American Shakespeare: Introduction

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Yes, there is certainly no land on the whole earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such high esteem as in this same America, so much criticized for its love of money; should one enter a blockhouse situated in the far west, and should the dweller there exhibit very definitely evidences of backwoods life, yet has he nearly always furnished a small room in which to spend his few leisure hours, in which the Bible and in most cases a cheap edition of the works of the poet Shakespeare are nearly always found. (Knortz 47)

1 An echo of Tocqueville's own staging of Shakespeare on the frontier –“there is hardly a pioneer’s hut that does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I remember that I read the feudal drama of Henry V for the first time in a log cabin” (55)–, this observation made in 1882 by German scholar Karl Knortz in Shakespeare in Amerika, encapsulates some of the questions both integral to the ever-growing field of Shakespeare's reception in the United States and representative of this issue of Transatlantica. The fact that this comment should have been made by a German scholar in the 19th century indicates that the field was virtually born outside of the United States via the publication in Berlin of Knortz's study of Shakespearean criticism in the US. As Alfred Van Rensselaer Westfall pointed out in 1939, the only studies on the subject he was able to trace were either written by Europeans or published in Europe, generally under the title “Shakespeare in America” (10). It is only fitting then that a French journal of American studies should publish this issue on American Shakespeare. Besides, despite pioneering work2 on “American Shakespeare” in France, the field still needs to find its place among French Shakespeareans. Therefore, though this issue is not directed only and primarily towards the French academic readership, its perhaps pretentious yet modest wish is to play a part in the emergence of the field.
More fundamentally still, the situation that Knortz describes makes explicit to an extreme degree the paradox commentators have pointed out in the phrase “American Shakespeare.” By the end of the 20th century, Knortz, who had travelled and stayed in the United States prior to writing his study of the appropriation of Shakespeare in American criticism, was able to suggest that Shakespeare, who had by now become the essential cultural idol of the British Empire, was also adored by each and every American alongside the Bible. Relating Shakespeare to one of the founding myths of the United States – that of the frontier – Knortz’s remark hinted that Shakespeare had himself become a myth in a still expanding America.

That the Bardolatry had reached the United States was by no means a given. The paradoxical tension in Shakespeare’s gradual absorption in North America can be grasped when considering that in 1746 Benjamin Franklin had the Library Company of Philadelphia purchase the Hanmer edition of Shakespeare’s works, while at the same time the Quakers of Philadelphia wanted to ban theatre, which happened momentarily in 1760 (Nathans 16). Indeed, until the late 18th century, theatre was still viewed as immoral and, in the words of Increase Mather, as “a danger to the souls of Men” (Nathans 20). Anti-theatrical feelings were strong among Quakers and Puritans. For instance, in 1750 an anti-theatre ban was passed in Massachusetts (Nathans 14-36). Besides, during the American Revolution, the theatres were closed, thus halting the furtherance of Shakespeare’s appropriation on the stages of America. Moreover, with the creation of the United States of America, the feeling towards the British population and culture was at best ambivalent and in some instances furiously antagonistic: a good example of which are the famous Astor place riots ignited notably around the question of the defence of an alleged American Shakespeare against what was viewed as the aristocratic Shakespeare of a British actor (Levine 63-69; Sturgess 41-43; Vaughan 24-25). As Kim Sturgess has shown, the development of an American form of Bardolatry and the rise of the national feeling in the United States are intricately related, to the point that, as Michael Bristol declares in his incipit, “Shakespeare is an American institution” (1).

The original paradox of Shakespeare as a crucial vector of national feelings in an otherwise largely anti-British country, has transformed into another unforeseen incongruity: Bardolatry has now even outgrown British responses to Shakespeare into what Loney and Mackay call “The Shakespeare Complex,” i.e. both a wealth of Shakespearean productions and a state of mind leading to the success of festivals, to the establishment of two libraries devoted to Shakespeare, to attempts at rebuilding Shakespeare’s playhouse, to academic responses and more:

For all the honor Englishmen render unto Shakespeare with stagings at Stratford-upon-Avon, in London, and at major and minor provincial repertory centers, it is the North Americans who have shown the greatest passion of and industry in the production and preservation of Shakespeare [...]. The result of such “Bardolatry” is that Shakespeare [...] brings out audiences which otherwise would not frequent live theatre. There appear to be no other playwrights with such magnetism. (5-6)

Thus an intriguing process has led to the internalisation of Shakespeare into an American Shakespeare.

The history of this development is traced in at least three books and was supplemented by an exhibition at the Folger Shakespeare Library for which a catalogue was produced (Alden Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan). It is not therefore the aim of this issue – despite its appearance in a French journal –, to propose a revolution. Other than Bristol
and Sturgess, critics, notably cultural materialists, have consistently explored how the Shakespearean myth was constituted. Michael Dobson in *The Making of the National Poet* examined how Shakespeare had been transformed into a canonical and “paradigmatic figure of literary authority” (1) in Britain.

