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# Shakespeare's Singularity

## Survival

Let me begin with a question. What do the following expressions have in common: 'high and mighty'; 'every inch a king'; 'the be-all and the end-all'; 'make short work'; 'the primrose path'; 'the green-eyed monster'; 'suit the action to the word'; 'more in sorrow than in anger'; 'poisoned chalice'; 'sea-change'; 'mind's eye'; 'tower of strength'; 'the milk of human kindness'; and 'the crack of doom'? They all sound proverbial. More precisely, however, they are all drawn from Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> In some ways these two observations amount to the same thing: Shakespeare is part and parcel of English-speaking culture, and not only high culture. In Britain now, phrases from the plays are still current, woven into the fabric of everyday life four hundred years after they were spoken on the early modern stage.

Like the Bible, Shakespeare is full of quotations. He also offers an endless supply of titles: *Pomp and Circumstance*, *Brave New World*, *Salad Days*, *Perchance to Dream*, *Look to the Lady*, *Cakes and Ale*, *Present Laughter*, *Sad Cypress*, *Band of Brothers*, *This Happy Breed*, *The Weaker Vessel*, *The Dogs of War*. On in London for decades in Agatha Christie's version, *The Mousetrap* originally ran for one night in *Hamlet*.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, Shakespeare has proved nearly as influential in other countries. Many Germans feel, not entirely without justification, that Shakespeare belongs to them. Slogans from Shakespeare were used to inspire soldiers in the trenches on both sides in the First World War.<sup>3</sup> The old Soviet Union made films of Shakespeare that cast the plays in a new light: in 1971 Grigori Kozintsev's version

of *King Lear* brought out its concern with the link between property and power. In Japan Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1984) drew on the Noh tradition to foreground the element in *Lear* that links power to performance.<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare is also well known in India, although his reputation there suffers from his appropriation for colonial education in the mission schools.

Cinema's love of Shakespeare has reinforced his international currency. Early films included a trailer for Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's *King John* in 1899, and an extract from Sarah Bernhardt's *Hamlet* made in 1900. Any number of silent renderings followed. In 1929 D. W. Griffith made *The Taming of the Shrew*, 'with additional dialogue by Sam Taylor'. There have been at least nine mainstream English-language *Hamlets* since the Second World War, while Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* broke records in 1996. Surely, no other dramatist quite possesses this continuing status, for better or worse? Would *Aeschylus in Love* have had the same box-office appeal, I wonder?

If not, why not? What is it that differentiates Shakespeare from other writers? One consensual answer has been the endless adaptability of his work. Modern directors reset the plays in a contemporary world and discover new meanings. But then, every generation notoriously perceives its own preoccupations in Shakespeare. He has also regularly invaded other genres: retold for children as *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb in 1807, the plays also threaded their way through a number of classic novels and a great many Victorian paintings;<sup>5</sup> nineteenth-century composers made music out of them. In these instances, as always, appropriation necessarily reworks what it borrows, testifying in the process to a vitality that is open to repeated reinscription.

Besides filming the plays, Hollywood has also adapted Shakespeare with enthusiasm, often on the basis of successful Broadway musicals. In *The Boys from Syracuse* the music of Richard Rodgers and the lyrics of Lorenz Hart re-energized the plot of *The Comedy of Errors* (Jules Levey, 1940), while Cole Porter's *Kiss Me, Kate* reframed *The Taming of the Shrew* (Jack Cummings, 1953). *The Tempest* surfaced anew as *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956) and *West Side Story* updated *Romeo and Juliet* with music by Leonard Bernstein (Robert Wise, 1961). No doubt taking its cue from the

success of *10 Things I Hate About You*, based on *The Taming of the Shrew* (Gil Junger, 1999), and *O*, which rewrote *Othello* to centre on a basketball player (Tim Blake Nelson, 2001), *She's the Man* set the plot of *Twelfth Night* in a school called Illyria (Andy Fickman, 2006). This teen flick shows Viola disguised as Sebastian in order to join a soccer team captained by Duke Orsino. Malvolio, meanwhile, turns out to be a tarantula.

Somehow, the stories stick, even when all about them changes. In 2005 the BBC rewrote Shakespeare. Preserving the names but very few of the words, four new plays took Shakespeare's titles and relocated them to our own era. *Much Ado About Nothing* made a plausible romantic comedy, set in a regional newsroom and played out between two presenters. Hero did the weather. The Shrew was a Conservative Party candidate; Macbeth was a successful chef. These plays were highly watchable, and more immediately accessible, of course, than the originals. What they demonstrated beyond doubt was that Shakespeare tells a good story. It seems that his plots include a degree of irony and a measure of suspense that has lasted into the twenty-first century. They have also generated modern spin-off novels by well-known authors, including Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1991), Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1992), and John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000).

