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Expos 20.043

21 April 2020

Response Paper 3.3:
An Abstract

Why Shakespeare?
Irony and Liberalism in the Canonization Process

The title of this paper, “Why Shakespeare?” sounds like the kind of question that would have been asked and answered numerous times in Shakespeare Studies, especially in light of the turn to Shakespeare's reputation in the work of scholars such as Gary Taylor, Michael Dobson, Michael Bristol, and Marjorie Garber. When these critics consider Shakespeare's rise to fame and his lasting popularity in modern culture, however, they usually end up telling us *how* Shakespeare came to assume his position at the front of the Western canon, but not really *why*. Critics tend not to answer the difficult question of what it is about Shakespeare's art that led to his selection above all other writers, and what it is about modernity that led it to select Shakespeare above all others, and what the special relationship between Shakespeare and modernity is. In this paper, I argue that Shakespeare's elevation above all other English writers in the early nineteenth century was the result of a remarkable confluence between his strategy as an author and the political commitments of his canonizers. Specifically, Shakespeare's ironic mode made his drama uniquely appealing to the political liberals at the forefront of English culture in the early nineteenth century. I present my sense of Shakespeare's irony with some close readings of Shakespearean texts (such as *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*) alongside their sources. And I present the romantic reading of Shakespeare's irony in Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Poets* and Keats's letters in the context of their political liberalism (Hazlitt's liberalism as articulated by Duncan Wu, and Keats's by Nicholas Roe). In each their own way, both Shakespeare and his canonizers were anti-authoritarian: the literary version of anti-authoritarianism in Shakespeare's drama (which I call *irony*) was a perfect match for those who subscribed to the political version of anti-authoritarianism (namely *liberalism*) advocated by the likes of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mills. If so, then it may become possible to speak of Shakespeare as a factor in the rise of liberalism in English and Western culture.

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Public Shakespeareanism:
The Bard in the 2016 American Presidential Elections

This essay explores Shakespearean appropriations for the purpose of political commentary in the 2016 American presidential election. Many of these appropriations amount to what Scott Newstok and Harry Berger, Jr. have called “citational opportunism” – the exploitation of Shakespeare’s cultural capital for tendentious political analogies – but in 2016 there was also an unprecedented pattern of well-informed literary scholars going outside academia to write substantive Shakespeare-inspired cultural criticism in public venues. Why did these “public Shakespeareans” feel compelled and indeed qualified to comment on the election? I argue that the rhetoric, characters, structure, and outcome of the 2016 election were reminiscent of the same in Shakespearean tragedy, positioning Shakespeare scholars as legitimate authorities on a modern social event which was confusing and troubling to many traditional political commentators. The essay arrives at this conclusion by tracking the development of Shakespearean appropriations from the citational opportunism of young students and bloggers in the early days of the election to the public Shakespeareanism of scholars (such as Andrew Cutrofello, Charles McNulty, Paul Hamilton, Peter Herman, and Stephen Greenblatt) during the later days. Readings are situated amidst the rise of Shakespeare as “required reading” in U.S. high schools, and the rise of digital media as a resource for unconventional political commentary. Both the crisis in the humanities and the discourse of “presentism” in Shakespeare studies are considered as motivating forces. And the suggestion is made that public Shakespeareanism in argumentative essays may grow to supplement modern dress performances and adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays as a venue for thinking about the ongoing relevance and explanatory power of Shakespeare’s art.