This issue wishes to keep on showing how and why Shakespeare has become a paradoxical American writer of British origins through, for instance, Shakespeare’s multifarious appropriations in the South of the United States of America (Vignaux), in the production of Shakespeare’s plays in the 19th century (Ludot-Vlasak) and in American jubilees (Smialkowska). These articles also try to question the very term of “institutionalisation,” showing, for instance, that the production of cultural events for Shakespeare’s 1916 jubilee (Smialkowska) was both a result of Shakespeare’s institutionalisation in the USA and, interestingly enough, also a product of non-institutional groups, thereby, perhaps, testifying to the multiple modes of Shakespeare’s ingrained iconicity.

Often, the exploration of cultural phenomena presides over the investigation of Shakespeare’s institutionalisation into a “metonym[y] of an entire cultural-political formation” (Eagleton in Holderness x) –the Folgers’ construction of the Folger Shakespeare Library in the heart of cultural, judicial and legislative institutions in Washington D.C. is the example and the symptom of Shakespeare’s institutionalisation. However, studying Shakespeare’s transformation into an American cultural icon leaves another side of the question unmapped: though granting Shakespeare an important place in literature, a number of actors, artists and authors such as Melville (Imbert), Dickinson (Chevrier-Bosseau), H.D. (Conilleau) and experimental writers (Broqua) try to question Shakespeare’s iconic place so as to avoid, it seems, Shakespeare’s aesthetic fossilization into “The Bard.” We would like this issue of *Transatlantica* to suggest that, while participating in and of Shakespeare’s Americanisation, these authors, however diversely, try to transgress the “cultural consensus” (Hodgdon 194). This is, perhaps, what the original paradox and tension in the appropriation of Shakespeare in the United States enables them to do.

In “A Southern Shakespeare?,” Michèle Vignaux examines the “possibility of a specific response to Shakespeare” in the South of the United States. Focusing on the situation in antebellum America, i.e. the heydays of his popularity on the stage, she argues that the South was more open to Shakespeare than the North, in that it was more open to theatre in general. Though no clear-cut difference can be found between North and South in terms of what plays were performed, Michèle Vignaux shows that the reception of Shakespeare in the South was characterised by its tradition of amateur acting. Concluding on a thought-provoking parallel between the society of the South and that of Elizabethan England, the article not only suggests wider cultural vectors for the wide appeal Shakespeare had in the Southern States but also hints at his influence on Southern literature. Ronan Ludot-Vlasak’s approach is both historical and intertextual, providing readings of three largely neglected plays. While his analysis of Robert Conrad’s *Jack Cade* shows how much the play was a political interpretation of Shakespeare, his take on George Henry Boker’s *Anne Boleyn*, and *Francesca da Rimini* is that these were more consensual texts. Boker was unabashed about using a more European aesthetic than Conrad’s. Although the two American playwrights take opposite stances on how they should reinterpret Shakespeare, their texts share a common failure in so far as they did not succeed in “defamiliaris[ing] and demystify[ing] him, [while they] also failed to fully
Americanize the ‘Swan of Avon.’” With Adeline Chevrier-Bosseau’s article on Emily Dickinson, “American Shakespeare” moves from 19th century plays and stage to theatricality. What is at stake here is not Shakespeare’s intertext in Emily Dickinson’s poetry, thoroughly studied in Paraic Finnerty’s Emily Dickinson’s Shakespeare. This article reveals how much Shakespeare’s theatricality permeates Dickinson’s creation of her literary self. Adeline Chevrier-Boisseau’s approach is metacritical for she resorts to Greenblatt’s concept of “self-fashioning” – a concept Greenblatt coined for his Renaissance and Shakespearean studies– to read Dickinson’s invention of her self or “character.” Dickinson, Adeline Chevrier-Boisseau tells us, “might in fact have been influenced by the Shakespearean myth in the forging of her own,” which is explicit in her reinterpretation of hybrid characters such as Bottom, or characters whose identity is unstable such as Viola, or, again, via the mode of the prologue borrowed from Henry V.