## A black hole

How can we account for this pervasive power? What singles out Shakespeare for such continuing attention? The Victorians had an answer. Shakespeare was a genius; his plays depicted human nature in universal situations; and he inscribed timeless moral truths in immortal poetry.

Possibly. A century later, however, a sceptical academy developed radical doubts about this view. We were deluding ourselves, so the story went, misled by the Shakespeare industry, which had editions to sell and souvenirs to market. Theatres needed audiences: it was in their interest to promote Shakespeare as a reliable source of revenue. Hollywood itself was also party to this deception, it appeared, and with the same motive. The construction of Shakespeare as icon went back a long way: Britain needed a national poet – and Shakespeare

represented the obvious candidate. Generations of critics, it was urged, had not only made careers out of interpreting Shakespeare; they had also *created* the extraordinary dramatist they presented as no more than an object of knowledge. To Gary Taylor, for example, no less a figure than one of the editors of the Oxford Shakespeare, there is nothing exceptional about the plays. Shakespeare was never special, or not in the way his admirers imagine. Taylor puts it so vividly that the passage is well worth quoting:

If Shakespeare has a singularity, it is because he has become a black hole. Light, insight, intelligence, matter – all pour ceaselessly into him, as critics are drawn into the densening vortex of his reputation; they add their own weight to his increasing mass . . .

But Shakespeare himself no longer transmits visible light; his stellar energies have been trapped within the gravity well of his own reputation. We find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him or what others have left behind; he gives us back our own values . . .

Before he became a black hole, Shakespeare was a star – but never the only one in our galaxy. He was unusually but not uniquely talented . . . He was no less and no more singular than anyone else.<sup>6</sup>

## Cultural materialism

In this challenge to the Victorian veneration of the dramatist, Gary Taylor makes two related points. First, he denies Shakespeare's singularity; and second, he maintains that the plays have disappeared behind centuries of interpretation. All we can see in Shakespeare is our own image of him, he argues, and this in turn is the cumulative effect of successive rereadings. If Taylor is right, the answer to the question, 'why Shakespeare?', is to be found not in the works but in the history of their reception.

How has it come to this? The answer requires a brief excursion into recent critical debates, and readers who have no interest in the story of competing approaches to Shakespeare are invited to proceed directly to the section on 'The plays'. For the rest of us, it is

worth emphasizing that Taylor's is by no means an isolated voice. Shakespeare has been relativized. In English departments on both sides of the Atlantic a concern with historical difference has called into question traditional beliefs in human nature, universal situations, and timeless truths.

While new historicism (mostly American) has been busy pushing Shakespeare firmly back into his own period, cultural materialism (often British) has concentrated on the way the plays have been put to work since then, and enlisted or appropriated in support of specific causes. Shakespeare has been invoked to defend political passivity (*Julius Caesar* can be played to show resistance as hopeless), as well as imperialism (Prospero, the colonial oppressor, has been held up for admiration), in addition to Nazism (*Coriolanus* was a favourite in Germany between the wars). Cultural materialists have also scrutinized the education system to discover that Shakespeare has been interpreted on behalf of right-wing individualism and a divisive class structure, not to mention racism and sexism. The case is now incontrovertible: in the course of time Shakespeare has been made to speak from a range of positions, some more appalling than others, and each masquerading in its day as the truth about Eternal Man.

Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* had already removed the mask from the face of Eternal Man to reveal the history beneath it. Timeless human nature, Barthes affirmed, is an illusion societies foster to prove their own specific values and practices inevitable, or *natural*. The social arrangements that currently prevail in the West, he indicated, are one way of organizing the world; they have come into being historically, not naturally; and the attitudes they encourage are as much their consequence as their cause. The myths we live by transform history into nature in order to legitimize and perpetuate existing social practices.<sup>7</sup> Wherever 'human nature' makes its appearance, it is likely that change is being held at bay.

A historicized Shakespeare is no longer widely credited with enshrining human nature. But the evidence that the works can be so radically reread has generated not only a healthy scepticism towards any interpretation that proclaims itself definitive, but also, in extreme instances, a relativism so severe that it effectively erases

Shakespeare's own writing. If the plays can be invested with such different meanings, we have no access, purists urge, to Shakespeare, but only to what has been made of Shakespeare; there are no texts, they insist, only readings. The playwright whose meanings are reducible to existing interpretations is the Shakespeare who no longer transmits visible light, but is lost in the black hole of his own reputation.

