Why Shakespeare?
Irony and Liberalism in Canonization

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Abstract When scholars consider Shakespeare's rise and lasting popularity in modern culture, they usually tell us *how* he assumed his position at the head of the canon but not *why*. This essay contends that Shakespeare's elevation in the early nineteenth century resulted from the confluence of 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 their own ways, Shakespeare and his proponents were antiauthoritarian: the literary antiauthoritarianism in his drama (the irony granting audiences the freedom of interpretation) perfectly matched the political antiauthoritarianism (liberalism) advocated by the likes of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. Thus it is possible to speak of bardolatry as an allegorical intertext for liberal politics.

*Keyword*s   canonicity, bardolatry, irony, ambiguity, liberalism

Maisters Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate" were dubbed the "primier poets of this nacion" as early as 1475 (Ashby 1899: 13). Early sixteenth-century poets like Stephen Hawes (1504, 1554) and John Skelton (1523, 1545) repeated this roll call, writing themselves in. The Elizabethans elevated Chaucer above Gower and Lydgate while adding one of their own, Spenser.[1] Then the remarkable ongoing output of the

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[1] George Puttenham (1598: 49) ranked Chaucer first, followed by Gower, Lydgate, and John Harding. Thomas Nashe (1592: G3) called "Chaucer and Spenser the Homer and Virgil of England."

Elizabethan and Jacobean ages blew the early English canon wide open: claims were made for Philip Sidney, Samuel Daniel, William Shakespeare, Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, Michael Drayton, and Ben Jonson, among others.[2] "Not of an age, but for all time," Jonson (1623: A5) said, but Shakespeare was not always the saint he is today.

John Webster (1624: B2) listed the greatest English writers as "Chaucer, Gower, Lidgate, Moore and for our time"—not Shakespeare— "Sr. Phillip Sidney, glory of our clime." John Dryden (1668: 49) said that Beaumont and Fletcher were "the most pleasant and frequent entertainments of the Stage; two of theirs being acted through the year for one of *Shakespheare's* or *Iohnsons.*" Gower and Lydgate dropped out in the mid-seventeenth century. Edmund Waller, Abraham Cowley, and Dryden came in during the Restoration but faded fast thereafter. Many (including himself) thought Milton destined to be England's prized poet.[3] Dryden (1693: viii) thought that "the English have only to boast of Spencer and Milton"—not Shakespeare—"to have been perfect Poets."

Historians of the canon have detailed how, by the mid-eighteenth century, the roll call of early English poets showed a consensus: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton (see Kramnick 1998; Lipking 1970; Ross 1998; Weinbrot 1993: 114–43). William Wordsworth's "creed" was that "there were four models whom he must have continually before his eyes—Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, and Shakespeare—and the first three were constantly in his hands" (*Quarterly Review* 1851: 191). (That Wordsworthian preference for the epic poets over the dramatist will be important later.) The pantheon of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton survives to this day, but the early nineteenth century usually elevated Shakespeare and Milton above Chaucer and Spenser, as in William Hazlitt's (1818b: 90) *Lectures on the English Poets*:

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[2] Jonson (1616: 1012) name-checks Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, and Spenser. John Taylor (1630: 72) lists Chaucer, Gower, Thomas More, Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Edward Dyer, Robert Greene, Nashe, Daniel, Josuah Sylvester, Beaumont, John Harrington, John Davies, Drayton, John Donne, Jonson, George Chapman, John Marston, Thomas Middleton, William Rowley, Fletcher, George Wither, Philip Massinger, and Thomas Heywood. Peter Heylyn (1652: 268) lists Gower, Lydgate, Chaucer, Sidney, Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, Beaumont, Fletcher, and Jonson.

[3] For example, Milton (1641: 37) sought to "leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die."

> The four greatest names in English poetry, are almost the four first we come to—Chaucer, Spenser, Shakspeare, and Milton. There are no others that can really be put in competition with these. The two last have had justice done them by the voice of common fame. Their names are blazoned in the very firmament of reputation; while the two first, (though "the fault has been more in their stars than in themselves that they are underlings") either never emerged far above the horizon, or were too soon involved in the obscurity of time.[4]

According to Google's Ngram Viewer, Milton was more popular than Shakespeare up to the 1790s. However, David Garrick (1769: 1) could worship at the first Shakespeare Jubilee: "'Tis he! 'tis he!—that demi-god. . . . 'Tis he! 'tis he! / 'The god of our idolatry!'" By the mid-nineteenth century Shakespeare had overtaken Milton, and Thomas Carlyle (1840: 21) could write, "Of this Shakspeare of ours, perhaps the opinion one sometimes hears a little idolatrously expressed is, in fact, the right one; I think the best judgment not of this country only, but of Europe at large, is slowly pointing to the conclusion, That Shakspeare is the chief of all Poets hitherto." George Bernard Shaw (1901: xxxii) invented the term *bardolatry*—"the indiscriminate eulogies with which we are familiar"—while dismissing the practice, but the Ngram Viewer suggests that Shakespeare's popularity grew steadily until the 1950s, when it took a downward turn. It rebounded in the 1980s, his reach now wider than ever. "Shakespeare has become a global icon," Jonathan Bate (2014) wrote on the playwright's 450th birthday. As of May 2019 the MLA International Bibliography contains 48,015 items about Shakespeare, nearly four times as many as about the next most popular author, Dante, followed in order by Joyce, Chaucer, Milton, Dickens, Faulkner, Beckett, Woolf, Proust, Hemingway, Spenser, and Dostoevsky.

Why Shakespeare? Empire often seeks out a literary icon, of course. It is usually the author of a mythic epic about the culture's foundation: Greece had its Homer, Rome its Virgil, and the Holy Roman Empire its Dante. Henry VIII's declaring England an empire in 1533 launched a debate about who would be its literary figurehead (Armitage 1998). England eventually opted not for an epic poet like Chaucer, Spenser, or Milton but for the dramatist Shakespeare. Why?

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[4] For an overview of Shakespeare and Milton in the Romantic age, see, respectively, Burwick 1997 and Trott 1997.

