

## Scholarship and Its Phantoms: Anthony Burgess's *Shakespeare* and "fin de siècle" Conceptions of Genius

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This short article is a revised version of a paper given on the occasion of the Fifth Conference of the European Society for the Study of English held at the University of Helsinki in August 2000. Professor François Laroque of La Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris 3) had invited me to address an audience of renowned authorities in the small world of Shakespeare specialists. Here I was, then, true to a promise made perhaps too rapidly to a dear friend, engaged in a workshop tantalizingly called "Fin de siècle Shakespeare," suddenly finding myself in the very uncomfortable position of the layman willing to defend a thesis no one in the audience was prepared to hear, and understandably so. For the problem was—and still is—that my presence was slightly, if not totally, incongruous. As everybody well knew, I am *not* a Renaissance expert. I spoke then, and write now, as a professor of 19th and 20th-century British literature *with a point of view*.

My view of Shakespeare is inevitably constrained by the position I occupy and the encyclopedia that it implies: first, by my knowledge of modern literature and, second, by my familiarity with "fin-de-siècle" critical theory, notably the contemporary issues raised in the field of biographical writing.<sup>1</sup> My concern is evidently not with Shakespeare's work as such, but with the man himself, not the author, though, but the *representation* of a man whose "genius" has become, as Andreas Höfele of Heidelberg wittily observed in the course of the seminar, "the Coca Cola of culture."<sup>2</sup> The thesis I wish to put forward is in fact dictated to me by a close reading of Anthony Burgess's serious biography of the Bard, *Shakespeare*, first published in 1970<sup>3</sup> (when I say "serious," I have in mind the novelistic biography, *Nothing Like the Sun* [1964], devoted mainly to the sexual aspects of the playwright's amorous life). The central issue of my paper is the same

as Höfele's: how do we determine cultural significance? My German colleague chose what I would call a sociological approach; for my part, I shall attempt to tackle the same issue of Shakespeare's resilient "genius" from a more literary point of view. I propose to sum up my point in the following two assumptions, which Burgess's reconstruction of "Shakespeare" seems to rely upon:

*Assumption 1:* There is no original Author in *Shakespeare*, the biography. By which I mean two things: a) that the biographer *produces* the two authors, both himself and Shakespeare; b) that he produces the two figures as two *undistinguishable identities*. It is clear from the text itself, that is, from its rhetorical strategy, that Burgess is prone to view Shakespeare as his own past self:

We would not want to call Milton Jack, but Shakespeare seems to ask for an intimacy of address. [. . .] From now on we shall say Will and not William. (24)

The phonetic proximity of "we" and "Will" is symptomatic of such a confusion. Further in the text (177ff.), this confusion contaminates the whole narrative: in an attempt at reconstructing the workings of the mind of Shakespeare, the biographical narrator speaks in *Shakespeare's place*, as if he were inside the poet's skull, reacting both to external events and internal movements of the mind he cannot possibly have witnessed or experienced. In other words, Burgess—whose real name, we should remember, was John Wilson—puts himself in the place of a great 'biographical adventurer'—John (Dover) Wilson?—through an act of absolute "imposture":<sup>4</sup> he becomes "himself," that is the author of another author's life, as a Shakespearean production. In a sense, John Wilson says "we" because he is indeed Will's son, and at the same time he comes to existence as the one who gives life to the dead poet, as Shakespeare's father, whose name, we remember, was also John. It appears therefore that biographical authority is nothing but an effect of the text. And it is also an effect of Burgess's autobiographical narrativization of himself. In an interview made public in 1979, Burgess strongly insisted on his Catholic origins and curiously noted that one of his ancestors, also named John Wilson, had been persecuted for his faith in the Roman doctrine under the reign of

Queen Elizabeth, a fate quite similar, according to a significant number of critics, to that of Shakespeare's recusant father.<sup>5</sup> The ghost story of scholarly research is taking shape. Burgess does not place himself as a *spectator* of Shakespeare's life and work: he comes to life, he comes to "himself," as if he were spoken by a voice that is not "purely" his. Which leads me to my second assumption.