We find in Shakespeare no more than we bring to him, Taylor asserts. I have never been able to see the force of this argument. Texts exist in their difference as the material inscription of meanings. Our interpretations are the effect of an interplay between what we bring and what we find. The sense we make of Shakespeare will not be exhaustive or final; it will be made in the present and in the light of current knowledges; but the process of making sense does not come to an end because a succession of editors, directors, critics, or examiners have previously made other senses of the same works. Whenever it pronounces the plays inaccessible behind their own celebrity, cultural materialism closes off the question why it should be *Shakespeare* who is so repeatedly adapted and enlisted, and excludes the possibility that some aspect of the plays facilitates such appropriation.

### Performance criticism

Meanwhile, other voices were announcing the disappearance of the texts from a quite different angle. Shakespeare works wonderfully in the theatre. From the gallery at the Old Vic I craned forward as a schoolgirl to catch every detail of the unfolding action. (In retrospect, I am not entirely sure in my own mind whether the primary lure was Shakespeare or Richard Burton, who played most of the star roles at that time.) Although I knew almost none of the plays in advance, I had no sense that I needed to read a synopsis, and no difficulty in following the course of events. It is on the stage that the plays come alive.

But their meanings have been ruled inaccessible, ironically, by the redefinition of the texts as *no more than* scripts for performance. While the cultural materialists were developing their case, a generation of theatre historians were arguing that the real Shakespeare

existed *only* on the stage. The surviving texts were merely spectral pointers to possible productions. A play that lives only in the theatre lives in one particular incarnation at a time, and is subject to perpetual revision. According to the strong form of this view, then, there are no texts, but only successive productions, and if we want to understand Shakespeare's continuing pre-eminence, we should look to the theatrical record.

Once again, this deflects any appeal to the plays for an answer to the question, 'why Shakespeare?' Although I have no quarrel with performance criticism, it does not, in my view, tell the whole story. The materiality of the texts is reaffirmed, however, perhaps surprisingly, by the proposition that versions of the plays printed in the dramatist's own lifetime were designed for reading. In *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* Lukas Erne makes the detailed case that the texts originally led a double life – as scripts for performance on the one hand, and as reading matter for an increasingly literate public on the other.

Although it may not have been Erne's primary project, the effect of his argument is to undermine the view that the plays have no meaning outside individual productions, and can do no more than reflect the values of any moment at which they happen to be performed. If we concede that the plays also once made at least a degree of sense on the page, we reassert their intelligibility as texts, and confirm in the process that meaning depends on what we find there, although always in conjunction with what we bring to the task of interpretation.

## The plays

Shakespeare does more, in my view, than give us back our own values. The works exist in their material inscription, and therefore in their difference from subsequent cultural norms, as well as in their resemblance to them. We can recognize the undoubted adaptability of Shakespeare, and the range of possible interpretations, without giving up on the plays, or declaring them dead and buried under the weight of their own fame. Moreover, I believe the time has come to assess whether there is something in these works that makes them especially susceptible to appropriation. In the end, we

do not have to choose. Of course Shakespeare's visibility promotes his reputation; it is also possible that the plays contribute to his continuing visibility. Whether Gary Taylor likes it or not, the plays have proved 'singular' in the specific sense that they have been singled out to an exceptionally high degree for re-creation. This might be because we are all sheep, foolish enough to follow any institutional lead without question. And it might also be thanks to some feature of the plays themselves.

That term, 'the plays themselves', cannot, of course, be invoked without very considerable caution. What we read may be some way from anything Shakespeare actually wrote. None of his works have survived in manuscript (although a passage from *Sir Thomas More* may be in his hand). Sometimes individual plays appeared in one or more quarto editions, printed in Shakespeare's own lifetime; in other cases we owe them entirely to the Folio collection of *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, assembled after his death by his colleagues in 1623. When there are consecutive early printed texts, there is no way to tell for sure how far the differences between them are the effect of revision in the theatre, with or without the dramatist's approval, as the plays reappeared in the repertory over the years. Since then, editors have modernized, modified, 'improved', and explained, to the point where Shakespeare's own designs are beyond reconstruction.

On the other hand, precisely because there are no authoritative or *authorized* versions of Shakespeare's plays, they represent paradigm instances of the unstable nature of all textuality. In practice, we have no access to the intentions of an author 'behind' any text. Interpretation of the texts works with what there is, and concedes all the undecidability that implies. Shakespeare's texts are just a little more undecidable than most.