Our answer must be able to explain the surge in Shakespeare's popularity in the late eighteenth century as well as its resurgence since the 1980s. We must ask not only *Why was Shakespeare chosen as England's national treasure?* but also *Why is Shakespeare the only author mentioned by name as required reading in the US Common Core State Standards Initiative?* (see Turchi and Thompson 2013). Not only *Why was Shakespeare voted the British person of the millennium?* (Ezard and Radford 1999) but also *Why are there so many global Shakespearean adaptations in cultures with no love for Great Britain?* (see Desmet, Iyengar, and Jacobson 2019). Why was Shakespeare a darling of German philosophers like Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche (Kottman 2009)? Why so many "modern Shakespearean offshoots," to use the term coined by Ruby Cohn (1976)? Why so much appropriation of Shakespeare, both literary and commercial (see Bristol 1996; Desmet and Sawyer 1999; Fazel and Geddes 2017; Fischlin 2014; Huang and Rivlin 2014; Marsden 1991)? Why so many Shakespearean echoes in modern literature (Wetmore and Hansen 2015)? Why the pilgrimages to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (Thomas 2012)? Why so many texts that are not Shakespeare called "Shakespearean" (Desmet, Loper, and Casey 2017; Holderness 2014)? Why is it that "'Shakespeare' continues, in the new millennium, to represent a marker of high cultural value in spite of the powerful anti-bardolatrous thrust of academic literary criticism in the late twentieth century" (McLuskie and Rumbold 2014: 1)? Why multiple academic journals about all this, including *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*, established in 2003 by Yoshiko Kawachi and Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney, and *Borrowers and Lenders: A Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, founded in 2005 by Christy Desmet and Sujata Iyengar? Why were the opening ceremonies of the 2012 Olympics in London based on a passage from *The Tempest* (Prescott 2015)? Why do 50 percent of schoolchildren across the world study Shakespeare (British Council 2012: 17, but cf. Prescott 2015: 10–11)? Why did the British government decide to pay £1.5 million to have his works translated into Mandarin (Chow 2014)? Why did people across the globe celebrate his 450th birthday in April 2014 and the 400th anniversary of his death in April 2016 (Calvo and Kahn 2015)? Why did UNESCO's International Memory of the World grant documents about Shakespeare's life the same status as the Magna Carta and the Gutenberg Bible (*Guardian* 2018)? Why does Shakespeare matter so much to so many people? Why Shakespeare?

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It sounds like a question that would have been asked and answered several times in Shakespeare studies, especially since the turn to Shakespeare's modern reception by scholars such as Gary Taylor (1991), Samuel Schoenbaum (1991), Michael Dobson (1992), Jonathan Bate (1997), Jack Lynch (2007), and Marjorie Garber (2009). They have shown "the unlikely afterlife that turned a provincial playwright into the Bard" (Lynch 2007); that "adaptation and canonization, so far from being contradictory forces, were often mutually reinforcing ones" (Dobson 1992: 5); that "'genius' was a category invented in order to account for what was peculiar about Shakespeare" (Bate 1997: 163); and that "the word 'Shakespearean' today has taken on its own set of connotations, often quite distinct from any reference to Shakespeare or his plays" (Garber 2009: xiv). When critics consider Shakespeare's popularity in modern culture, however, they usually explain *how* he assumed his position at the head of the canon but not *why*. Critics tend not to address what about Shakespeare's art led to his selection above all others, what about modernity led it to select Shakespeare, and what the special relationship between Shakespeare and modernity is. That is how I want to ask *Why Shakespeare?* What is it about him—as opposed to Chaucer or Spenser or Milton—that led modernity to say, *He's the one for us*, given his methods and concerns and given our values and commitments? This essay supposes, therefore, that the reason for Shakespeare's preeminence is neither totally intrinsic nor totally extrinsic to his art.

   In slightly different terms, I am adopting neither the sentimental view of a Harold Bloom (1994, 1998), who believes that Shakespeare invented the human as we know it, nor the cynical view of a Gary Taylor (1991), who sees Shakespeare simply as the benefactor of British imperialism. Both focus too much on one side of the canonization process, either the canonized author or the canonizing culture. Nothing in Shakespeare's works guaranteed his canonization, yet something encouraged it. We cannot ignore the role Shakespeare was made to play in British colonialism (see Cartelli 1999; Loomba and Orkin 1998; Marcus 2017; Singh 2019; Wilson-Lee 2016) but cannot rest there, either. There were plenty of dead white male English authors to prop up in a claim of cultural greatness, so why Shakespeare?

In response to these questions, I contend that Shakespeare's canonization resulted from the confluence of 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 nineteenth century. Shakespeare and his proponents were both antiauthoritarian: the literary antiauthoritarianism in his drama, which I call irony, perfectly matched the political antiauthoritarianism, or liberalism, advocated by the likes of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill.

As Antony Taylor (2002) and Ewan Fernie (2015, 2017a) discuss, Shakespeare has frequently been aligned with freedom, starting with Garrick and the first Shakespeare Jubilee at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1769. "Shakespeare means freedom," Fernie (2017a: 1) argues. "That is why the plays matter, and not just aesthetically but also in terms of the impact they historically have had and continue to have on personal and political life in the world."[5] I further suggest that bardolatry is an allegorical intertext for liberal politics, though my aim is not normative but descriptive, analytic, and historical. My driving question, *Why Shakespeare?*, is more commonly asked in the public forums of newspapers and magazines than in academic journals (e.g., Jaffe 2014; O'Toole 2012). It is then answered with a mixture of suggestion, provocation, and celebration or condemnation. It is not often answered with argument and demonstration. This essay is an attempt to do so. It pieces together a story whose parts are well known to scholars in the fields invoked (including the study of Shakespeare's drama, his sources, his reception, and the history of liberalism) but never fused into a conceptual account of Shakespeare's canonization. Thus nothing here is particularly new except the explicitness with which I think we can conclude that Shakespeare is celebrated today because he signifies liberty.[6]

[5] On his book's release, the *Shakespeare Quarterly* staged a discussion between Fernie and Paul A. Kottman (2017), author of *Love as Human Freedom*, a philosophical work featuring readings of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*. Fernie and Kottman reviewed each other's books and responded to questions on the journal's new website; see Fernie and Kottman 2017.