*Assumption 2:* In fact, I can see a crucial objection to my first assumption (according to which there would be no original author in this life of Shakespeare). The objection could be formulated as follows: Is Burgess not spoken by another authority, an invisible authority, I mean Shakespeare's authority? This, of course, takes us back to the same old question of influence, i.e. of Shakespeare's force as the original signature behind the rest of British literature in the last four centuries. My second assumption runs up against this theory. For Shakespeare's voice is not here an author's voice. Burgess views Shakespeare as the voice of literature itself. The kind of authority that is thus at stake is a "fin-de-siècle" authority: it is an authority that cannot be assigned to residence, an authority that is invisible and nomadic, an authority that, following Derrida, I shall therefore call "spectral."<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare's plays are never presented as original pieces; rather, they always appear to be the work of a "lucid *bricoleur*,"<sup>7</sup> who invariably finds his inspiration in the words of others, while at the same time adapting his own production to a given situation:

Let us imagine that Will starts to translate the *Menaechmi* of Plautus into English. Like other creative artists, he becomes bored with following another man, word by word, and ends with a translation that is, though close to the original in theme, characters, general movement, yet very different in its deployment of words—a translation so free as to develop into an original work [. . .]. Starting to write the *Menaechmi* in English, he ends up with *The Comedy of Errors*. (45)

The overwhelming sentiment one is left with is that Shakespeare is never perceived as being *quite himself*. Burgess's lexical choices are very interesting here: according to him, Shakespeare does not have "a gift," he has "a skill" (39), which consists mainly in

finishing plays started by others, brightening up old stuff with fresh topical references, throwing in new rhetorical monologues to swell the lungs of the star performer. (84)

In other words—the words of a “fin-de-siècle” academic—Shakespeare’s life is construed as a “dialogic” event: life is made possible by the existence of the other, or more precisely, by the existence of the other’s word.<sup>8</sup> “Shakespeare’s” authority is in fact a linguistic construction, owing its richness to the traces left in it by ancient masters, but also to the competitive relation that ties it to the contemporary production of other playwrights, most prominently among them Greene and Marlowe. Above all, however, Shakespeare’s authority is due to *the state of the English language itself*, a language still in the making, still open to invention and revision, in short, Burgess tells us, a language “not fixed and elegant and controlled by academics” (14-15) and the potentialities of which the “author” knows how to explore. “Shakespeare” is a child of language, a child of what Burgess views as “a melting pot”: again, authority is a linguistic construct, made possible by English itself, then “coarsely rich and ready for any adventures that would make it richer. English was a Golden Hind” (14).

Shakespeare’s ability to survive in a globalized landscape is not therefore to be explained in terms of world-wide distribution and clever commercialising. What Burgess’s book tells us is that the enduring cultural significance of “Shakespeare” is due to an initial “im-posture.” This approach has the merit of avoiding at least two pitfalls: a) the temptation to essentialize the genius of Shakespeare, with all the ideological appropriations this might entail; b) the temptation to quantify Shakespeare’s genius in terms of produced effects, i.e. in terms of the number and intensity of the actions and reactions it provokes.<sup>9</sup> Burgess’s *Shakespeare* now brings me to two conclusions:

*Conclusion 1: The individual self is never unproblematic and never self-explanatory, much less an irreducible metaphysical substance.* Shakespeare’s biographer never considers his author as an autonomous individual, or, if you prefer, as an original genius. The narrative strategy he constantly adopts is that of the contextualist placement. This is in fact a very pragmatic conception of subjectivity: the author himself appears as *an effect* of a mass

of discourses that interpellate him and produce him through interpellation. "Shakespeare" is effectuated by layers of fundamental narrative forms that are universal and preexist his own emergence, but the way those forms are styled and filled in with content depend on particular historical conventions of time and place. As the author grows more mature, he responds more and more to historical contingencies (political motives, architectural constraints, financial worries, etc.). This is where Burgess's contextualist view of human conduct is most effective: Shakespeare's self, more than any other, is considered to be an *evolving construction*; i.e. it emerges out of continual social interaction in the course of time. There is therefore no original Shakespeare in Burgess's life of the Bard: what he calls "Shakespeare" is in fact *a lacuna* to be filled in the great pool of intersubjective selfhood. Shakespeare's genius, his unique self, is precisely this capacity to exist as such a lacuna. This view is undeniably that of a postmodernist novelist, whose fascination for the polyphonous is attested in the critical work he dedicated to James Joyce (*Here Comes Everybody*, 1965), but also of course in his own literary production. Which leads me to my second conclusion.