## The language

Can we, despite the difficulties, and without reverting to simple value judgements, which are no more, in the end, than the inscription of changing tastes, find a feature of the plays that would go some way to account for Shakespeare's iconic status? Many people, when asked, 'why Shakespeare?', are likely to mention the language,

and they are surely right. Shakespeare's vocabulary is immense, his linguistic innovations way in excess of other writers', while the sheer density of the imagery can be breathtaking. 'The words drop so fast', Virginia Woolf noted in her diary, 'one can't pick them up.'<sup>8</sup> There are, first and foremost, the grand set pieces, such as Mark Antony's oration over Caesar's body (*Julius Caesar*, 3.2.74–243). It is hard not to be moved by Antony's appeal, even though the play makes clear that his rhetoric is designed to manipulate. Then there are the cosmic comparisons: 'O sun,/ Burn the great sphere thou mov'st in! Darkling stand/ The varying shore o'th' world!' (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 4.15.10–12). It is not necessary to understand medieval cosmology, with its concentric crystalline spheres each inhabited by a star, to grasp the scale of Cleopatra's pain at the sight of the dying Antony. Shakespeare could have seen the random indentations of the earth's shorelines on a globe, still a relative rarity in the period.

This image of a darkening world, perceived as if from beyond the earth, invests Cleopatra with a superhuman stature that has nothing to do with mere morality. I was brought up to worry about the relation between heroism and piety, and to question whether Shakespeare's tragic protagonists 'learned from their experience', as if tragedy were a variety of Sunday school. Some do, some don't; but most of them are rendered magnificent by the way they speak. 'There is nothing left remarkable', Cleopatra laments, 'beneath the visiting moon' (4.15.69–70). Hearing these words, could an audience doubt the grandeur of the dead Antony, however poor his moral judgement might have been?

Moreover, the breaches with convention, in many instances almost blunted for us by familiarity, can still on occasions surprise an audience, or at least a reader, who has time for reflection. When Macbeth imagines the end of the world, he sees the pity he is about to abandon not as a conventional ministering angel, but 'like a naked new-born babe,/ Striding the blast' (*Macbeth*, 1.7.21–2). This simile, apparently so pictorial, in practice almost defies visualization, but it specifies Macbeth's horror at the brutality of his own projected crime, as the vulnerable infant paradoxically rides triumphant on the gales to bear witness at the Last Judgement. The 'blast' that heralds the apocalypse may also be suggested, in

the manner of the free association that characteristically links one element of Shakespeare's vocabulary with another, by the trumpet(-tongue)s of the angels calling the dead to account (*Macbeth*, 1.7.19); it leads on to the cherubim bestriding the storm to disseminate the image of Duncan's murder, like dust invading all eyes, so that 'tears shall drown the wind' (25).

None of this, it is worth pointing out, is particularly lifelike. Not even heroes talk – or think – like this at times of stress. Indeed, many of us do not at such times talk or think at all: anxiety is more commonly registered physiologically, as is pain, in accelerated heartbeat, or tears. It is not a good idea to look to Shakespeare for realism. Critics who condemned the improbability of *Titus Andronicus*, because Marcus laments over the raped Lavinia when he should be administering first aid, were missing several points at once. On the other hand, Shakespeare's descriptions suggest a sharp eye for detail, ridiculous, as well as sublime. The 'ages of man', although they varied in number, were a commonplace of the period, but the precise comments of Jaques were not. His schoolboy, for instance, is closely observed, 'with his satchel/And shining morning face, creeping like snail/ Unwillingly to school' (*As You Like It*, 2.7.145–7). Classes began at six o'clock, and the boy's face gleams in the horizontal light of dawn. This is not from pleasure, evidently, but because it has been scoured with cold water, probably at the pump. As the day wears on, the shine will give way to grime from the schoolroom, not to mention smears of ink, as the lad struggles to construe or imitate passages of Latin.

It is extraordinarily difficult to talk *in* language about why an inventive image or a witty observation gives pleasure. But if the language we learn is the source of our world picture, a surprising collocation or an unexpected verbal association can make us see that world differently, at least for a moment. At the same time, the ultimate undecidability of meaning, the trace of an alternative that haunts all interpretation, tantalizes in itself, giving rise to new readings. I shall revert to Shakespeare's language at intervals here, and shall have more to say in the course of the book about its share in the responsibility for Shakespeare's continuing pre-eminence. But the language alone would not account for the success of the many adaptations and offshoots that discard the words of the plays. While

it contributes critically to Shakespeare's singularity, the language cannot, in my view, constitute the whole explanation.