The last article on the appropriation of Shakespeare in the 19th century is Michel Imbert’s “Sous l’empire de la folie : Moby-Dick, Shakespeare et compagnie.” Though it so happens that the reception of Shakespeare by American novelists is underrepresented in this issue, this engaging and comprehensive essay on Melville and Shakespeare makes up for such a lack. Imbert’s article is an odyssey into the Shakespearean and Melvillian oceans, and the shallow waters of the following summary cannot do justice to its depth. First reading “Hawthorne and his Mosses” in relation to Moby-Dick, Michel Imbert shows that for Melville Shakespeare underwrites American thought and remains its frontier: “L’horizon de la pensée américaine est aussi son ‘impensé’.” An undercurrent of madness runs in and through Shakespeare and Melville: for Melville, Shakespeare reaches the unfathomable depths of madness and his paradoxical secrecy remains accessible only to a few fellow writers. Imbert analyses how Melville borrows and rewrites Shakespeare’s theme of the will to power and his imperial theme both seen as fantastmatic power and as the power of a mad thirst for power. When borrowing Shakespeare’s “imperial theme,” Melville plays with the motif of the will to power encapsulated notably in Moby-Dick’s Ahab. Through intertextual readings, the article goes on to show how power is staged and how it threatens to drift into autocratic forms and thus question the democratic ideal. Moreover, Ahab’s madness, as in Lear, has a feminine principle which one wishes to reject, to such extent that it also leads to reinterpreting the Pequod as a new manufacture of transgenic sexuality (“la manufacture de la sexualité New Age, transgénique” or “le laboratoire génétique du Nouveau Monde”) through the appropriation of Macbeth’s “Thou art too full of the milk of human kindness” into “the milk and sperm of human kindness.” The boat and its crew thus embody a utopian yet disturbing dream of undivided community reducing otherness to a minimum: “le rêve utopique de la réduction radicale de toute altérité à une communauté indivise par définition indéterminée.”

The question of democracy is tackled from another perspective in Monika Smialkowska’s “‘A democratic art at a democratic price’: The American Celebrations of the Shakespeare Tercentenary, 1916,” which explores the “localising” of Shakespeare in the early 20th century. Indeed, this article looks at the social treatment of the American celebrations of the Shakespeare Tercentenary. It demonstrates how Shakespeare was “a rallying figure for the championing of social cohesion.” Taking a close look at Percy MacKaye’s Caliban by the Yellow Sands, a “community masque” written for the Tercentenary, the article also investigates the varied and diverse efforts local communities (Anglo-Saxon, Jewish, African American) made to celebrate Shakespeare, showing how these efforts were not driven by national institutions. Moreover, Monika
Smialkowska reads these in connection to “the processes and tensions involved in defining American identity and democracy in the second decade of the twentieth century.” After Monika Smialkowska’s thorough explorations of the 1916 jubilee, this issue moves to Claire Conilleau’s literary approach of modernist poet H.D.’s multi-faceted response to Shakespeare. Her contention is that “by reappropriating ‘[the] very act of naming’, and producing her own family romances, H.D. [...] establishes a familial rather than adversarial relation to her literary past, which allows her to write with tradition and not against it.” Showing how intimately H.D. wove Shakespeare to the text of her life as well as to the life of her texts, Claire Conilleau devotes a large part of her study to H.D.’s experimental text By Avon River unravelling how the modernist poet “presents herself both as reader and writer of Shakespeare.” The last text of “American Shakespeare” concentrates on three late 20th century poets’ readings of Shakespeare’s sonnet 130. “Living-with Shakespeare?” intends to show how Harryette Mullen, Stephen Ratcliffe and Jen Bervin’s compositions with Shakespeare’s sonnet 130 can be regarded as attempts not so much to speak for the ghost of Shakespeare’s text, but to engage in a dialogue with his works. The article questions Bloom’s essentialist references to Shakespeare in his preface and introduction to The Anxiety of Influence, and tries to bring forward what experimental poets introduce. Its hypothesis is that they allow Shakespeare to happen in the present not just and only in the guise of the vindictive ghost who, as in Hamlet, speaks from the tomb –or from the fixated place where myth and tradition have en-crypt-ed him– and whose voice forces to “remember [him]” and, as it were, to speak him from the malediction on the tombstone.

Though the general argument of “American Shakespeare” is not chronological, to allow the fruitful interconnections between different approaches to unfurl, the articles are organised chronologically. Indeed, it should be noted that their echoes are manifold, so that the issue can also be viewed obliquely, focusing, for instance, on the many references to and readings of Meville’s “Hawthorne and his Mosses,” or on the allusions to the Astor Place Riots, to Sturgess, Bristol and Levine; it perhaps enables a cross-section view of the different scientific methods used to address “American Shakespeare,” considering the historical, theoretical, poetic and metacritical correspondences. These constitute, we hope, some of the seams in the motley of Shakespeare’s institution and de-institutionalisation in the United States of America.

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I would like to thank Nathalie Cochoy for her patience and the impressive amount of work she put into making this “American Shakespeare” possible.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHIE**


NOTES

1. Quoted and translated in Westfall 60, n.12.
2. To take a recent example, Ronan Ludot-Vlasak wrote an acclaimed dissertation on Shakespeare’s reinvention in 19th Century American Literature (2006).
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