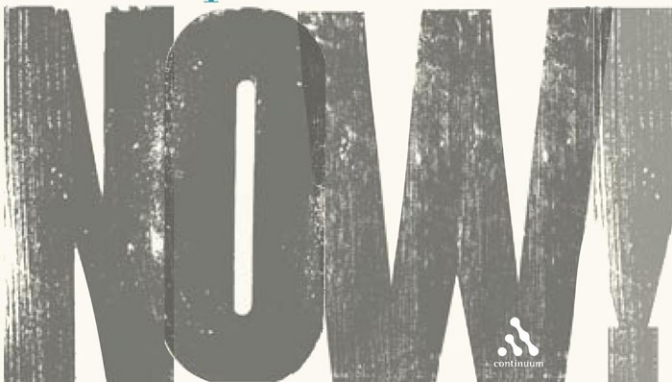
Michael Witmore

SHAKESPEAREAN METAPHYSICS

Shakespeare



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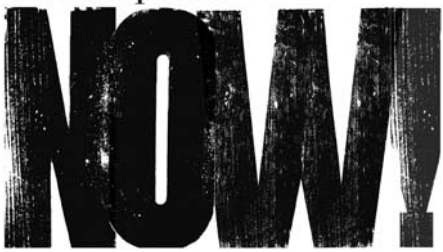

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For Silas

We often assume the impossible, so as to understand the nature of things in and of themselves.

– Johannes Philoponus (sixth century), *Commentary on Aristotle's* Physics

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General Editors' Preface

Shakespeare Now! represents a new form for new approaches. Whereas academic writing is far too often ascendant and detached, attesting all too clearly to years of specialist training, *Shakespeare Now!* offers a series of intellectual adventure stories: animate with fresh and often exposed thinking, with ideas still heating in the mind.

This series of 'minigraphs' will thus help to bridge two yawning gaps in current public discourse. First, the gap between scholarly thinking and a public audience: the assumption of academics that they cannot speak to anyone but their peers unless they hopelessly dumb-down their work. Second, the gap between public audience and scholarly thinking: the assumption of regular playgoers, readers, or indeed actors that academics write about the plays at a level of abstraction or specialization that they cannot hope to understand.

But accessibility should not be mistaken for comfort or predictability. Impatience with scholarly obfuscation is usually accompanied by a basic impatience with anything but (supposed) common sense. What this effectively means is a distrust of really thinking, and a disdain for anything that might unsettle conventional assumptions, particularly through crossing or re-drafting formal, political or theoretical boundaries. We encourage such adventure, and base our claim to a broad audience upon it.

Here, then, is where our series is innovative: no compromising of the sorts of things that can be thought; a commitment to publishing powerful cutting-edge scholarship; *but* a conviction that these things are essentially communicable, that we can find a language that is enterprising, individual and shareable.

To achieve this we need a form that can capture the genuine challenge and vigour of thinking. Shakespeare is intellectually exciting,

and so too are the ideas and debates that thinking about his work can provoke. But published scholarship often fails to communicate much of this. It is difficult to sustain excitement over the 80–120,000 words customary for a monograph: difficult enough for the writer, and perhaps even more so for the reader. Scholarly articles have likewise become a highly formalized mode not only of publication, but also of intellectual production. The brief length of articles means that a concept can be outlined, but its implications or application can rarely be tested in detail. The decline of sustained, exploratory attention to the singularity of a play's language, occasion or movement is one of the unfortunate results. Often 'the play' is somehow assumed, a known and given thing that is not really worth exploring. So we spend our time pursuing collateral contexts: criticism becomes a belated, historicizing footnote.

Important things have got lost; above all, any vivid sense as to why we are bothered with these things in the first place. Why read? Why go to plays? Why are they important? How does any pleasure they give relate to any of the things we labour to say about them? In many ways, literary criticism has forgotten affective and political immediacy. It has assumed a shared experience of the plays and then averted the gaze from any such experience, or any testing of it. We want a more ductile and sensitive mode of production; one that has more chance of capturing what people are really thinking and reading about, rather than what the pre-empting imperatives of journal or respectable monograph tend to encourage.

Furthermore, there is a vast world of intellectual possibility – from the past and present – that mainstream Shakespeare criticism has all but ignored. In recent years there has been a move away from 'theory' in literary studies: an aversion to its obscure jargon and complacent self-regard; a sense that its tricks were too easily rehearsed and that the whole game has become one of diminishing returns. This has further encouraged a retreat into the supposed safety of historicism. Of course the best such work is stimulating, revelatory and indispensable. But too often there is little trace of any struggle; little sense that

the writer is coming at the subject afresh, searching for the most appropriate language or method. Alternatively, the prose is so laboured that all trace of an urgent story is quite lost.

We want to open up the sorts of thinking – and thinkers – that might help us get at what Shakespeare is doing or why Shakespeare matters. This might include psychology, cognitive science, theology, linguistics, phenomenology, metaphysics, ecology, history, political theory; it can mean other art forms such as music, sculpture, painting, dance; it can mean the critical writing itself becomes a creative act.

In sum, we want the minigraphs to recover what the Renaissance 'essay' form was originally meant to embody. It meant an 'assay' – a trial or a test of something; putting something to the proof; and doing so in a form that is not closed-off and that cannot be reduced to a system. We want to communicate intellectual activity at its most alive: when it is still exciting to the one doing it; when it is questing and open, just as Shakespeare is. Literary criticism – that is, really thinking about words in action, plays as action – can start making a much more creative and vigorous contribution to contemporary intellectual *life*.