### Familiar stories

So what does make Shakespeare's plays so extraordinarily adaptable or explain the renewability that Marjorie Garber aptly calls 'an uncanny timeliness'?<sup>9</sup> I suggest that the plays seduce audiences in the first instance by their capacity to tell good stories.

'You mean the *plots*? But surely Shakespeare didn't invent his plots?' No, on the whole he didn't. He assembled them from any number of sources: Latin poetry, Roman comedy, Chaucer, popular romance, and racy Italian narrative, among others. At the same time, he also drew on a genre he and his audiences must have known from their childhood onwards, tall tales of magic and witchcraft, apparitions, oppressed maidens and wronged wives, poor boys who win princesses, as well as heroes who kill giants or solve riddles to save lives. These are the familiar stories that we gather under the general heading of fairy tales.<sup>10</sup>

In a number of instances, Shakespeare's plays retell these traditional fables with a difference and, in doing so, they strike a chord with successive audiences, much as they must have done in their own period. Some of these same stories have been kept alive by anthologies of fairy tales, the British pantomime tradition, picture books for children, and Disney movies, but also by repeated reinscription for grown-ups in contemporary guise. Their generic characters and clear distinctions between vice and virtue offer every opportunity for rewriting in the light of changing concerns. Each time a poor heroine marries someone whose status might be expected to put him beyond reach, every time an ordinary man stands up to a huge corporation, the fairytale pattern is reinvested with modern preoccupations. Cinderella lives in Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Eyre as surely as she does in *Pretty Woman* and *Bridget Jones*. While their stories are not reducible to folk tale, when *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* or *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, or Truman stands up to the creator/director of his *Show*, they evoke 'Jack the Giant Killer' (and *Tom Jones* and *Nicholas Nickleby*) as well as 'Dick Whittington' and tiny Tom Thumb who, in his early modern

incarnation, outwitted the giant Garagantua. Perhaps, then, the adaptability of Shakespeare echoes the renewability of the fairy tales he also reinscribes.

### Fireside tales

Although Shakespeare's London was growing fast, the rest of England was still predominantly agricultural, and farming in a northern climate left dark winter nights idle. The calendar was still agricultural, too, and the long Christmas holidays were determined by the short hours of daylight and the impossibility of working frozen soil. Candles were expensive, but the fire provided light, as well as warmth. In 1590, when Shakespeare's theatrical career was at an early stage, the anonymous author of *The Cobbler of Canterbury* marketed his collection of stories by drawing an idealizing picture of their popular use: 'When the farmer is set in his chair turning (in a winter's evening) the crab in the fire, here he may hear, how his son can read, and when he hath done, laugh while his belly aches.'<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the author of the first surviving printed assembly of fairy tales in English urges his readers, 'you must imagine me to sit by a good fire, amongst a company of good fellows over a well-spiced wassail bowl of Christmas ale, telling of these merry tales which hereafter follow'.<sup>12</sup> This cheap edition of *Tom Thumb*, marketed, no doubt, by pedlars like Autolycus, is confidently ascribed to Richard Johnson, and although the earliest copy we have is dated 1621, the majority of Johnson's work was roughly contemporary with Shakespeare's.

Puritans were just as ready as the storytellers to occupy the space the calendar made available. In *The Country Man's Comfort*, which first appeared in 1588, John Rhodes offers improving songs to answer the question, 'what shall we do in the long winter nights; how shall we pass away the time on Sundays, what would you have us do in the Christmas holidays?'<sup>13</sup> But more frivolous options probably tended to prevail. In the early seventeenth century Robert Burton named the recreations available in winter. These included games (cards, dice, chess), singing and dancing, jests and riddles, and, of course, 'merry tales', mainly romances and fairy stories, 'of

errant knights, kings, queens, lovers, lords, ladies, giants, dwarves, thieves, cheaters, witches, fairies, goblins, friars, etc'.<sup>14</sup>

Fireside tales were not all cosy. Horror stories ought also to have featured on Burton's list. In 1584 the sceptical Reginald Scot, who had no time for such things, insists that people have been so frightened in their childhood by stories of 'spirits, witches, urchins, elves, hags, fairies', as well as giants, enchanters and changelings, and 'Tom Thumb' itself, that 'we are afraid of our own shadows'.<sup>15</sup> Christopher Marlowe's Jew of Malta remembers 'those old women's words,/ Who in my wealth would tell me winter's tales,/ And speak of spirits and ghosts that glide by night'.<sup>16</sup> The tradition lasted well. A painting of *A Winter Night's Tale* made by Daniel Maclise in the 1860s shows one of the listeners looking apprehensively towards the corner furthest from the fire.

