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Introduction

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Introduction

Yan Brailowsky

- 1 As Maurizio Calbi has argued, Shakespeare is a constant spectral presence in contemporary culture.¹ Two years after having dedicated its annual conference to “Shakespeare *after* Shakespeare”, the Société Française Shakespeare chose to answer a haunting question: how has Shakespeare been constructed, be it literally in “bound” form with the publication of his plays in the early Quartos and Folios, or figuratively with the strictures of early modern England, and how has he been “unbound”? To what extent can Shakespeare’s work free itself from the bonds of the patriarchal Western culture he inhabited, inviting us to use the symbolic “fire” of his works, inciting us “to be rough, unswayable and free” (*Coriolanus*, 5.6.25)?² By devoting our conference to “Shakespeare Unbound”, we ostensibly took our cue from the title of Shelley’s lyrical drama, first published in 1820, in which the Romantic poet attempted to reconnect with a lost play by Aeschylus, portraying “the sufferings and endurance”³ of Prometheus, the mythical figure who gave fire to mankind. Contrary to the Romantic poet, however, Shakespeare did not set out to delve into history to produce plays or poems that strove to be faithful to Ancient sources, nor was he only interested in depicting dark and brooding emotions. If anything, Shakespeare’s oftentimes anachronistic and imaginative reworkings of his sources were but a first step in what has become an endless process of adaptation and reappropriation, spanning genres, art-forms and periods. In effect, Shakespeare “unbound” his source material as much as later writers, directors, film-makers, and artists have unbound “Shakespeare”.
- 2 The conference thus addressed Shakespeare’s propensity to negotiate with dominant ideologies, to discuss his ability to break and renew formal and cultural rules and his long-lasting influence in creating innovative dramatic and poetic forms, new words and thoughts, “And all that faith creates or love desires, / Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes”,⁴ Prometheus-like.
- 3 The works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries have come down to us through bound Quartos and Folios, emended, truncated, annotated, as well as through unbound scripts and performances, “faithful” or “adapted”, many of which exceed the place of the stage, flowing down into the audience, out onto the streets, showing up on screens, in anime,

graphic novels and narrative recreations and appropriations. These transformations have contributed to the aesthetic liberation of drama, poetry, the visual arts, music, and other forms. In this respect, we remain bound to Shakespeare for having unbound our imagination, regardless of the strictures of early modern culture. One can thus speak of Shakespeare as “the bound liberator”, as did Victor Hugo of Prometheus, “le libérateur enchaîné”, in remarks introducing his thoughts on *Hamlet* in his essay on Shakespeare, first published in 1864, one generation after the publication of Shelley’s lyrical drama.⁵

- 4 The contributions in this volume take Shakespeare’s liberating force to heart, working on the materiality of the playwright’s works, discussing their publication and editorial history—in bound and unbound formats—as well as the manner in which the playwright’s “borrowed robes” (*Macbeth*, 1.3.109) contributed to liberating dramatic and poetic aesthetics of his time, and of our own, one that can “beguile Nature of her custom” (*The Winter’s Tale*, 5.2.99).
- 5 In the first section of this volume, devoted to the binding and unbinding of the “Shakespeare Book”, Christy Desmet thus turned on its head the trope of destruction used to discuss “mutilated books” and “unbound” pages, showing how the dissemination of Shakespeare’s First Folio throughout the centuries and, more particularly, in recent years, illustrates the multiplying power of the book, rather than its disappearance. Desmet’s contribution, which was to be her last to the Société Française Shakespeare after her sudden disappearance last summer, pursued her groundbreaking work on appropriation—one which lives on in the journal she co-founded, *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*.
- 6 Desmet’s insights on the multiplying power of the book resonated with early modern practice, as suggested by collections of plays which included Shakespeare’s works alongside that of his contemporaries. One such manuscript miscellany in Douai studied by Line Cottegnies shows how the playwright was subtly edited in Catholic circles for the stage as early as 1695, before more famous eighteenth-century editors such as Nicholas Rowe or Edmond Malone sought to emend Shakespeare’s works. She also unwraps the process in which the plays were bound, rebound, and how the various forms taken by the manuscript inform our understanding of editing practices.
- 7 More recently, the Shakespearean text has also been used as raw material, literally, to produce innovative art. As shown by Jennifer A. Low, artist’s books using Shakespeare’s text can both challenge and exploit the playwright’s canonical status by borrowing the poet’s words to produce new work. In producing several of these series, artist’s books also create a rhizomatic and spatially poetic approach to Shakespeare’s word, further liberating readers and/or viewers from the canonical, bound versions of, say, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s iconic playtext.
- 8 The second section of essays turns to more symbolic readings of the notion of unbinding, proposing several close readings of Shakespeare’s plays to show how the playwright extended his artistic freedom and our experience. Sophie Chiari thus takes *Antony and Cleopatra* and unravels the geo-humoral and “climatic” imagery in the play to suggest that Cleopatra is as much dependent on the overflowing Nile as Antony is taken in by her overflow of emotions. In so doing, Chiari highlights the versatility of the play’s location.
- 9 In the following essay, Lynn S. Meskill unbinds not Egypt, but an iconographic *topos*, that of the wheel of Fortune. Taking several plays, notably *Othello*, she shows how Shakespeare

transforms the significance of the imagery associated with Fortuna, as well as “distilling” it through expressions such as “wheeling” and “turning”.

