

Performances of Character: Shakespeare, Theatre, and Critical Practice

2003-2006

Le Personnage en jeu: Shakespeare, le théâtre, et la critique littéraire

"Character" is a word with enormous resonance in theatrical practice, performance criticism and theory, and literary and historical scholarship. The task undertaken by the Shakespeare and Performance Research Team over the three-year period of the FQRSC grant is to re-evaluate the utility of the concept of character, especially its capacity to serve as a point of exchange between theatrical and critical approaches to Shakespeare. One of the questions that we will try to answer is, "What is character?" To address this central problem--and to begin to provide an adequate characterological vocabulary--it will be necessary to study the history, the formal properties, and the diverse institutional settings of Shakespearean character, an undertaking which, we believe, can best be accomplished by an interdisciplinary team of researchers. This encounter among critics, theorists, theatre historians, and theatre practitioners will challenge settled beliefs on all sides, enliven the idea of character in the theatre and the academy, and serve to advance our understanding of Shakespeare, theatre, and the role of character in the life of both culture and the individual subject.

We find the notion of character involved in, and even at the very centre of, numerous significant movements in the history of Shakespearean criticism. Over the course of the twentieth century the subject developed into an important flashpoint, and attitudes toward character-focused criticism became significant markers between generations of critics. At the turn of the century, Richard Moulton's *The Moral System of Shakespeare* (1903) and especially A.C. Bradley's monumental *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) summed up a tradition of characterological criticism that celebrated Shakespeare's ability to portray psychological depth, a tradition that reached back to the eighteenth century, and the time of Samuel Johnson. The first major statement rejecting this approach is L.C. Knights's famous essay "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" (1933), which directs the reader away from what Knights sees as irresponsible speculation about the psychological mechanics of fictional characters, and toward an emphasis on a play's theme, literary language, and form.

The interpretive priorities of Knights and the "New Criticism" gave way in the latter half of the twentieth century to critical approaches influenced by poststructuralism such as the "New Historicism," cultural materialism, materialist feminism, and postcolonialism. Among the leading figures in this more recent attack on characterological criticism are Catherine Belsey, Jonathan Dollimore, and Jonathan Goldberg. Their case against character has been two-pronged: it has developed a theoretical argument about the impossibility of inward, agential personhood altogether, especially given the way persons (according to the argument) are produced by, or are effects of, infantile fantasies of wholeness and the social, linguistic, and ideological determinations of individual identity.

It has also elaborated an historicist argument, according to which inwardness as we understand and experience it did not exist in the early modern period (and therefore interpretations of Shakespeare in terms of an inward, agential personhood are simply anachronistic, not to mention politically retrograde).

In spite of the fact that the end of the twentieth century has seen something of a resurgence of interest in character criticism, which has been conducted with varying degrees of theoretical sophistication by scholars such as Harry Berger, Jr, Harold Bloom, Michael Bristol, Stanley Cavell, Anthony Dawson, Christy Desmet, Katharine Maus, and Bert States, the centre of interest in academic criticism of Shakespeare has nevertheless moved elsewhere--focusing on larger political structures and historical movements and remaining mostly uninterested in character except insofar as particular characters can be seen to embody features of the larger, transpersonal spheres of politics and history. It is striking that one of the standard literary reference works, *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago, 1990), touches on a wide range of topics but includes no discussion of character.

This turning away from the question of character has been less pronounced in the theatrical setting, where an emphasis on character has remained prominent. This does not mean, of course, that the theatre has not struggled with the issues surrounding character; indeed some of the most powerful critiques, whether in discursive or dramatic form, of the idea of inward characterization have come from theatre professionals such as Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, and Charles Marowitz. As Herb Weil has recently noted, much greater attention needs to be paid to the contributions made by the theatre and the performance environment in our attempts to understand Shakespearean character.

Our main critical goal is to invoke this theatrical emphasis in order to provoke a rethinking of Shakespeare studies in general. A reconsideration of character by way of theatrical practice will, we believe, introduce productive ways of understanding Shakespeare's innovations in dramatic style and technique and also clarify the long-term artistic and cultural life and influence of his characters.

An important aspect of the project has to do with the fact that there are differences of opinion among the members of the team about how to interpret Shakespeare's characters, whether in literary, historical, theoretical, or theatrical frames of reference. Not surprisingly, the different approaches that exist within the academy are also represented within the group. Some team members believe that a reconstructed idea of dramatic character (with its attendant inwardness, agency, and awareness of self and others) will enrich Shakespeare studies and illuminate Shakespeare's relationship with modernity. Others of us are inclined to view inward, agential character as an instrument of power first of all--a means of "naturalizing" relations of domination. In this view, performing or reading Shakespeare in terms of his characters serves to naturalize social power by making dominance and submission seem like an outward expression of the inward natures of individuals and groups.