[6] I am not posing the *Why Shakespeare?* question as it was asked at the start of the twentieth century, as a call to justify the value of reading and teaching Shakespeare (see, e.g., Simon 1934; Smith 1902). That value is addressed by Kottman (2013).

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Source study shows that Shakespeare regularly removed any trace of a strong, central, single authorial voice engineering the meaning and values of his texts. At the start of *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third* (1594), one source for *Richard III*, Poetry asks Truth to tell the story of the Wars of the Roses. When Truth gets to Richard III, he says that Richard was "a man ill shaped, crooked backed, lame armed, withal, / Valiantly minded, but tyrannous in authoritie" (Greg 1919: lines 57–58). The lines shape audience attitudes toward the character, controlling meaning. When Truth speaks, you can't really disagree. But Shakespeare cut Truth from his *Richard III*. The prologue is a soliloquy by the protagonist. Richard says that his deformity has estranged him from society, and so "I am determinèd to prove a villain" (1.1.30).[7] The lines express perspective, not truth. Similarly, both plays conclude with the Tudor myth, but in *The True Tragedie* the actors step out of character to narrate the lineage of the Tudors from Henry VII to Elizabeth I, while *Richard III* ends with Henry VII himself claiming to have quelled a period of civil war by uniting two rival households—a situated perspective, not absolute truth.

Likewise, Arthur Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet* (1562) tries to control meaning where Shakespeare did not. A prefatory note "to the reader," signed "Ar. Br.," expresses the author's aim "to teche men," because "every exaumple ministreth good lessons" (Brooke 1966: 284). A second statement "to the reader"—in jangly quatrains—promises to publish poems that "geve rules of chaste and honest lyfe" (285): a bad theory of poetry by a bad poet in bad poetry. Yet a third preface, "The Argument," is a Petrarchan sonnet calling *Romeus and Juliet* "ministryng matter" for "Gods goodnes, wisdome, & power" (284). As in Petrarch's sonnets, human love here is delightful but fleeting, while romantic frustrations are opportunities to embrace the more lasting love of God. Maybe it is strange to make a poem about love gone wrong into a Christian homily, but for Brooke all actions and events, good or bad, happy or sad, "in divers sorte sound one prayse of God" (284). The prefatory material in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* presents no authorial voice. It is a short sonnet concerned, like Shakespeare's other sonnets, not with divine love as an alternative to human love but with the mental and social structures

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[7] All citations of Shakespeare's works refer to Shakespeare 2016.

that make love a problem. There is no "ministryng matter" to be found in it.

So Truth out of *Richard III*, and God out of *Romeo and Juliet*. To be sure, Shakespeare added to his sources, altering emphasis and meaning. Writing new soliloquies of philosophical introspection changes the story of *Hamlet*, though that play continues Shakespeare's penchant for deafening silence. His main source, Saxo Grammaticus's (1973) "Gesta Danorum," clearly explains, after narrating the wicked uncle's treachery, why Hamlet decides to feign an alien state of mind: "Amleth beheld all this, but feared lest too shrewd a behavior might make his uncle suspect him. So he chose to feign dullness, and pretend an utter lack of wits. This cunning course not only concealed his intelligence but ensured his safety." In contrast, Shakespeare's Hamlet merely says parenthetically, as if it were no big deal, "I perchance hereafter shall think meet / To put an antic disposition on" (1.5.171–72). Saxo's voice is in the text, explaining it; Shakespeare's is nowhere to be found.

Creating ambiguity by suppressing motives present in his sources became Shakespeare's favorite strategy for creating compelling tragedy. In *Othello* he removed Iago's love for Desdemona (Burns 2018). In *King Lear* he took out Lear's recently deceased wife (Adelman 1992) and the explanation for the love test (Ioppolo 2005). In *Macbeth* he cut Macbeth's legitimate claim to the throne of Scotland (Carroll 2014). Shakespeare also took away from later comedies the voice that ought to assure us that everything is all right: both Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* remain silent when claims for comic restoration are advanced. Shakespeare's strategic silences impose a burden of resolution on audiences. Is Bolingbroke's rebellion justified? Is *The Merchant of Venice* anti-Semitic? Is Falstaff the problem or the answer? Is Henry V a national hero or a Machiavellian hypocrite? Is the assassination of Caesar principled or idiotic? Is Coriolanus more sinned against than sinning? Who is worse, Prospero or Caliban?

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It is not immediately obvious why Shakespeare so stubbornly refused to tell audiences what to do or think. Jonson (1641: 120) happily did— "Language most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee"—whereas

Shakespeare asked audiences to "piece out our imperfections with your thoughts" (*Henry V*, Pr.23). The easy explanation—a little too easy—is that authorial invisibility made for a more entertaining work of art, one with more intrigue, mystery, and suspense, and a more energetic engagement from the audience. But in the Renaissance artistic entertainment was a means, not an end, at least to Sidney (2002: 86), who defined literature as "a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight." For Hamlet, by contrast, "the purpose of playing . . . both at the first and now . . . is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (3.2.19–20). Sidney's view is didactic, while Hamlet's is mimetic. But mimesis, as Shakespeare seems to have realized, can educate better than moralization.

When Shakespeare withheld information from his plays, he created a more robust ethical education for audiences. This approach, associated with "active learning" in our time, is at least as old as the Socratic method. In contrast to Aristotelian taxonomy, which expounds each aspect of an idea in its proper order, Socratic irony rests on "dissimulation, pretended ignorance."[8] It differs from the modern irony that says one thing but means another, and from George Puttenham's (1589: 157) "drye mock," and also from the "Sophoclean irony" A. C. Bradley (1904: 339) attributed to Shakespeare, "by which a speaker is made to use words bearing to the audience, in addition to his own meaning, a further and ominous sense." Rather, Socratic irony is allied with the pedagogical strategy Francis Bacon (1605: 51) connected with skepticism:

> It was not without cause, that so many excellent Philosophers became *Sceptiques* and *Academiques*, and denied any certaintie of Knowledge, or Comprehension, and held opinion that the knowledge of man extended onely to Appearances, and Probabilities. It is true, that in *Socrates* it was supposed to be but a fourme of *Irony*, *Scientiam dissimulando simulauit*: For hee vsed to disable his knowledge, to the end to inhanse his Knowledge.