- 10 Picking up on this stylistic turn, Barbara Muller proposes a different type of unbinding, one delving not with a location or a trope, but with language itself. Using a stylistic and rhetorical approach, she shows how Shakespeare revivifies dead metaphors in the Romances, freeing them from the rules of decorum. As the essays in this section suggest, Shakespeare not only broke with barriers, symbolic or linguistic, he served as a liberating force.
- 11 The third section in this collection invites us on a liberating tour, one which breaks barriers despite all appearances to the contrary, starting with nineteenth-century industrial Birmingham, stopping in Paris and the 1848 barricades, before crossing the Atlantic and into the twentieth century to US penitentiaries, and further afield to Shakespearean appropriations in Asia.
- 12 Ewan Fernie thus locates the liberating force of modernity through the figure of George Dawson, the founder of the first public library ever devoted to Shakespeare, the Shakespeare Memorial Library in Birmingham. Fernie locates Dawson’s visionary plan within the revolutionary spirit that spread throughout Europe in 1848, re-politicizing Shakespeare’s work and his ability to free thought and men.
- 13 The playwright’s ability to free men has been shown to be a lifeline for those who are physically bound, such as inmates in American prisons, whose rehabilitation through performances of Shakespeare have given voice to marginalized and disenfranchised populations typically far removed from the works of an “elite”, early modern British dramatist. Yet examples studied by Pamela J. Monaco prove that performing Shakespeare behind bars has given inmates illuminating, even life-changing, liberating experiences.
- 14 The final contribution by Alexa Alice Joubin takes us through three Asian adaptations of *Hamlet* to show how the Ophelia figure has become unbound through spectacle and music, as sequences involving Chinese martial arts or Bollywood dances provide audiences with an exoticized version of both Shakespeare and Asian cultures.
- 15 Additional contributions to the conference included roundtables with artists and academics, all of which helped “unbind” Shakespeare, available in video format on Youtube. In one, Denis Podalydès, the renowned French actor, director, script-writer, writer, and member of the Comédie-Française, spoke with Jean-Michel Déprats about his experiences with Shakespeare throughout his career. Podalydès, who has also written a personal biography of Shakespeare, argued that his time “bound” with Shakespeare’s works proved a revelation, as if he were rediscovering theater’s mother tongue.
- 16 In a second roundtable, Florence March spoke with Irina Brook, the Franco-British actor, theater and opera director, for whom Shakespeare has always been a household name. When she was a child, her father, Peter Brook, allowed her to attend numerous performances of his Shakespeare productions, making the playwright’s *œuvre* part of Irina’s personal experience of theater, and what theater stands for, one that informs her experience to this day, and that explains her desire to “unbind” Shakespeare for the people in Nice, where she currently heads the Théâtre National.
- 17 In two final round-tables, several academics and translators discussed their editions of plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries for the “Pléiade” collection for French publisher Gallimard. Jean-Michel Déprats, Gisèle Venet, Line Cottagnies and François Laroque spoke with contributors such as Michèle Willems, Margaret Jones-Davies and

Francis Guinle about the difficulties and pleasures in producing these new “bound” collections. These volumes represent the collective effort of generations of French Shakespeare scholars, many of whom played key roles in the founding years of the Société Française Shakespeare, and whose work will help further the study and performance of early modern drama in France today.

- 18 In “unbinding” Shakespeare, the essays contained in this collection similarly contribute to rediscovering his work and influence throughout the ages. Undeterred, Shakespeare lives on. As Prometheus said to Earth, “Thou art a living spirit”.⁶

NOTES

1. Maurizio Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares: Media Adaptations in the Twenty-First Century*, Houndmills and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
 2. All quotes taken from George Blakemore Evans (ed.), *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
 3. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts with Other Poems*, London, C. and J. Ollier, 1820, p. viii.
 4. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poetical Works*, Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1947, p. 212.
 5. Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare*, Paris, A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven et Cie, 1864, p. 306-310.
 6. Shelley, *The Poetical Works*, op. cit., p. 211.
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