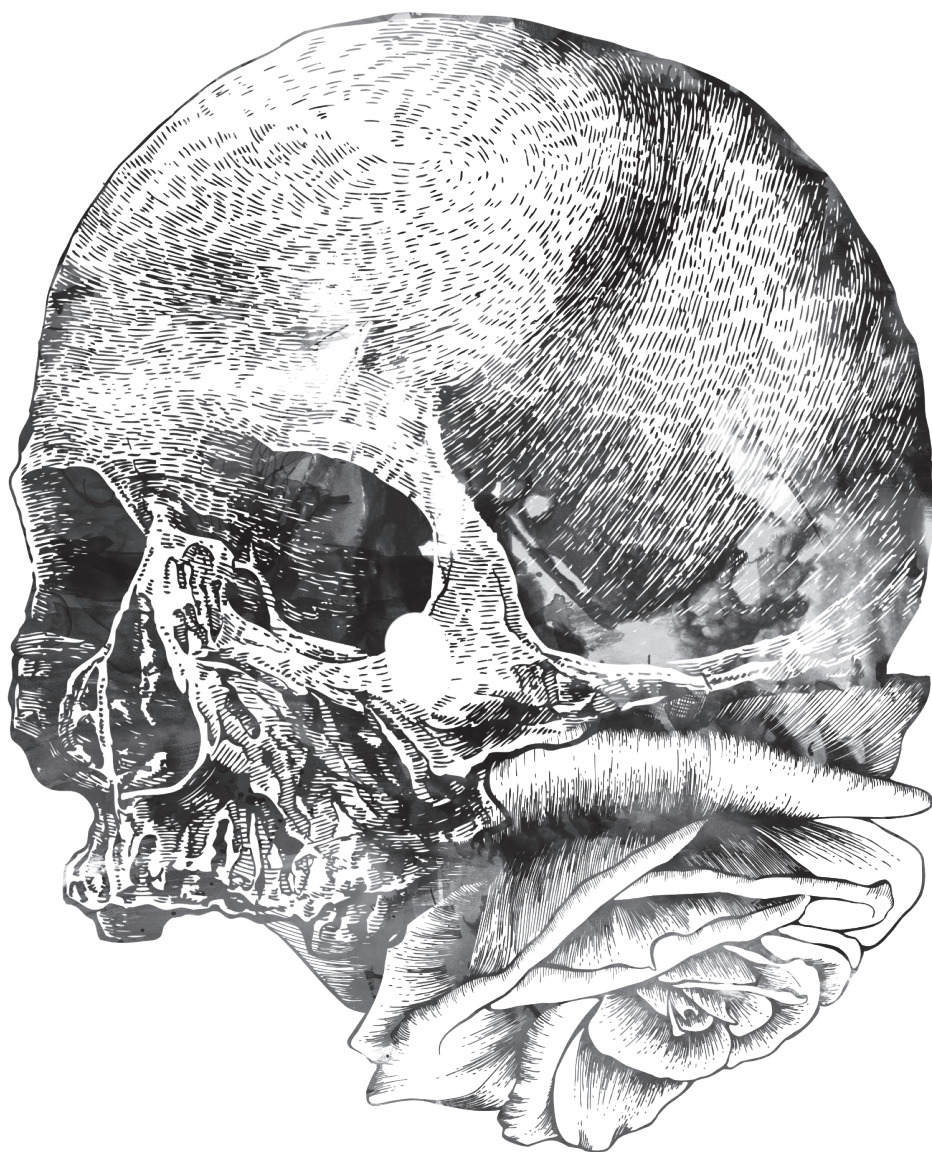
From Shakespeare to Sh(Web)speare

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Łódź 2015

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From Shakespeare to Sh(Web)speare

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Introduction

An exemplary banter between two anonymous people¹ 399 years after Shakespeare's death:

- How can you?
- How can I what?
- How can you say that THIS is SHAKESPEARE?
- Then tell me, how can I name THIS so that THIS is this SHAKESPEARE and not that Shakespeare.
- What do you mean by 'that'?
- That you can categorize.
- No, I meant "What do you mean by 'that Shakespeare'?"
- Oh, you mean this.
- Yes, that is what I meant.
- Just distinguish between Shakespeare's socks and Shakespeare's mocks. "Take this from this if this be otherwise"².
- I got that!

