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CRITICISM

Introduction: Mobilizing Shakespeare During the Great War

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This introduction situates this special issue in the context of ongoing debates surrounding the “cultural mobilization” of Shakespeare during the Great War. The key areas of these debates include the degree to which Shakespeare could successfully be appropriated during the war for totalizing – nationalist and imperialist – purposes; the challenges to such appropriations (for instance, from the colonized nations); ideological fractures produced by seeing Shakespeare, simultaneously, as “universal” and “national”; and tensions between “global” and “local”, “public” and “private” uses of Shakespeare.

Keywords: cultural mobilization; appropriation; nationalism; imperialism; global; local; public; private

In this year, which marks the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War and the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth, it seems timely to re-examine the connections between Shakespeare and that first global conflict. This is especially important in view of the recent upsurge of critical interest in the broader topic of Shakespeare and war, and in multidisciplinary investigations of the intersections of war, cultural memory, and identity.¹ The Great War was the first of “the great conflicts which scarred the twentieth century and made it of necessity into a memorial century” (Kidd and Murdoch, “Introduction” 2), and which “set in motion these enduring centrifugal and centripetal forces, propelling us away from and towards a unified Europe” (Winter 1). Meanwhile, Shakespeare has long been recognized as “the paradigmatic figure of literary authority” (Dobson 2), who can be usefully employed to support a variety of ideological enterprises, among them those which contribute to “the nation’s cultural capital” (Dobson 8). Given the centrality of both the Great War and Shakespeare to the issues of memory, nation, and cultural identity, it is important to continue investigating the intersections between the two in search of further insights into these key concerns which are still relevant today.

The existing accounts of Shakespeare and the Great War can be usefully approached through Matthew C. Hendley’s concept of “cultural mobilization” (25). Hendley builds on John Horne’s perceptive analysis of the ways in which a nation’s support for the war effort during the Great War was sought and obtained not only through the means of coercive state apparatuses, but – perhaps more importantly – through “popular legitimization” intended to generate “a sense of belonging to a densely defined national community” with “distinctive values, ways of life and political institutions” (Horne 2). Thus, Horne argues, “[n]ational mobilization was ... an essentially cultural and political

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process” (3). Hendley, as well as critics such as Balz Engler, Werner Habicht, Richard Foulkes, Jonathan Bate, Graham Holderness, Lynn Walhout Hinojosa, and Clara Calvo (“Fighting over Shakespeare”), convincingly demonstrates that during the Great War Shakespeare was aggressively appropriated by both Britain and Germany to lend cultural authority to their respective causes. In other words, his powerful cultural status was mobilized in a variety of ways – from newspaper articles, through sermons, to propagandistic performances and publications – in order to legitimize the cultural values and the nationalistic and imperialist goals of both sides of the conflict. As the title of Calvo’s article succinctly summarizes, Britain and Germany were fighting over Shakespeare in order to claim him in support of their respective versions of patriotism.²

However, this “‘national’ and ‘imperial’ Shakespeare” (Holderness 204) is certainly not the whole story that emerges from the examination of the uses of Shakespeare during the Great War. The closer one investigates these uses, the more contradictions and ideological fractions can be detected. Thus, Holderness points out that the application of Shakespeare “as a vessel of [English] nationalistic longing” is “more utopian than political” (212), since “Shakespeare’s England” is grounded in “myths and fantasies” rather than reality (202). Moreover, as Calvo argues, claiming Shakespeare as an exclusive supporter of one nation “clashes with the ... widespread desire to see in Shakespeare a universal genius for humankind” (“Fighting over Shakespeare” 55). And, of course, the attribution of “a universal genius” is precisely what gives Shakespeare his elevated cultural status which makes him so desirable to appropriate. In effect, “fighting over Shakespeare” reveals “a fault-line between Shakespeare the national poet and the universal genius” (“Fighting over Shakespeare” 55), a fault-line which compromises his ideological usefulness.

The paradox of Shakespeare being seen as both national and universal has also been noted in investigations of Shakespeare’s wartime mobilization for the purposes of consolidating the British Empire. As Coppélia Kahn points out, the 1916 *Book of Homage to Shakespeare*, edited by Israel Gollancz and presenting tributes from across the British Empire and allied states on the occasion of the 1916 Shakespeare Tercentenary, aimed “to create an imaginary unified community in the face of the deep, increasingly bloody divisions of the Great War” (459). However, some of the volume’s contributions in fact “stage the contradictions of the empire” (Kahn 457), exposing problems inherent in using Shakespeare to prop up an imperial version of Britishness. This, as Kahn demonstrates, is particularly striking in case of the tributes by the representatives of colonized territories, such as South Africa, Burma, and Ireland. Andrew Murphy develops the Irish angle more fully in a recent chapter which explores the Shakespeare Tercentenary (in particular, Douglas Hyde’s contribution to Gollancz’s volume) in the context of Irish struggle for independence, culminating in the 1916 Easter Rising (Murphy 51–63; see also Foulkes 196–98).

