

Shakespeare in Our Time

Shakespeare in Our Time

A Shakespeare Association of America Collection

Edited by
Dympna Callaghan and
Suzanne Gossett

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*In tribute to J. Leeds Barroll, founder of the
Shakespeare Association of America.*

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PREFACE

At some undocumented moment in April 1616, the life of William Shakespeare ended and his astonishing afterlife commenced. This volume marks two milestones: the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death and the 44th anniversary of the founding of the Shakespeare Association of America (SAA). Our dedication honors the distinguished scholar who conceived of the organization in 1972 and who served as executive officer for its inaugural conference in 1973.

An interim landmark was the first "modern" edition of Shakespeare's plays in 1709. Adding a biographical account, editor Nicholas Rowe observed that "the knowledge of an author may sometimes conduce to the better understanding of his book." Knowledge and understanding, research and interpretation—these continue to occupy us centuries later. But the nascent SAA was also perfectly poised to register the revolution in Shakespeare studies that occurred within a decade of its formation. Many groundbreaking acts of political, theoretical, and performative analysis are associated with contributors to this volume, some with the author of our Afterword.

For much of this work, the SAA was an incubator. Our second executive officer, Ann Jennalie Cook, pioneered a program of conference seminars to complement formal panel sessions. In the seminars, senior scholars have sat with their juniors, women with men, faculty from small colleges with those from research universities, all at the same table and on equal footing. The seminars have produced an untold number of discoveries and debates, mentorships and partnerships.

How can one volume capture the SAA experience? *Shakespeare in Our Time* represents half the SAA's institutional history, featuring member-elected presidents over the course of the past twenty-two years. The chronology of officers has determined the

content order of the collection. Thus, we begin with Phyllis Rackin, president in 1993–4; follow with Bruce R. Smith, president in 1994–5; and proceed accordingly to Rebecca Bushnell, president at press time. There are just two exceptions to this principle of organization: presidents Meredith Skura (2000–1) and Anthony B. Dawson (2001–2) were unable to take part, and Robert Miola and Gary Taylor write in their steads. Two presidents, Suzanne Gossett (2011–12) and Dympna Callaghan (2012–13), do not offer essays, having served as editors of the volume. The project was first conceived and approved by their boards of trustees (who have recused themselves as contributors).

The authors of our keynote essays consulted with the trustees about commissioning the shorter, satellite essays in each chapter. The intent is further to sample the richness of Shakespeare studies and the diversity in our membership. Soon after its establishment, the SAA welcomed a strong contingent of scholars from Canada. During the term of our third executive officer, Nancy Elizabeth Hodge, the membership grew even more international. Here, we include essays by Shakespeareans from England, India, New Zealand, and Switzerland, as well as Canada. Four hundred years on, “Shakespeare” can be a universal language, a way of communicating across cultural difference about human relations and humanist values.

As the successor to Dr. Hodge, I am grateful to the many officers and members who have shown such care for and commitment to this organization. They take the SAA forward in the high-minded, even-handed, and open-hearted spirit of its founder, Leeds Barroll.

Lena Cowen Orlin

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Introduction

Dympna Callaghan and Suzanne Gossett

Presidents, Shakespeare Association of America

2012–13 and 2011–12

“[I]t is impossible to limit the purposes for which the language of Shakespeare may be studied” wrote Helen Kate Furness in her Preface to *A Concordance to Shakespeare’s Poems* (1874). She presciently anticipated the myriad possibilities opened up by Shakespeare’s writing which, over a hundred years later, remains at the forefront and the core of contemporary literary study. Focusing her speculations, Furness imagined ever more microscopically honed close readings in imitation of the scholarly attention bestowed upon classical literature. She envisaged a time to come, “if it has not already,” when Shakespeare’s “use of every part of speech, down to the humblest conjunction, will be criticized with as much nicety as has been bestowed upon Greek and Latin authors.” Ready evidence that her projections on this score were correct can be found, for example, in the much-discussed pronominal problem of the *Sonnets* and in the work of queer philology. Writing forty-six years before American women got the vote, and nearly a century before the Civil Rights movement and Stonewall, she could not, however, have imagined that such careful close reading might be combined with matters—had names for them even existed—that would no doubt have seemed at a very great distance from Shakespeare’s plays: ecological criticism, queer studies, disability studies, psychoanalytic criticism, race and gender studies, to name a few. Other areas such as performance studies, textual criticism, contextual criticism, book and theatre history are rather more easily translated back into the critical

idiom of Furness's era, but even these aspects of the field have undergone such revolutionary changes since the dawn of the twentieth century that it is unlikely she would recognize them. In part, by sheer dint of archival labor, we now know vastly more about Shakespeare and about his plays and poems, as well as about almost every dimension of early modern life. Scholars have uncovered hitherto unknown or unexamined documents on matters ranging from agriculture to the zodiac. Indeed, the topics and themes of the field have expanded exponentially not only since Furness's time but even within the presidential chronology of twenty years covered by this book.