Where Michel de Montaigne (1603: B1) responded to the skeptical crisis by putting everything about himself into his writings—"It is my selfe I pourtray"—Shakespeare responded by including nothing.

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[8] See the etymology of "irony, *n.*" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.), which dates to 1502 the sense of "dissimulation, pretence; esp. (and in later use only) feigned ignorance and disingenuousness of the kind employed by Socrates during philosophical discussions."

Ironia socratica was rediscovered in the Renaissance thanks to the increased circulation of classical authors like Cicero and Quintilian, who commented on Socrates's irony (Knox 1989: 97–138). Renaissance writers like Petrarch and Erasmus identified Socratic irony as a sustained mode of discourse associated with the rhetorical tradition of argument *in utramque partem*, on both sides of an issue. As a key to the educational curriculum in Elizabethan grammar schools, argument *in utramque partem* contributed to a shift in England from homiletic to exploratory drama, as Joel B. Altman (1978: 6) argues: "The plays are essentially questions and not statements. . . . The plays functioned as media of intellectual and emotional exploration for minds that were accustomed to examine the many sides of a given theme, to entertain opposing ideals." Meanwhile the Protestant Reformation, accompanied by the dissemination of printed Bibles, encouraged individual interpretations and called into question the authoritative control of meaning claimed by the Catholic Church (Eisenstein 1997). I suspect that Shakespeare's attitude toward the interpretability of things, as cultivated by his religious setting and rhetorical training, drew him toward drama, which, through its absence of a central narrative voice, encourages an interrogative rather than a declarative posture toward its audience, ironic rather than didactic.

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A long line of Shakespeare criticism has noted the absence of authorial voice leading to an openness of interpretation. Elizabeth Montagu (1769: 37) wrote that "Shakespear seems to have had the art of the Dervise, in the Arabian tales, to throw his soul into the body of another man, and be at once possessed of his sentiments, adopt his passions, and rise to all the functions and feelings of his situation." In 1802 Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1956) asked, "To send ourselves out of ourselves, to think ourselves in to the Thoughts and Feelings of Beings in circumstances wholly and strangely different from our own / hoc labor, hoc opus / and who has atchieved it? Perhaps only Shakespere." The Romantic reception of Shakespeare that began in Germany, emigrated to England with Coleridge, was consolidated by Hazlitt, and culminated in Keats's comment about Shakespeare's "negative capability" has been well

documented.[9] But I review some statements from Hazlitt and Keats below to situate them in a less familiar context: their religious and political liberalism, as emphasized in Duncan Wu's (2008) biography of Hazlitt and Nicholas Roe's (2012) of Keats (see also Burley 2014; Roe 1997).

The Shakespeare I have described depolemicized and depersonalized his art to let audiences exercise the "sympathetic imagination" Romantics celebrated (Bate 1945). Perhaps, therefore, Hazlitt (1818b: 91–98) was projecting his reading experience onto the intent of the author when in his *Lectures on the English Poets*, like Montagu, he characterized Shakespeare's silencing of his own voice as an out-of-body experience:

> The striking peculiarity of Shakespeare's mind was its generic quality, its power of communication with all other minds—so that it contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself, and had no one peculiar bias, or exclusive excellence more than another. He was just like any other man, but that he was like all other men. He was the least of an egoist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become.[10]

Hazlitt contrasted the self-effacing Shakespeare, whom I have dubbed an "ironist," with an "egoist," a term he associated with the self-centered poets of his own day:

> The great fault of a modern school of poetry is that it is an experiment to reduce poetry to a mere effusion of natural sensibility; or, what is worse, to divest it both of imaginary splendour and human passion, to surround the meanest objects with the morbid feelings and devouring egotism of the writers' own minds. Milton and Shakspeare did not so understand poetry. They gave a more liberal interpretation both to nature and art. (104–5)

The political use of Hazlitt's word, *liberal*, was established half a century before his *Lectures*.[11] But Hazlitt saw Shakespeare's and Milton's

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[9] See, e.g., volume 3 (*Voltaire, Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge*) and volume 4 (*Lamb, Hazlitt, Keats*) of Holland and Poole 2014.

[10] On Hazlitt's Shakespeare criticism, see Bate 1986, 1989, and Natarajan 2014. The quoted passage proceeds with a comparison between Shakespeare and a ventriloquist, as discussed by Jon Cook (2010).

[11] The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.) dates the political use of *liberal* to 1761 ("liberal, adj. and n.," def. 5a) and of *liberalism* to 1816 ("liberalism, n.," def. 1).

"liberal[ism]" as a certain self-forgetting, in contrast to the "egoists" who "fill up the dreary void with the Moods of their own Minds" (104). While Shakespeare sought to get outside himself to understand others, Hazlitt wrote, "to the men I speak of"—the egotistical Romantics—"there is nothing interesting, nothing heroical, but themselves" (104–5). They cannot imagine that "there ever was, or was thought to be, any thing superior to themselves" (105). M. H. Abrams's (1953) tropes from *The Mirror and the Lamp* are clearly in play, the ironic Shakespearean mirror reflecting the world, the egotistic Wordsworthian lamp illuminating it.

That was one of the things that "dovetailed" in Keats's mind in 1817 when he commented about "what quality [goes] to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats 1958, 1:193).[12] Shakespeare's "capability" was "negative" because he negated his own ideas, attitudes, beliefs, perspectives, and identities to embody and represent others'. He did not succumb to the "egotistical" impulse to resolve questions for his audiences. He exhibited a passive plasticity, a sympathetic identification with others, and an eager diffusion of multiple perspectives into his text, allowing for a certain critical freedom in response. Like Hazlitt, Keats hated didactic poetry and contrasted Shakespeare's negative capability with the positivity of the Romantics:

> It may be said that we ought to read our contemporaries. that Wordsworth &c should have their due from us. but for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist—Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes a false coinage and deceives himself. . . . We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand into its breeches pocket. . . . Each of the moderns like an Elector of Hanover governs his petty state, & knows how many straws are swept daily from the Causeways in all his dominions & has a continual itching that all the Housewives should have their coppers well scoured: The antients were Emperors of vast Provinces, they had only heard of the remote ones and scarcely cared to visit them. (1:223–24)

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[12] There is a vast library of criticism on Keats's comment about negative capability. See Bate 1939, Clayborough 1973, Lau 2014, Leech 1960, Mathes 2014, Ou 2009, Von Pfahl 2011, White 1987, and Wigod 1952.