To complicate matters even further, the cultural mobilization of Shakespeare during the Great War was fractured by other factors, besides conflicts between nations and divisions within empires. As Horne points out, “while legitimizing values and ideals of cultural community were promoted through the state apparatus, including national educational systems, they were expressed much more widely by a host of private and semi-private agencies, such as newspapers, political parties, pressure groups and churches” (2). This dispersal of cultural mobilization among numerous agencies opened the door for local competition for the ownership of the valuable cultural commodity that is Shakespeare. Thus, as Calvo demonstrates when discussing the rivalry between Stratford and London

during the 1916 Tercentenary (“Fighting over Shakespeare” 50–56), local entities such as cities, regions, or social groups could claim Shakespeare as their own, further fragmenting the monolithic image of a “patriotic” Shakespeare that the belligerent states may have wanted to promote. Another example of a group who used Shakespeare in very particular circumstances during the war is offered by interned prisoners, whose Shakespearean appropriations Ton Hoenselaars discusses as “hybrid instances of the ‘literature of exile’” (89). However, while diverse groups were competing or fighting over Shakespeare during the war, he was also used as a means of seeking rapprochement and collaboration. The most striking examples are the appropriations of Shakespeare intended to foster wartime alliances, like those between Britain and France (Calvo, “Fighting over Shakespeare” 63–68) or between Britain and the United States (Hendley 36–41; Foulkes 188–95; Smialkowska). All these instances of competition and collaboration demonstrate the complexity of the wartime uses of Shakespeare and the need to consider carefully the intersection of their global and local manifestations.

Finally, apart from being mobilized by various groups for their wartime purposes, Shakespeare was also used – both during and after the war – as a text through which the traumatic experiences of the conflict could be remembered, mediated, dealt with, and commemorated. Adrian Poole and John Lee probingly explore “the individual’s relationship ... with Shakespeare” (Lee 151) during the war, as evidenced in their poetic output. Meanwhile, Calvo draws our attention to the fact that Shakespeare also played a more public role in “commemoration and memory rites” in the period, through such commemorative gestures as the League of the British Empire’s Kitchener Souvenir Committee issuing copies of the Complete Works to disabled soldiers (“Shakespeare as War Memorial” 209). These explorations indicate the need to consider not only the global-local, but also the public-private dimension of Shakespeare’s uses during the Great War.

The contributions to this special issue engage with the problems outlined above in various ways. Edmund King’s essay addresses the hitherto neglected area of the Great War soldiers’ actual engagement with Shakespeare. Drawing on original archival material, King explores the soldiers’ “reading practices”, concluding that individuals’ approaches to Shakespeare varied: some read him for patriotic messages, some to reconnect to their lives outside of the trenches, and some to demonstrate their cultural literacy. Ton Hoenselaars also considers the usefulness of Shakespeare to individuals involved in the war, but he points out that some combatants doubted Shakespeare’s ability to address the enormity of the experience of the global conflict. However, he concludes that wider issues – the usefulness of Shakespearean quotations to comment on the war from home, the modernist need to fall back on established traditions, and the post-war innovations in teaching methods – ensured Shakespeare’s continuing survival as a valuable cultural icon. Clara Calvo moves away from the frontline to the “home front”, examining J. M. Barrie’s skit *Shakespeare’s Legacy*, performed in London to raise funds for the YWCA’s efforts to support female war workers. Calvo demonstrates how this performance foregrounded a number of important fractures in the patriotic uses of Shakespeare, by questioning “received notions of national identity, cultural value, and gender relations”. She also discusses another contribution by Barrie to the Shakespeare Tercentenary, his silent movie *The Real Thing at Last*, pointing out to the tensions between “high” and “low” culture manifest in this production. Ailsa Grant Ferguson’s essay discusses the function and significance of the YMCA’s “Shakespeare Hut”, built to commemorate the 1916 Tercentenary in Bloomsbury, on a site originally intended for

erecting a Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre. The Hut, used during the war for the benefit of New Zealand Anzac servicemen, subsequently disappeared almost completely from public memory. This, Ferguson argues, makes it “a paradigmatic model to examine the commemoration of Shakespeare”, a model which significantly blurs the boundaries of “commemoration *and* ... use by active soldiers”, of “the living *and* the dead, the historical *and* the mourned”, and of remembering and forgetting. Taken together, the essays in this volume thus contribute to the ongoing investigations of Shakespeare’s mobilization during the Great War by disparate groups and individuals, highlighting the intersections of the global and the local, the public and the private, the official and the marginalized.

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Notes

1. For a comprehensive overview of the existing scholarship on Shakespeare and the war, see Hiscock. Since the appearance of Hiscock’s article in 2011, a volume of essays on Shakespeare and the Second World War has been published, the subtitle of which – *Memory, Culture, Identity* – perfectly encapsulates the current trends in the field (Makaryk and McHugh, eds). For recent studies of memory not focused specifically on Shakespeare, see, among others, Winter; Ricoeur; Kidd and Murdoch, eds; Moore and Whelan, eds; and Nelson and Olin, eds. These come in the wake of seminal studies by Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann, and Pierre Nora.
2. As Dobson argues, Shakespeare’s status as a poet “normatively constitutive of British national identity” (7) had been long established by the time of the Great War. For the history of Germany’s adoption of Shakespeare as a vital part of its own national heritage, see Hortmann 1–43; and Habicht, *Shakespeare and the German Imagination*.

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