Arguably, however, even more significant than the new topics which have populated the field are the modes of inquiry that have arisen as new foci have revolutionized scholarly approaches to Shakespeare by means of theoretical and methodological innovation. To take one of the most far-reaching and transformative critical discourses as an example of the kind of shift to which we refer, namely feminist criticism, it is now commonly understood that sex and gender cannot be addressed alone but must be read in conjunction with race, class, identity, and the body. Similarly, Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines, once understood as somewhat titillating renditions of heterosexual femininity, may now be read in terms of current debates about transsexuality and addressed in relation to early modern discourses about tribadism. While these developments are not the products of a natural evolution or progression, but of the deliberate and spirited interventions of fiercely committed scholarship, the transformations they have effected can be traced back through the history of Shakespeare criticism. Thus, current work on these issues has its roots in the explicitly political agenda of feminist scholarship in the 1970s, which tended to advocate for female characters as oppressed and misunderstood victims of patriarchy. It can be traced back further still through the nineteenth century to the genteel explorations of Anna Jameson into the girlhoods of Shakespeare's heroines, which were in turn preceded by the long-standing discussion about women characters in Shakespeare.

Shakespeare is simultaneously entirely a product of his time and invariably ahead of it, and indeed ahead of our time, so that some new dimensions of Shakespeare studies may strike us as having always been present in Shakespeare's language, embedded

in the fabric of his composition and lying dormant to await the momentous occasion of “discovery.” In other instances, however, new avenues and objects of inquiry may appear to function as creative and often extraordinarily productive anachronisms that, variously, are and are not authorized by the text. For example, although ecological criticism is far from indifferent to Shakespeare’s representations of nature, it is also engaged with a broad field of inquiry, intimately bound up with the political struggle over natural resources, the climate crisis, the depletion of fossil fuels, and the ways in which boundaries are being redrawn, literally and conceptually, between the human and the nonhuman—both animate and inanimate. *Shakespeare In Our Time* is therefore the outcome of the complex synergy between the text itself and what the great variety of readers have brought to it, up to and including the present.

Attention to Shakespeare’s language thus has the capacity to enter into ever-new forms of engagement with the present, as well as to lead us back again to the words on the page. Shakespeare also provides a focal point for those of us interested in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature and enables us to function as custodians of knowledge who nurture not just awareness of the past but also vigorous engagement with it. Furthermore, Shakespeare can be and has been used strategically, by, among others, the contributors to this volume, to make expansive arguments about the advent of modernity and the role of literary and theatrical culture in shaping and responding to its developments, especially in relation to economic transformation, religious schism, and the dawn of colonialism. Indeed, the topic of every section in this book from historicism to source studies has seen major transformations, fueled by the vigorous intellectual engagement of generations of Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) members not only with the historical past but also with the imperatives of their own historical moments.

The central and vital question implicitly addressed by this volume is, why do we continue to pursue intellectual projects in relation to Shakespeare? The answer is that Shakespeare remains a vital link to the past and a powerful testament to the relevance of history and historicity for the twenty-first century. Shakespeareans are uniquely positioned in relation to the cultural imperative both to redeem the literary and to explain that the past is the most radical

place that exists in our society. Most of all, studying Shakespeare, as Furness suggested, permits us to access the immense potentialities of language, by reading closely, questioning assumptions, destabilizing terms, and finding the stories behind the words we use in order to allow us to become more fully conscious of how the past inhabits the present. “Shakespeare” thus functions as a synecdoche for the nexus between the literary and cultural inheritance of the past and that of the present, and Shakespeare studies has become a field where it is possible to discuss what culture means—both high culture and culture in the most catholic sense of the word—and a space where we can examine the function and consequences of the human impulse towards image making and mimesis.

While *Shakespeare in Our Time* aims to offer a scholarly snapshot of work within the broader field of Shakespeare studies, this book is not intended as a museum piece. We hope that the essays included here will provoke further discussion, in and out of the classroom, and that the book will be useful to all readers in offering a sense of the directions of current research, areas of scholarly contention, emergent areas of inquiry, and potential divergences within a given approach. The debates and discussions here—each section consisting of a longer essay, when possible by a former SAA president, and two shorter contributions by members of the organization—can be entered at any point in the volume, since read with and against one another the essays generate debate and demonstrate the dynamism and diversity of our field.

Sometimes tightly woven, sometimes in tension and at odds with one another, the topics and subfields included here represent the mesh of intellectual engagement, the friction as well as the rapprochement, that constitutes Shakespeare studies in this anniversary year. Such tensions are evident in the critical differences among contributors here, and for this reason, the editors have not tried to erase disagreements, to give but one example, by imposing uniformity on the dating of Shakespeare’s plays. Consisting of parallel lines as much as converging avenues of inquiry, all of the dimensions of this arena of intellectual energies are part of the ongoing cultural conversation about Shakespeare. Every contributor in this volume is part of the network of scholarship that connects students, teachers, and seminar participants, and in this sense each of them is much indebted to the wider constituency of the SAA. If the essays that follow demonstrate anything, it is

that Shakespeare studies is a living, breathing, growing arena of scholarly concentration and a powerful argument in favor of the necessity and the rewards of intellectual labor. What the scholars included here have in common, along with all SAA members, is a collaborative commitment to Shakespeare and an awareness of the aesthetic achievement his work embodies. The current volume is written both in celebration and commemoration of that fact and as an invitation to deepen the networks that continue to inform Shakespeare studies.