Keats's analogy between modes of literary composition and modes of government is revealing. Where the "Egotist," whose territory and power are small, tries to perform every detail of government himself, the ironist, whose province and power are great, delegates authority to the people—his audience. Here the virtue of limitation in government emerges as a way to think about what makes literature good, prompting thought on the relationship between authority and government in a literary context. How do authors choose to "govern" their texts? Kinds of government—from dictatorship and democracy to tyranny, anarchy, and mixed modes like constitutional monarchy—provide analogies for the position of authors in relation to readers. Concepts of government—*rights* and *laws* and *power* and *consent* and *contracts*—also apply to the situation of audiences relative to texts, as when a readerly freedom of conscience comes into tension with authorial (authoritative?) intent. I'm not talking about government in the sense of a work's political context; I'm talking about how authors govern meaning in artistic objects. For literature and life are both filled with different authorities who hold different kinds of power and wield their powers in different ways, creating things (whether texts or societies) then experienced and interpreted by people often voicing core disagreements about what really matters and what ought to be done. In life we study how people wield power and how the public responds under the rubric of "government"; it would be useful to theorize how literary power is exercised and experienced in the same terms.

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Hazlitt and Keats made their marks in the world of aesthetics, but their aesthetics were informed by the politics of their youth.[13] Both were raised in settings of religious dissent sympathetic to the fights for political liberty in America and France. Their roots lay in the seventeenth-century writers now considered forerunners of modern liberalism—John Milton, John Locke, Algernon Sidney—who saw themselves as inheritors of the classical republicanism that stood for representative government

[13] See Kucich 1994: 138 for an excellent discussion of "politicized reconstructions of the revolutionary past" related to "efforts to invent a national literary history."

and freedom from tyranny. As Frank Lovett (2015: 383, 384) writes, classical republicanism's central tenet—"reducing domination, so far as this is feasible"—is entirely compatible with modern liberalism's guiding principle: "protecting a private sphere within which some range of individual conceptions of the good and their associated life plans will be tolerated." Liberalism emphasizes individual freedom, republicanism the collective good, but it was seventeenth-century English republicans who laid the foundation for what we now call liberalism.

In this tradition, the English civil wars of the seventeenth century were fought over two competing visions of liberty. Royalists such as Thomas Hobbes (1651) and Robert Filmer (1680) understood liberty to be the freedom to do whatever you want. Hobbes associated it with the state of nature, a war of all against all, in which we are free to lie, cheat, steal, and kill to get what we want. For him, the only protection was consenting to government by a strong, central authority who could administer law, namely, the king. As long as he protects us from the war of all against all, the king is bound by no law, and we owe him absolute fealty. But English republicans—most of whom were Puritans—understood liberty to be freedom from the Catholic Church, religious freedom, which was closely connected to freedom of speech and freedom of the press. As John Milton (1644: 35) put it in *Areopagitica*, when arguing against state-sponsored censorship, "Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties." Puritans did not extend religious toleration to Catholics because, in the Puritan view, Catholicism did not allow for religious freedom. This give-and-take is the basis of modern liberalism: everyone is free to pursue his or her own happiness as long as it does not infringe on someone else's pursuit of the same. When such an infringement occurs, there needs to be a government institution to limit the power of the person or group overstepping its authority. "Freedom of Men, under Government," Locke (1690: 241) argued, "is, to have a standing Rule to live by, common to every one of that Society, and made by the Legislative Power erected in it. A Liberty to follow my own Will in all things, where that Rule prescribes not." That liberty inheres in Shakespearean interpretation.

To the chagrin of the republicans leading the English Revolution, monarchy was restored in 1660. The annual commemoration of the Restoration led the young Keats to pen his bitter "Lines Written on 29

May, the Anniversary of the Restoration of Charles II, on Hearing the
Bells Ringing" (ca. 1814–15):

> Infatuate Britons, will you still proclaim
> His memory, your direst, foulest shame?
> Nor patriots revere?
> Ah! when I hear each traitorous lying bell,
> 'Tis gallant Sidney's, Russell's, Vane's sad knell,
> That pains my wounded ear.
>   (Keats 1978: 28)

Algernon Sidney, William Russell, and Henry Vane the Younger were
English republicans executed for treason against Charles II, revolu-
tionary martyrs invoked nostalgically by Keats: "We have no Milton, no
Algernon Sidney" (quoted in Roe 1997: 49). Milton, Sidney, and Locke
wrote the script for the fight for freedom by religious Dissenters in
England and republican revolutionaries abroad. Rational Dissenters
(Christian humanists influenced by Enlightenment thought who wor-
shipped outside the orthodoxies of the Anglican Church) were freed
from penalty by the Toleration Act of 1689. They continued to have lim-
ited rights, however, leading to the Unitarian minister Joseph Priestley's
(1768) *Essay on the First Principles of Government*, which held that matters of
private conscience, especially religion, should not be administered by
the state. Adam Smith (1778, 2:290) built the politics of liberalism into
the free-market theory of economics argued in *The Wealth of Nations*:
"Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left
perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both
his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man,
or order of men. The sovereign is completely discharged from . . .
the duty of superintending the industry of private people." Meanwhile
writings by Milton, Locke, and Sidney became the conceptual founda-
tion for the American Revolution (1775–83) and the French Revolution
(1789–99).

. . .