Maclise depicts a whole family enthralled by the narrative. The poet, Philip Sidney maintained, tells 'a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner'. Sidney's 'poet' is a maker of fictions, and although Sidney might not have approved, at least officially, of fairy tales, he *did* like Aesop's fables.<sup>17</sup> Others probably had broader tastes. The traditional stories evidently had a special appeal for children, but Richard Johnson claims a wider audience for his popular chapbook:

The ancient tales of Tom Thumb in the old time have been the only revivers of drowsy age at midnight; old and young have with his tales chimed matins till the cocks crow in the morning; bachelors and maids with his tales have compassed the Christmas fire-block [yule log].<sup>18</sup>

Of course, not everyone lived in a cottage, especially not the ideal cottage of these nostalgic images. But there is reason to suppose that urban and elite groups were also familiar with the fireside narratives, even when they had not learnt them at their mother's knee. Reginald Scot blamed 'our mothers' maids' for transmitting them to the next generation. Looking back on his childhood in the 1630s, John Aubrey recorded how the servants sat up by the fire recounting such fictions. And, he adds, 'My nurse, Kath Bushell of Ford, was excellent at these old stories'.<sup>19</sup> No doubt *Tom Thumb* was expected to sell just as many copies in London as it did in the

country and, one way or another, might reach the homes of both the well-to-do and the poor.

### Old wives

As Marlowe's protagonist and Maclise's painting indicate, these fables were the special province of women. This tradition has a long ancestry. It was while they were weaving and spinning that Ovid's daughters of Minyas told some of the best tales in the *Metamorphoses*, including 'Pyramus and Thisbe'. Nearly two thousand years later, Maclise's spellbinding old woman sits behind her spinning wheel, casting a shadow that hints at the witchcraft involved in relating a story. Women's household tasks, tedious and repetitive as many of them must have been, were lightened by spinning good yarns, and passing them on as 'gossip'. The Cobbler of Canterbury, whose printed tales are not English fairy stories but translations from Boccaccio, goes on to affirm that 'the old wives' who have hitherto confined their attention to Robin Hood and other native folk heroes 'may here learn a tale to tell amongst their gossips'.<sup>20</sup> The example of an 'Old Wives' Tale' he himself includes is preceded by a description of the teller, a toothless, bristly old woman, who likes to gossip over a drink. Edmund Spenser's old wife, Mother Hubberd, by contrast, is 'a good old woman', although she speaks bluntly. Mother Hubberd tells a moralizing fable of a fox and an ape.<sup>21</sup>

Evidently, the ascription of these stories to old wives is not always derogatory. Burton exemplifies the merry tales he lists as winter recreation with an instance he could expect his readers to remember: 'such as the old woman told of Psyche in Apuleius'. This crone's captivating story of Cupid and Psyche, told to cheer up a maiden abducted by thieves, was a favourite of Shakespeare's period. The youngest of three sisters, the old woman recounts, Psyche is cursed for her beauty and doomed to marry a hideous serpent. She is told she must never look at her husband, who shares her bed only in darkness and vanishes before day. Even so, she falls in love with this unseen partner. Urged to breach the rule by her envious elder sisters, however, one night she lights the lamp, only to reveal the god of love himself lying beside her. Cupid flies away at once, but Psyche,

more deeply in love now than before, pursues him through the world. To regain the god, she must complete a series of impossible tasks. Creatures and objects miraculously take pity on her, and in the end she fulfils all the obligations. Cupid appeals to the king of the gods, who makes Psyche immortal, and they live happily ever after.<sup>22</sup>

The story demonstrates the close relationship between romance and fairy tale. Although 'Cupid and Psyche' is no longer part of our repertoire, the pattern of events is familiar to us from the stories of 'Beauty and the Beast', 'Cinderella', and others who win through, against the odds, with magical help. Many of these fairy tales were equally familiar in Shakespeare's period. A variant of 'Beauty and the Beast' features in Giovanni Francesco Straparola's mid-sixteenth-century Italian collection of stories, *Le piacevoli notti*; 'Cinderella' itself can be traced back at least a thousand years.