*Conclusion 2: The biographer himself is never quite himself.* He also is preceded by ghosts that speak through him and "dis-place" his authority. Burgess, too, is an effect of the words of the others. His *Shakespeare* is necessarily born from former interpretations of Shakespeare's life, serious (Harris and Brown, Wilson and Rowse, etc.) and less serious (Aubrey, Kipling, Wilde, Joyce). Since the "serious" ones are easily verifiable,<sup>10</sup> I choose to concentrate on the "less serious." What the specialist of modern fiction cannot fail to recognize is the insisting presence of another text behind the text, a text that entirely determines Burgess's biographical approach. This text is Joyce's "Scylla and Charybdis" chapter in *Ulysses*. This famous chapter clearly haunts Burgess's text, especially on page 176, when Hamlet's name is associated with that of Shakespeare's dead son, Hamnet.<sup>11</sup> But if *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*—in the same interview with Aggeler, Burgess mentioned his Irish grandmother's name: Finnegan—are the two novelistic filters through which the biographical reconstruction of "truth" is achieved, in fact the one textual phantom Burgess's biography is haunted

by is purely Shakespearean. Burgess's conception of life is to be found nowhere but in *Hamlet*, the interpretation of which is constrained by Joyce's vision of father-son relationships. Is *Hamlet* not the text *par excellence* about usurpation, parricide, lost regal authority and wrong relations of transmission from generation to generation? I can now reach my main point: *the task of the "fin-de-siècle" biographer is to let the ghost speak, to speak to it, to have it speak, to speak with it.* This second aspect of Burgess's conception of authority, i.e. this "deferral" of the biographer's own "true" voice is precisely what the scholar, the expert, the professor, cannot perform. Such a performance is the privilege of the postmodernist artist, who, unlike Horatio, does not seek to arrest the phantom and stabilize its speech.

The thesis I have just put forward—Burgess's life of Shakespeare is a haunted house which, in a true "fin-de-siècle" fashion, raises the problematic status of textual authority—finally leads me to a series of highly disturbing questions, which will serve as a general conclusion to my paper. It usually goes without saying that a knowledge of the "classics" is indispensable to the modernist. Less obvious is the reverse: what use was there in having someone like me address an international Shakespeare conference? I hope I convinced a few of my eminent colleagues that a professor of contemporary literature could at times be useful to the specialist, and, to be quite frank about it, that Professor Laroque knew what he was doing. The modernist will immediately see that Burgess's reconstruction of Shakespeare's life is dependent on a number of novelistic lives of the Bard, most prominently among them Joyce's theory of paternity as a "legal fiction," but I am not sure this was big news—in fact, all Shakespearians know Joyce's chapter in *Ulysses*. My iconoclastic point of view as a "fin-de-siècle" specialist sought to raise a number of more fundamental issues concerning scholarship and its limits.

For it seems to me Burgess's life of Shakespeare touches on something that concerns us all as "fin-de-siècle" interpreters of the text. What I really mean is: *on which side is seriousness?* On which side the truth of Shakespeare? Are we ready to play the game of fiction? Are we willing to abandon ourselves to the play of endless specularities? I am not only asking the

question of whether Burgess's *Shakespeare* should be placed on the shelves of serious criticism. The question engages nothing less than the conception we have of ourselves as active participants in cultural history. Allow me, to finish, to put things in an unusually straightforward manner: can we tolerate what decisively places itself outside the scope of the "anxiety of influence"? Can we, in fact, understand *the ethics* of the biographer who chooses to be nothing but the effect of the absolute absorption of the precursor?

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See *La Biographie littéraire en Angleterre*, ed. F. Regard (Saint-Etienne: PUSE, 1998), abstracts in English.

<sup>2</sup>Höfele's own paper was entitled "Millennial Shakespeare: Profile of a Megastar." My German colleague was kind enough to send me a copy of his lecture, to which my present paper is both a tribute and a rejoinder.

<sup>3</sup>Rpt. London: Vintage, 1996. All further references to this edition.

<sup>4</sup>I borrow the concept from Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 89ff.

<sup>5</sup>See G. Aggeler, *Anthony Burgess: The Artist as Novelist* (U of Alabama P, 1979) 3.

<sup>6</sup>J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993) 16.

<sup>7</sup>F. Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World*, trans. J. Loyd (Cambridge: CUP, 1998) 191.

<sup>8</sup>See M. Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990) passim.

<sup>9</sup>See Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997) 191.

<sup>10</sup>See S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 487, 560-61.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922), ed. J. Johnson (Oxford: OUP, 1993) 183.