In England revolutionary politics and religious dissent often went hand
in hand. Early Romantic poets were freedom fighters, dissenting min-
isters, or both. In 1791 Wordsworth went to revolutionary France and

became enchanted with republicanism (Roe 1988: 38–83). William Godwin's (1793) *Political Justice* argued for radical liberty to the point of anarchy. Coleridge and Robert Southey dreamed of creating an egalitarian utopia in America called Pantisocracy (Roe 1988: 113–15). Their plan fell through, so in 1798 Coleridge became a Unitarian minister at Shrewsbury, working with Hazlitt's father, meeting, impressing, and inspiring the younger Hazlitt (1823: 24), whose reflection on that encounter, "My First Acquaintance with Poets," said that the community of dissenting ministers around Shrewsbury was "a line of communication . . . by which the flame of civil and religious liberty is kept alive, and nourishes its smouldering fire unquenchable."

Hazlitt's father was a freethinker. From 1756 to 1761 he studied under Smith at the University of Glasgow (Hazlitt 1823: 28). He became a dissenting minister and, sympathetic to the fight for liberty in the American colonies, moved his family (including the five-year-old William Jr.) to Philadelphia in 1783, shortly after the end of the American Revolution. They stayed for only three years, but that time profoundly impacted the young Hazlitt (1947: 283), as he remembered in "Trifles Light as Air" (1829): "I am by education and conviction inclined to republicanism and puritanism. In America they have both." They returned to England and settled in the small town of Wem, where the thirteen-year-old Hazlitt (1978: 59) published his first writing in 1791, a letter to the editor of the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* bewailing the "prejudice" and "bigotry" behind the "persecution" of the dissenting minister Priestley.

Turning from his father's religion to his own atheism, Hazlitt (1805: 3) argued in *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* that humans have a natural inclination for "disinterestedness"—an "imagination" that "must carry me out of myself into the feelings of others"—which is effectively a safeguard against the Hobbesian state of nature, but administered by the individual rather than the government.[14] Disinterestedness points both backward to classical republicanism (and its concern with the collective good) and forward to modern liberalism

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[14] On Hazlitt's disinterestedness, see Kinnaird 1977. See Davis 2005: 46 on the way that "Hazlitt's *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* is central to all his later understanding of Shakespeare." On the eighteenth-century prehistory of disinterestedness and Shakespeare, see Marsden 2008.

(and its affirmation of the individual as the seat of moral authority), and it inspired Hazlitt's critique of England's involvement in the Napoleonic Wars. That argument in *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs* cites Shakespeare and Milton in its first paragraph (Hazlitt 1806). Hazlitt then encountered Leigh Hunt, editor of the liberal magazine the *Examiner* (1808–21), who was imprisoned in 1812 for slandering the prince regent. Hazlitt became theater reviewer for the *Examiner*, in which he heard about Hunt's (1807: 50) notion of an actor's "passive capacity," first argued in *Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres*. While in prison, Hunt wrote a masque, *The Descent of Liberty* (1814), which made him a modern-day Milton of sorts, for, as Hazlitt (1815: 382) wrote in the *Examiner*, "We have no less respect for the memory of Milton as a patriot than as a poet."

Politics and poetry were inseparable to Hazlitt. That is why he imported his critique of Wordsworth's politics (Wordsworth abandoned his revolutionary liberalism in the first decade of the nineteenth century) into his reading of Wordsworth's poetry. Hazlitt (1817b: 99) criticized Wordsworth's "intense intellectual egotism" in his 1814 review of *The Excursion*, outraging Wordsworth, who was always sour toward Hazlitt anyway. As Wu (2008: 169) explains, "Wordsworth's antipathy is understandable: not only was Hazlitt the voice of a liberal conscience to which he had long turned a deaf ear, he was also an unwelcome reminder of the young man he had once been, and the radical principles he had disowned." In contrast, Hazlitt's (1817b: 111) review of Wordsworth's poem vowed to "never cease, nor be prevented from returning on the wings of imagination to that bright dream of our youth; that glad-dawn of the day-star of liberty." And Hazlitt's (1818a: 206, 242) republican sympathies powered his disdain for the kings in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*: the description of Henry V as "a very amiable monster," for example, or the statement about Henry VIII that "no reader of history can be a lover of kings."

Hazlitt never explicitly linked his account of Shakespeare's authorial mode to his theory of disinterestedness as a philosophical and political virtue. But both clearly stem from Hazlitt's religious background in rational dissent and political background in revolutionary liberalism. The effect of Shakespeare's drama was, for Hazlitt (1817a: 26–27), the same as the effect he claimed for classical education: "It gives men liberal views; it accustoms the mind to take an interest in things foreign to itself."

This passage glosses liberalism not with reference to any approach to government but as the disposition of disinterestedness.

The "day-star of liberty" also shone on the childhood of Keats. In 1803 a young Keats was sent to board at the academy in Enfield, a school founded by the zealous Baptist minister John Ryland ("ardent friend of liberty") and run by John Clarke ("independent-minded far in advance of his time") (Roe 2012: 20). "At Clarke's Academy," writes Roe, "[Keats] would be taught reading and writing, and also how England owed its freedoms to the great dissenting tradition, with John Milton at its head" (20). Years later Charles Cowden Clarke (1861: 88), the schoolmaster's son and Keats's classmate, reported that "Burnet's *History of His Own Time* [an account of the English Revolution published in 1724] . . . and Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*—which my father took in, and I used to lend Keats—no doubt laid the foundation of his love of civil and religious liberty." Elsewhere Clarke asserted the young Keats's liberalism even more forcefully: "With regards to Keats's political opinions; I have little doubt that his whole civil creed was comprised in the master-principle, of universal 'Liberty,'—Viz: 'Equal, and stern justice;—from the Duke to the Dustman'" (quoted in Roe 1997: 10). To another friend, George Felton Mathew (1948, 2:185), Keats was "of the skeptical and republican school. An advocate for the innovations which were making progress in his time. A faultfinder with everything established."