There is always a difficulty, of course, in dating fireside tales precisely: their origins are literally lost, since they generally belong initially to an oral tradition. We know about their history only when they make their way into the written record. But there are enough traces of specific stories to guess that many fairy tales would have been familiar to the range of social classes that made up Shakespeare's audience, whether they learnt them from their mothers and grandmothers, from nurses and servants, or from printed texts.

### Shakespearean allusions

How familiar were these fables to Shakespeare himself? Very, I shall propose, and the main evidence lies in the plots of the plays themselves. But a number of incidental allusions confirm that he knew – and assumed his audience would know – some of the tales in oral circulation at that time. For instance, it seems that childhood stories resurface in madness. 'They say the owl was a baker's daughter', intones the crazed Ophelia (*Hamlet*, 4.5.42–3), alluding to a folk tale about a young woman turned into a bird for withholding bread

from Jesus.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Poor Tom shows that he knows what folk-tale ogres conventionally say:

Child Rowland to the dark tower came,  
His word was still, 'Fie, foh and fum,  
I smell the blood of a British man'. (*King Lear*, 3.4.178–80)

I remember a similar incantation from 'Jack the Giant Killer' at the moment when the giant registers the approach of his young antagonist.<sup>24</sup> Richard Johnson ascribes much the same formula to Garagantua as he senses the presence of Tom Thumb.<sup>25</sup>

Fairytales motifs are to a high degree interchangeable.<sup>26</sup> The Jack of my childhood was a peasant variant of Poor Tom's noble Child Rowland, youngest of three sons, who set out to rescue his sister from the Dark Tower of the King of Elfland. Instructed by Merlin, Rowland traced his sister to a room in the Tower, but the King of Elfland burst in, saying, 'Fee, fi, foh, fum, / I smell the blood of a Christian man . . .'. Rowland defeated the king in combat and compelled him to release his sister and his two elder brothers.<sup>27</sup>

Ogres recur elsewhere in Shakespeare. Celia mentions Gargantua's huge mouth (*As You Like It*, 3.2.222). It is possible that Shakespeare knew Rabelais' giant in the original French, but as Richard Johnson's *Tom Thumb* indicates, 'Garagantua' had a place in English popular culture. Meanwhile, Bottom teases little Mustardseed by reworking a dish of roast beef with mustard as a tale of a flesh-eating giant and his diminutive prey (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 3.1.183–5).

Many of these references are ironic or comic, but they assume a familiarity with the tales they deprecate. When Benedick mocks Claudio's reluctance to confess he is in love, 'Like the old tale, my lord: "It is not so, nor 'twas not so: but indeed, God forbid it should be so"' (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 1.1.205–6), his words include a blood-curdling allusion to marriage. Benedick is quoting Mr Fox, an early version of Bluebeard, the serial-killer husband of folk tale, who repeatedly denies his crimes with this refrain.<sup>28</sup> And when the man in the moon features in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.134) and *The Tempest* (2.2.136–7), the plays allude to the story of the thief who was sent there as a punishment for gathering sticks of thorn on a Sunday.<sup>29</sup>

## Neglect

There has not been a great deal of critical interest in Shakespeare's links with such fireside tales. The Victorians of the folklore revival took the issue seriously,<sup>30</sup> and incidental later references show that their work made some impact on twentieth-century Shakespeare critics, as well as folklorists. But the divergence between these two disciplines has often combined with a distrust of fairy tales to distance Shakespeare from such childish associations.

The issue is realism. 'Fairy tale' is more or less synonymous with untrue, implausible, unreal; old wives' tales are by definition unlikely, based on terrors of the night, wish-fulfillments, dreams. How could a great dramatist have any connection with such improbabilities? From Coleridge to A. C. Bradley and beyond, Shakespeare's plays were understood as if they were nineteenth-century novels, aspiring to depict complex characters in convincing settings and situations. Inheriting this tradition, twentieth-century critics conceded an element of fantasy only where the evidence was inescapable – in *Macbeth*, for example, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. When novelistic criticism gave way to historicism, the plays were read alongside early modern social practices, at the expense of their intertextual affiliations. Even if the 'truth' they told was now historically relative, the plays were still expected to reflect reality.

But a century of modernism has itself relegated realism to soap opera, which does it perfectly well. Only anachronism confines Shakespeare to a mode that would have had very little meaning in his own time. Now, nearly a hundred years after James Joyce, fifty years after Samuel Beckett, or in the light of Tom Stoppard, we are surely ready to see that fiction may be exactly the place for fears, anxieties, dreams, and desires. Those of the past may not be identical with ours in the present, but the adaptability Shakespeare shares with fairy tale has allowed successive generations to uncover their own concerns in the fictions of a vanished epoch.