Shakespeare's dramas are potentialities. Each play may be conceived of as space where Shakespeare's legacy and authority is tested, trifled and transgressed. I am fond of the cultural phenomenon called Shakespeare, which is a continuum of human interactions with intermediated and transcoded versions of his plays: from Shakespeare to Sh(Web)speare.³

I know Shakespeare's plays from books ... no, from theatre ... no, from cinema .. no, from the internet ... I know them only as/via different media and therefore, on an intermediated level. I treat page, stage, and screen as media. Shakesperare is neither written words/spoken words, nor live/remediated action. Yet each drama depends on the medium, the play is embedded in its materiality. I continue to discover intermediated Shakespeare. What remains is my relation to his plays (an aggregate of texts by a historical figure) and their afterlife (an aggregate of adaptations, spinoffs, allusions, and citations).

¹ Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

² Quoted in *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2.

³ My own term.

Sill, I do not know Shakespeare's plays. There is no reason why I should. I can appreciate the play, unattached to any particular cultural register. I am under the spell of drifting Shakespeare; of those myriad adaptations, derivations, quotations, and fragmentary allusions in media that have in some sense drifted free from anchorage in the master discourse of Shakespeare's texts. Once I accept the play's unmooring, I am free to be an occasional bardolater, worshipper of linguistic intricacies, and a reader who is sensitive to textual subtleties. At the same time it is not necessary for me to declare my devotion to Shakespeare, in order to be tagged 'a regular' in Shakespeareland. Irregular pleasure derived from immersing in intermedia treatments of the drama will suffice.

From Shakespeare to Sh(Web)speare represents selected approaches to Shakespeare. The volume consists of five essays, each followed by a summary. The arrangement of the content into three sections: "Polish Approaches to Shakespeare," "Sensory Approaches to Shakespeare," and "Popcultural Approaches to Shakespeare: Sh(Web)speare," illustrates selected places in culture and cultural spaces in which Shakespeare dwells. In some of these places and spaces Shakespeare is a temporary foreigner (the case of Shakespeare in Poland), a welcomed guest (the case of Shakespeare within the sensory domain), or a natural-born traveler (the case of Shakespeare on the Web). Each section aims at exhibiting the impact of Shakespeare's legacy on different levels of culture: national/local, highbrow/scholar, and popular/global.

There is just always something to learn from Shakespeare. Spatial and temporal conditions, in which people live, invite alternative Shakespeares. The call for modernized, updated and remediatiated Shakespeares does not go unanswered. Therefore the history of Shakespeare's (and Shakespeares') presence on different levels of culture is a process of rewriting, recreating, revisioning, reimagining, rearticulating and recontextualizing Shakespeare. This process initiated by the Big Bang, when Shakespeare's talent exploded and emanated across his environment, is known by an array of names: abridgment, adaptation, allusion, alteration, amplification, appropriation, citation, conversion, distortion, emendation, expropriation, interpolation, iteration, modification, mutilation, parody, spin-off, transformation, transposition, and translation. Shakespeare's oeuvre manifests itself whenever it returns in any of the abovementioned forms. Shakespeare returns as we return to his works: "If it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all" (act 5, scene 2).

Are you ready for Shakespeare? Are you ready for Sh(Web)speare?

POLISH APPROACHES TO SHAKESPEARE

Romantic Shakespearations in Polish Culture: From Inspiration to Incorporation¹

Polish romantic movement in very “unromantic” times

Unlike today, in the Romantic period Shakespeare and his creations were definitely not cultural commodities, nor were Shakespeare and his protagonists globally recognized icons or pop-icons. Even more importantly, his works were not translated into a multimedia language of a multicultural society. None of the Romantics would have ever conceived of their Shakespeare belonging to the world’s canon, much less the World Wide Web. For the Romantics, manipulations and modifications involving Shakespeare, his literary figures and his texts were limited predominantly to page and stage unlike the multitude of contemporary Shakespearean transmutations and hybridizations. As Manfred Pfister observes in his essay “‘In states unborn and accents yet unknown’: Shakespeare and the European Canon”:

Shakespeare was right: his texts have indeed survived in the “states unborn and accents yet unknown” he addresses and they are constantly reedited, translated and retranslated, read, staged, filmed, quoted, interpreted, taught, discussed, and re- or deconstructed and that not only in Europe but globally. (2004: 49)

Romanticism initiated a complex and complicated process of reception, acceptance, incorporation, and appropriation of Shakespeare’s plays. The nineteenth century can also be praised for giving birth to a cultural phenomenon called Shakespearemania in Europe. In several cultures, including Polish, Shakespeare helped fashion the national identity by captivating the imagination of a Romantic generation of artists, while his theatrical renderings generated significant publicity among the common people. The promotion of Shakespeare in Europe intertwined with the

¹ Using the word “Shakespearations” in the title of this essay is a mingling, meaning cultural explorations of Shakespeare both as inspiration and incorporation.

promotion of national cultures at that time. The Polish case demonstrates how the cultivation of national values was accompanied by the flourishing cult of Shakespeare, entailing the canonization of his works. Shakespeare was there, at the very heart of the Romantic movement.