Skeptical, republican, innovative, progressive, antiestablishment: Keats was a political liberal raised in a school of religious dissent long before he was a poet, and his poetry, often seen as some of our most purely aesthetic verse, has strong political bearings. His Shakespearean sonnet "On Peace" (1814) figures peace as "Europa's Liberty" (a stark contrast to Hobbesian liberty as perpetual war), then calls for continued progress toward freedom, away from monarchy:

> O Europe! let not sceptred tyrants see
> That thou must shelter in thy former state;
> Keep thy chains burst, and boldly say thou art free;
> Give thy kings law—leave not uncurbed the great.
>   (Keats 1978: 28)

In "To Hope" (1815) Keats longs for "freedom" in England, "And not freedom's shade":

> Let me not see the patriot's high bequest,
> Great Liberty! how great in plain attire!
> With the base purple of a court oppress'd,
> Bowing her head, and ready to expire.
>   (34)

In "To George Felton Mathew" (1815) Keats dreams of retiring with his friend to talk "of those who in the cause of freedom fell"—Alfred the Great, William Tell, William Wallace, and Robert Burns—alongside talk of Shakespeare and Milton (43). In "To Charles Cowden Clarke" (1816) Keats returns to his roll call of freedom fighters to thank his schoolmate for pointing out

>   the patriot's stern duty;
> The might of Alfred, and the shaft of Tell;
> The hand of Brutus, that so grandly fell
> Upon a tyrant's head.
>   (60)

That poem also laments "the wrong'd Libertas," a personification of the imprisoned Hunt. In "Written on the Day That Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison" (Feb. 3, 1815) Keats presented Hunt as a Miltonic figure signifying liberty set against an authoritarian government with no freedom of the press (32). Keats (1817) dedicated his first book, *Poems*, to Hunt. Its frontispiece was, at Keats's request, an engraving of a bust of Shakespeare with an epigraph from Spenser: "What more felicity can fall to creature, / Than to enjoy delight with liberty." As Roe (2012: 146–47) explains: "Shakespeare's head reinforced his epigraph's liberal sentiments, and intersected neatly with Hunt's presence. . . . Readers who glanced at Keats's title-page and dedication would immediately be apprised of his liberal sympathies, and of Shakespeare's ascendancy in his imagination."

In sum, Hazlitt and Keats were raised in settings of rational dissent, a tradition grounded in Milton's affirmation of the need for liberty and toleration in matters of value and conscience. In the context of the most pressing power struggles of the late eighteenth century, the American and French Revolutions, the religiously inspired liberalism of English rational Dissenters became more explicitly political. In the context of their artistic endeavors, Hazlitt's and Keats's liberalism cultivated a literary taste for texts allowing readerly freedom through ambiguity,

mystery, uncertainty, doubt, and openness of interpretation, which they found in Shakespeare and Milton more than anywhere else, and in Shakespeare more than in Milton. Both politically and poetically, Hazlitt and Keats aligned themselves against authoritarianism dictating meaning and value from a singular centralized authority to a subjugated and servile populace. They valued Shakespeare's toleration of conflicting viewpoints, which allowed audiences to enjoy a literary version of what we have come to call the freedom of speech—the freedom of interpretation. In Shakespeare they found an aesthetic experience approximating their political ideal.

. . .

We might further speculate that Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton were elevated to the top of the canon (over Gower, Lydgate, Cowley, Dryden, etc.) because they were seen as the most liberal English writers, meaning the most ironic, the most open to interpretation; that Shakespeare and Milton were elevated above the other two because they were seen as more liberal; and that Shakespeare was ultimately elevated above Milton as the most deeply liberal of them all—liberal in form as opposed to liberal in content. In this context, canonicity is proportional to irony.

 If we are going to set Shakespeare at the pinnacle of liberalism, however, we must acknowledge that he peacefully coexisted with not one but two monarchs, while Milton was a combative poet-polemicist defending the killing of a tyrant. But canonization is a matter of how texts work as artistic objects, not of an author's political affiliations.[15] In Stanley Fish's (1967, 2001) argument about Milton's authorial mode—first presented in *Surprised by Sin*, later developed in *How Milton Works*—Milton's modern, secular, humanist, democratic, liberal impulses were real but always subjugated to his Puritan fundamentalism. The epitome, for Fish, is the voice of the epic poet in *Paradise Lost*, who, after ideas resonant with modern liberalism are advanced by characters in the poem, exploits his position as the epic narrator to subordinate such ideas

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[15] This is why I have not entered into the recent push to identify Shakespeare as a republican (see Hadfield 2005).

to the truth, beauty, and glory of God as understood in Milton's religious worldview. Fish (2001: 14) concludes that "conflict, ambivalence, and open-endedness—the watchwords of a criticism that would make Milton into the Romantic liberal some of his readers want him to be—are not constitutive features of the poetry but products of a systematic misreading of it." It is hard to avoid the suspicion that, although Hazlitt adored Milton, he saw Shakespeare as more central to English literature because Hazlitt, a committed atheist, could not square himself with Milton's devout Christianity. There is, ultimately, a fixed meaning in Milton's authorial mode that is not present in Shakespeare's. If, per Fish, Milton is liberal in content but authoritarian in method, the inverse is true of Shakespeare: his tragedies are all about monarchy but, for audiences, have the feeling of freedom.

In the end, the difference between Shakespeare and Milton is the difference between drama and epic. Milton's epic has a centralized authorial voice; Shakespeare's plays have many voices. Meaning is perspectival, not absolute. The contingency of Shakespearean meaning acknowledges various interpretations and encourages readers to pursue and argue for them, forming an openness congruent with the liberalism trumpeted in British, Western, and, increasingly, global culture from the Romantic age on.

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Keats's comment about Shakespeare's negative capability inspired what is now a critical consensus regarding Shakespeare's dramatic practice: William Empson's (1930) "ambiguity" (Empson 1966), A. P. Rossiter's (1961) "essential ambivalence," Fredson Bowers's (1963) "dramatic vagueness," Norman Rabkin's (1967) "complementarity," Terence Hawkes's (1992: 147) "meaning by Shakespeare" (the plays "don't, in themselves, 'mean.' It is *we* who mean *by* them"), Jonathan Bate's (1997: 327) "first law" (that "truth is not singular"), Stephen Greenblatt's (2004) "strategic opacity," Julia Reinhard Lupton's (2014) "affordances," Emma Smith's (2019) "permissive gappiness," and a host of other commentators, including Tzachi Zamir (2007) and Peter G. Platt (2009), showing Shakespeare putting his audience in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts. Significantly, Bate, the standard-bearer of Shakespeare's reputation in

England, began his career writing about the Romantic reception of Shakespeare, and Greenblatt (2010), the standard-bearer in the United States, wrote a book titled *Shakespeare's Freedom.* Their style of reading Shakespeare took shape near the start of the nineteenth century—precisely when Shakespeare moved to the head of the canon—because they still read Shakespeare in fundamentally the same way as the Romantics and, moreover, still think about liberty the same.