## Peele

Shakespeare's culture was more ambivalent towards fairy stories than most of his earnest twentieth-century academic interpreters

allowed. In *The Old Wives Tale* George Peele makes entertaining comedy precisely out of the naivety of fireside narratives. Three town lads, lost in the woods after dark, take shelter in the cottage of an old smith and his wife, Madge. What shall they do to pass the time, the smith wonders: 'Lay a crab in the fire to roast for lamb's-wool' (mulled ale), or play cards, perhaps? After singing a song, the boys opt for a story, 'Look you, gammer, of the giant and the king's daughter and I know not what'. Madge embarks on her tale about a beautiful princess, 'as white as snow and as red as blood',<sup>31</sup> but the old wife makes such a hash of it, forgetting the details and muddling the order of events, that the characters themselves come on to enact the rest of the story. What follows weaves together several old and highly improbable folk tales in an affectionate parody of the genre's inconsequentiality, and the play manages to bring the whole farrago to a happy resolution in the end.

*The Old Wives Tale* was printed in 1595, but probably performed earlier, in the late 1580s or early 1590s, when Shakespeare's career was getting under way. The play retells fairy tales with an ironic difference, distancing itself from the very material it also indulges. And it positively celebrates its own unlikelihood.

## Royal entertainments

What was good enough for Peele was also good enough, it seems, for more than one queen. In 1591 Elizabeth I visited Elvetham, one of the houses belonging to Sir Edward Seymour, ninth Earl of Hertford. As was the custom on such royal occasions, her host put on the most lavish pageantry to welcome his sovereign. This mainly drew on classical mythology, but on the morning of the fourth day, as soon as Elizabeth was ready to look out of the window, she was greeted by the Fairy Queen, who paused in a dance with her maidens to salute her fellow ruler. There was enough allusion to the fairies' subterranean life and their nightly rings to ground this courtly episode in popular lore. The Fairy Queen presented the mortal monarch with a chaplet of flowers given her by Oberon, king of the fairies, and joined in a part song in praise of Eliza. Her majesty was so delighted that she asked to hear it again.<sup>32</sup>

By now a salutation from the fairies had become a feature of royal progresses. At Woodstock in 1575 the Queen of the Fairies appeared to Elizabeth in a wagon of state drawn by six little boys. As a token of her admiration, she presented the Queen with a richly embroidered gown. Three years later, as Elizabeth left Norwich, she was hailed by seven fairies, played by boys, who came out of a hedge to dance before her on the grass. The gods had already honoured her; should the spirits of the air do less? The design of the author, Thomas Churchyard, was to amuse the Queen, he records.<sup>33</sup>

It seems, then, that while the classical deities took precedence over the native fairies, the humbler local spirits were also worthy of inclusion. Even Ben Jonson, who deplored improbability on the stage, felt impelled to invoke the fairy queen in the entertainment he devised to meet the new Queen Anne at Althorp as she made her way south to join James I in 1603. Jonson's Queen Mab helps or hinders the churning in the dairy, pinches young women who neglect the housework, and misleads midwives into ponds at night. What the young Danish consort from Scotland made of this quint-essentially English fairy queen, with the anarchic propensities of Shakespeare's Puck, is not recorded.<sup>34</sup>

Whether coincidentally or not, the folktale encounter at Elvetham in 1591 followed the publication the year before of the first three books of Edmund Spenser's epic tribute to Elizabeth herself, *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser's poem draws on a range of sources, including medieval literary romance, but the world it depicts includes fairytale giants and dragons, as well as wicked witches and evil enchanters, among its knights and ladies drawn from the Arthurian narratives. Properly habited, old wives' tales could, it seems, be presented at court without incongruity.

## Enchantment

In all these instances, the popular fireside stories are reinscribed with significant differences. Disparaged at the time as trivial, and despised for their simple manner, fairy tales are put, nevertheless, to serious work in early modern texts that are neither inconsequential nor artless. The differences contribute as much as the parallels to the meanings of the texts. In Shakespeare's case, I shall propose,

the resemblances of the plays to fairy tales constitute the secret of both their familiarity and their adaptability. The distinctions, meanwhile, between the plays and these models invest them with another kind of magic. A conjunction between tradition and novelty in Shakespeare's plays exercises an enchantment at once renewable and altogether singular.

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