Simon Palfrey
Ewan Fernie

Acknowledgements

This book was inspired by a footnote in Graham Harman's *Tool Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* and was nursed by conversations with Daniel Selcer, with whom I co-taught a graduate seminar entitled 'Late Epicureanism: Varieties of Materialism in Early Modernity' during the spring term of 2007. In addition to the discussions that took place in that seminar, I have benefited greatly from conversations with Kellie Robertson about the nature of pre- and early modern 'things' and from exchanges with Peggy Knapp, whose reading of the language of 'overspecification' in *Lear* has been immensely suggestive. The book would have never been written without the encouragement of the editors of the series, Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey, who have provided a welcome venue for a different kind of writing about Shakespeare. I here express my thanks to these individuals, with the understanding that none but me should be held responsible for any of the faults that may remain in the book they helped shape. Readers will find details about specific works referred to in the text in the 'Bibliographical Note and Further Reading' section, located at the end of this volume.

London, January 2008

Chapter 1

Shakespearean Metaphysics and the Drama of Immanence

Shakespearean what? The adjective Shakespearean gets applied to character flaws, moments of irony, certain types of tragedy or comedy. But metaphysics? What exactly does Shakespeare, a playwright known for his ability to 'hold a mirror up to nature', have to say about the organized study of ultimates: being, substance, unity and necessity? The premise of this book is that playwrights have as many things to say about these concepts as philosophers, but that they do so in their staging of theatrical reality, through the collective set of techniques that we refer to as dramaturgy. Shakespeare was just such a metaphysician, and we see him taking the measure of the world and its ultimate ordering principles when we examine closely the construction of three plays – *Twelfth Night*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest* – each of which illustrates what I will be calling Shakespeare's preference for a metaphysics of immanence over one of punctualism. In choosing the former, Shakespeare favoured a view of the world in which order and change are seen to emerge holistically from things themselves (immanence) rather than being localized in certain metaphysically isolated pockets of the universe (punctualism). We will be turning to three philosophers, Alfred North Whitehead, Henri Bergson and Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza in order to explore this contrast in depth and to say more precisely what a metaphysics of immanence is in each of these plays, but in consulting such an array of philosophers, we will not be hunting for their 'ideas' in Shakespeare's texts. For if it is true that Shakespeare valued immanence as a way of

thinking about the very nature of being – locating the actor in the action, the player in play – then we should not expect him to 'voice' his metaphysics in a series of dramatic monologues. We are far more likely to find a distinctly Shakespearean metaphysics emerging from what the plays *do* and *are* rather than what they and their characters say. Indeed, the logic of Shakespeare's position is most obviously apparent in the phenomenal practice of the theatre: to appreciate it, we must look to the manner in which his plays take apart reality and then put it back together in a particular way, somewhat like an artist who builds a miniature ship, disassembles it and then raises it piece by piece within the confines of a bottle or glass.

The ship under glass in this case is not a physical thing, of course, but a series of actions and events held together by the theatrical rigging of entrances and exits, speeches, monologues and physically embodied actions. If the philosophers mentioned above can help us find the metaphysics in the motion of these plays, it will be because they too are vitally interested in characterizing a reality that is immanent or interpenetrating rather that boxed up in some special type of container – for example, a mind pinched off from the world or a body that interacts with only a discrete part of that world. Like the party of Italians who emerge from the sea in *The Tempest* only to marvel at the music that wafts across its shores, Whitehead, Bergson and Spinoza are fascinated by the ways in which truly distinctive forms of being fail to be bounded within the edges of a physical body, taking shape rather in an ensemble of actions, like the mobile shine of a school of fish turning in the water. Yet these thinkers are also interested in the reality and touch of the physical world in which we live, its pressing claims on our being and consciousness, something Shakespeare too never loses sight of in his theatrical practice. Finding our way to a truly Shakespearean metaphysics, then, should not be an exercise in transcendence, but an attempt to unearth a new and different kind of materialism, one that is grounded in bodies but emphatic in asserting the reality of their dynamic interrelations. A ship might very well be a hole in the water, but that doesn't mean

the ocean is full of holes instead of ships: the abstract definition and the thing it defines are one and the same.

In this expansive spirit of inquiry, then, our task in these introductory pages will be to keep our attention focused on the theatrical situations in which Shakespeare's metaphysics emerges, and to recognize as well that there is something irreducibly abstract about the larger unity that these situations compose. The name we will be giving to Shakespeare's position as it emerges over the course of his career is 'dramaturgical monism', a position that we will find articulated most clearly in *The Tempest* and which we will approach through a discussion of Spinoza's substance monism. Dramaturgical monism and the theatrical practices associated with it must await full exposition in the final chapter of this book, but some of its key premises and corresponding theatrical techniques can be found in *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*, which are treated in their own chapters with reference to the philosophies of Whitehead and Bergson respectively. Of course, these are different plays and different thinkers, and my aim in this book is not to say anachronistically that Shakespeare is a 'Whiteheadian', 'Bergsonian' or 'Spinozan'. Shakespeare is a Shakespearean, and while his metaphysics shares a common thread of interest with these philosophers, it could be explicated with the help of other writers in the metaphysical tradition as well. (Leibniz, Hegel and James come to mind.) There is something about the way these philosophers think the fluctuating and fundamentally indissociable nature of being, however – about their shared sense that metaphysical knowledge is a knowledge of our dynamic place in such a reality – that makes Whitehead, Bergson and Spinoza the nearly indispensable guides for thinking about a truly Shakespearean metaphysics as it emerges on stage. Because, as we will see, these philosophers refuse to model reality on spatially discrete bodies or materially indifferent ideas; they help us hear the metaphysical line that is part of the larger 'score' of *Twelfth Night*, *Lear* and *The Tempest*, calling our attention to the ways in which an immanent reality – one in which the whole of the thing is present in each and every part – unfolds in the real