The word “romantic” can bring to mind adjectives such as dreamy, fascinating or idyllic, but these expressions do not suit the predicament of the Polish nation in the nineteenth century, when pre-Romantic attitudes and new artistic trends paved the way for the future manifesto of Romantics (Adam Mickiewicz’s “*Romantyczność*,” 1821). Adjectives suited to describe the Polish socio-political reality of the Romantic period are exactly the opposite: realistic, unattractive, and disturbed. What was romantic about a nation without recognized borders, a nation whose political and cultural life was controlled by three occupants, a nation whose future was a great question mark?

In *Odnawianie znaczeń* [*Renewing Meanings*] Maria Janion claims that Polish culture created the most original Romantic literary output in Europe (1980: 7). Elaborated by the Polish writers and artists, equipped with phantasmatical imagination and driven by messianic motives, Polish romanticism was interwoven with historical experiences of the separated nation. Male voices of great individuals – Romantic poets and writers – took possession of the Polish collective consciousness. The unfavorable conditions after the collapse of the Polish state and the three partitions (1772–1795) by Russia, Prussia, and Austria resulted in the awakening of a national sensibility, motivated by the manifesto of Polish Romantics. Living in a divided state, the Poles needed to establish common values and preserve their national heritage. Culture, particularly literature, was fueled by a treasury of national memory and a repository of ideology and knowledge. The fight for national preservation and fashioning of cultural identity energized the Polish intellectual elites. The disappearance of the state’s boundaries could not eradicate the spirit of the nation and erase all historical data from this ‘collective cultural hard drive.’

In *Szekspiariady polskie* [*Polish Shakespeariads*] (1976) Andrzej Żurowski indicates a double function of Shakespeare’s works for the Romantics. Firstly, it was a method through which they could reveal the past and tell about the great mechanism of history (and its meaning) as well as revolution (and its effects). Secondly, Shakespearean creations allowed them to communicate their views about individual – human beings of a twisted nature, characterized with a tormented psyche and abundance of emotions (1976: 91). Żurowski claims that

this shift from a man ruled by reason to a man beset by emotions is indicative of the nascent nineteenth century culture. It imposed new tasks on literature and its interpreters and creators leading to penetration of the unknown regions of human psyche (98).

In Zbigniew Majchrowski's essay entitled "Pytania o polskiego Szekspira" ["Asking about Polish Shakespeare"] he maintains that one of the golden ages for Shakespeare in Polish culture includes the Romantic period (1993: 22). That Romantics were engrossed in reading his works, is reflected – according to Majchrowski – by Shakespearean references in their correspondence. That they read the world (nature and history) through Shakespeare becomes evident in aesthetic tastes and the reading choices of their literary creations, who literally are depicted holding a Shakespeare play in their hands, f. e. Juliusz Słowacki's *Kordian* (the main character from his drama *Kordian*, 1834) studying *King Lear* (22).

“Let order die” (2 *Henry IV*, 1.1.154): Romantic quest for dramatic rules and forms

Paradoxical as it may seem, Neo-classics who denigrated Shakespeare and treated his works with programmatic disdain, helped pave the way for a re-discovery of the Elizabethan playwright on the European continent (Lasocka, 1993: 95). Just after this period of distaste for Shakespeare under Voltaire's dictum – which might be compared to an ominous prologue – came a comforting first act, concocted by the Romantics, who paid tribute to Shakespeare by praising and finding inspiration in his dramatic and poetic technique.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Shakespeare's works provided critical ammunition in debates about a model of drama between two generations of intellectuals with the help of an in-between (pre-romantic) literary formation. According to Stanisław Helsztyński:

Until the November Uprising, Shakespeare's position in Poland met with determined opposition on the part of the group of pseudo-classicists who ruled in the salons, amongst the critics and in the Warsaw theatre. Opposition was also very strong in the chief learned institute, The Association of the Friends of Learning. (1965: 16)