Conclusively demonstrating a positive correlation between love of Shakespeare and love of freedom would be impossible here, probably anywhere, but anecdotal evidence is readily available: George Dawson making Shakespeare central to civic reform in nineteenth-century Birmingham (Fernie 2017b); the tradition running from Hegel to Bradley to Bloom to Fernie and Kottman celebrating Shakespeare's characters as "free artists of their own selves" (Hegel 2009: 77); adaptations of *The Tempest* in the fight for freedom in Latin America (Galery and Camati 2017); political activists fighting European nationalism by citing Shakespeare's speech on behalf of strangers in *Sir Thomas More* (M.S. 2015); the swirl of recent Shakes-takes positioned against Donald Trump's authoritarianism (Wilson forthcoming).

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Three qualifications are needed. First, bardolatry is not always bound up with liberal politics. Carlyle's Shakespeare hero worship does not fit the pattern. John Wilkes Booth loved Shakespeare (Kauffman 2004). Nazis loved Shakespeare (Symington 2005). Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa (1964), Boris Johnson (forthcoming), and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (2015) all love Shakespeare. His works have been used for many illiberal purposes. The argument that, formally, Shakespeare's text allows for readerly freedom clashes fascinatingly with the fact that, historically, many have used that interpretive freedom to make Shakespeare a platform for oppression, authoritarianism, and imperialism. "Even the revolutionary aspect of Shakespeare's work which evoked sympathy and recognition in the colonial intellectual," Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2013: 33) writes, "was tamed and co-opted by the colonizing classes." Bardolatry contains "the contradictions of empire," as Coppélia Kahn (2001: 457) wrote of the 1916 tercentenary, with Shakespeare a

signifier of both asymmetrical power dynamics between colonizers and colonized, and core human concerns transcending cultural borders. These tensions are real and to be taken seriously. How does the Shakespeare celebrated as a beacon of liberty square with the one used as a tool of empire? What parts of Shakespeare are conveniently ignored when he is made a banner man for freedom? Does Shakespeare prompt political enlightenment, or is that a liberal fantasy?

Second, the Shakespeare made a figurehead of nineteenth-century merrie liberal England seems to do nothing to illuminate the Shakespeare cults of, say, Germany and Hungary (Dávidházi 1998), let alone of the United States (Levine 1988) and Japan (Kishi and Bradshaw 2005). Over the past four hundred years, however, globalization has repeatedly led Shakespeareans to reconceive the culture he stands for: first England, then Britain, then Europe, then the West, and finally the world. Globalizing bardolators point to the multicultural adaptations with new settings and resonances. But those are often hostile to Shakespearean shortcomings (see, e.g., Chaudhuri and Lim 2006; Kennedy 1993; Massai 2005). Like liberalism, the Shakesphere is its own greatest critic, harking back to argument *in utramque partem*. But how does negative attention on Shakespeare—still about Shakespeare—relate to the question of canonicity? Does the same readerly freedom that inspired Shakespeare's canonization in England gain him followings in new democracies, even those rejecting the greatness of Great Britain?

Third, bardolatry is not benign. Westerners propping up Shakespeare on the world stage, even when joyful and sincere, is an act of Eurocentric narcissism, not to mention cultural imperialism and neo-colonial capitalism. With recently emboldened white supremacists now co-opting ancient Greeks and medieval Vikings, bardolatry can be read, as Kim F. Hall (1995: 266) reads the imagery of fairness and darkness in the sonnets, "as part of a white supremacist ideology." The world of Shakespearean free play of interpretation can be, like *Othello* as described by Ambereen Dadabhoy (2014: 123), "a fantasy of inclusion and a tragedy of exclusion." The recuperative turn to multicultural Shakespeares is not without traps, like obscuring indigenous voices. "Even as we turn to the margins of the Shakespearean text," Jyotsna G. Singh and Gitanjali G. Shahani (2010: 130) ask when looking at postcolonial scholarship and adaptations, "do we inadvertently affirm its centrality to

the canon?" Centering Shakespeare so strongly, Brandi Kristine Adams (2019) observes, skews the image of early modern English literature, potentially driving marginalized young scholars who do not see their interests represented away from a field that desperately needs those voices. One result, Ian Smith (2016) writes, is that Shakespeareans of color must, Othello-like, navigate daunting systems of overt and structural bias in a largely white academic culture. What are the unforeseen consequences of centering Shakespeare in the canon, including giving fuel to white supremacy?

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I will conclude with a conjecture concerning the rebound of Shakespeare's popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps it was the conservatism of the Reagan-Thatcher era shoring up its image of traditional Western greatness, but I suspect that this resurgence occurred more closely in relation to the normalization of 1960s radicalism in the 1980s. As the principles and mood of academic, philosophical poststructuralism were mainstreamed in the notion of "postmodernism"—as the people in college during the 1960s grew up and got jobs—there was, for lack of a better way to put it, a cultural realization that Shakespeare was a friend of the movement, not the enemy.

Richard Rorty (1989) describes the ideology behind the poststructural phenomenologists who denied that there were natural foundations for truth and value—Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault—as "irony." The postmodern period has been called "the age of irony" (Rosenblatt 2001). Might it be that Shakespeare's continued cultural prominence today stems from an affinity between the "irony" in his drama and the "irony" in the post-1980s Western liberal sensibility? That popular cultural paradigm takes its cues from the Anglicization of mid-twentieth-century poststructuralism, which grew out of the Romantic tradition. Significantly, those whom Rorty calls "ironists" (Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault) were reading the people (Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) who were reading the people (Herder, Schiller, Fichte, Tieck, Solger, Hegel, and the Schlegels) who were reading Shakespeare when writing their philosophy about the individual and his or her relation to the world. And while it is silly to predict the future, I suspect that

Shakespeare will remain central as long as modern audiences find his works malleable. His fortunes will only fall if he stops signifying freedom.

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