We will retain the element of debate about character, subjectivity, and power that has energized Shakespeare studies (and many other fields in the Humanities) over the past three decades, but we will attempt to surmount the impasse that has come to characterize the quarrel between "humanism" and "materialism." The composition of the team--or, rather, the fact that we are a team--and the format of the research program will facilitate this opening of the field to more creative exchanges. Especially important is the particular interdisciplinary orientation of the project, since the theoretical arguments, of whatever stripe, that are brought to the table will have to reckon with the historical record of theatrical performance (not to mention the history of reading Shakespeare), and they will also have to take account of the exigencies and experiences of acting Shakespeare's characters. The exchange of ideas will also incite the team members on the theatre side to go further toward theorizing their own practice. Beyond that, the study of the theory and history of character will serve the interests of performance roughly in the same way that the study of anatomy served the artists of Renaissance Florence, where the understanding of the skeletal and muscular structures beneath the skin rendered the artistic representation of the human figure more verisimilar and meaningful.

The total effect of this meeting of differing approaches and disciplines will be to produce a dialogical (in terms of theoretical viewpoint), historically specific, and thickly described account of Shakespearean character. Overall, the project will undertake to explain how Shakespeare developed his techniques of characterization in the first place, how subsequent generations of spectators and readers have come to identify and to engage with his characters, and how theatre practitioners have often deepened but have also sometimes challenged these forms of engagement. To elaborate a long historical view along these lines is to begin to understand the importance of the affective and ethical dimension of Shakespearean drama--a specifically aesthetic dimension--in the emergence of modern ideas about personhood and society.

Finally, the team's openness to a range of approaches is connected to a collective aspiration, which is to make our work innovative, not by putting aside theoretical assumptions or standards of scholarly verification, but by subjecting these assumptions and standards to challenges from within critical practice itself, from the position of theatrical practice, and from the vantage point of a broadly constituted vernacular criticism--that is, from the viewpoints of the large, public, non-academic audience and readership of Shakespeare's plays.

In order to fulfill the primary objective of re-thinking Shakespearean character in criticism and performance, the work of the Shakespeare Research Team will be organized under three general headings, each of which will serve to direct a year's work. These are (1) Theory of Shakespearean Character, (2) Early Modern Contexts of Shakespearean Character, and (3) Shakespearean Character from the Renaissance to the Present.

Year 1, with its theoretical emphasis, will help establish the foundation for the largely historical work of years 2 and 3. We will begin by establishing a working theory of Shakespearean character, one that takes into account ethical criticism, political criticism, and theatrical practice--three fields normally separated by divergent ideological and disciplinary horizons. In a series of colloquia and workshops we will debate the

competing claims of the ethical emphasis (which features a close-up focus on character and is interested in the moral agency and expressive capacity of particularly situated persons) and the political emphasis (which tends to pay attention to characters as exempla of the workings of language and ideology). Furthermore, we plan to examine this argument as it occurs not only in criticism, but in the domain of theatrical practice as well. Over the course of the year, we also plan to canvas issues that attend on the broader topic, such as the relationship between language (as social system and as expressive register) and character, the relationship between fictional characters and real persons, and the embodiment of character in performance vis-à-vis the virtuality of characters in literature.

Year 2 will develop an account of Shakespearean character in relation to early modern society and ideology, the early modern field of dramatic and literary production, and the literary and theatrical antecedents of the Shakespearean theatre. It is important to note that there is no extended study of the Renaissance origins of Shakespearean characterization; the work of Year 2 will begin to address this important, largely unexamined dimension of literary and theatrical history. In addition to adumbrating a description of the competitive field of early modern playing and playwriting, the project of writing the early history of Shakespearean characterization includes the following topics: the development and definition of acting styles, the English use of boy actors, which was a significant divergence from European practice, the traffic between literary and theatrical genres, the importation of European literature and theatrical innovations, the relationship between theatrical space and character, and the connection between stage music and character. Also important is the relationship between Shakespeare's plays and early modern discourses of the person--both those concerned with the definition and constitution of persons, such as Medicine, Law, and Theology and those that model individual self-description, such as epistolary, confessional, and essayistic forms of writing.

Building upon the theoretical and local historical inquiry of years 1 and 2 respectively, year 3 will begin to develop an account of Shakespeare's characters, in the theatre and in culture, over the long term. The account will be selective but representative, most attention being paid to the Restoration and eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a British context, and to twentieth-century American, Canadian, and Québec productions of Shakespeare in a range of forms. A central question will have to do with the nature of the relationship between characterization in Shakespeare's playhouse and later versions of the characters. We will seek to explain how the original versions (and the conditions of production that are sedimented in those versions) have tended to determine the conditions of interpretive possibility for subsequent performers, and also how later theatres have revised, transvalued, or indeed overturned the original paradigms. While there are a number of important studies of the history of particular characters such as Shylock or Caliban, there has been no systematic study of the topic, and especially no study that has measured the long history of the acting of characters such as Shylock and Caliban against an account of early modern styles of characterization.