

# ARTICLES

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## Material Shakespeare

*Sean Benson*

Readers of this journal are well aware of the decline in the number of schools that require at least one Shakespeare course for a major in English. Troubling though this may be, fortunately Shakespeare's reputation still precedes him: many of the best students, English majors and otherwise, still take Shakespeare courses on a voluntary, elective basis. In spite of concerted efforts in academia to level distinctions between high and low forms of art, Shakespeare retains a strong attraction for many undergraduates because his works speak to the depths of human experience with language that is no less than transcendent. Despite, too, Shakespeare's status as a representative of WASPish or DWEMish hegemony, he remains, as Harold Bloom has argued, the towering literary rock against which current waves of resentment-based criticism inevitably founder.<sup>1</sup> Having "give[n] to aery nothing / A local habitation and a name,"<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare continues to appeal across borders and cultures and times, finding enthusiasts everywhere: it is a strange world, indeed, where traditionalist academics and queer theorists alike adopt Shakespeare as their own. Perhaps, then, all of this rumor-mongering about the death of Shakespeare is premature.

Still, the number of students in undergraduate Shakespeare courses is not encouraging. Although Shakespeare courses attract good students, more students now have the option to replace Shakespeare with other courses instead, making it inevitable that fewer students study Shakespeare today than did their counterparts a generation ago. It is not surprising for liberal arts majors today, even English majors, to graduate without having taken a single course devoted to the works of Shakespeare. Under the aegis of multiculturalism, college curricula increasingly encourage students to study a diverse array of authors, canonical and otherwise, but the diversity in question is typically preoccupied with the accidents of birth—race, class, and gender. Though these categories are worthy of serious consideration, it is by no means clear that an author's social or biological background would render one more or less able to delve into such issues. *Othello* is one of the most powerful explorations of racism, *The Merchant of Venice* of anti-Semitism, yet Shakespeare seems to have been neither black nor Jewish. Nor is it clear why neglected authors, some of whom have been justly neglected because of their middling talents, are worthy of being revisited if doing so means that students necessarily will have less exposure to Shakespeare and other major writers. Matthew Arnold's dictum that the best education should seek to study the best that has been thought

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and written still seems intellectually superior to any alternative yet offered in the name of biological diversity.

Even more troubling than the sheer decline in the absolute numbers of students taking Shakespeare courses are some of the scholarly and pedagogical practices that inform the ways in which Shakespeare's work is now taught. An acquaintance of mine recently graduated with an English degree from a major state university where his professor taught his Shakespeare course almost exclusively by showing film versions of the plays, with intermittent pauses for professorial comment. When I asked my acquaintance whether he actually read any of the plays in the course of the semester, his savvy reply was a simple, "Why?" Why, indeed, work harder than one has to? Should I have been surprised to learn that he earned an "A" for the class?

Having recently attended one of the many annual Shakespeare conferences, I sat in on one of the sessions on pedagogy, only to learn that the speaker, a professor at a Big Ten university, teaches his undergraduate Shakespeare course in light of his own publishing agenda. Given the need to publish, this is hardly surprising, but I was nonetheless struck by how difficult it is for such careerism to coincide with good teaching. The professor in question, for instance, devoted an entire class day to a discussion of his research into Shakespeare's alleged association of Falstaff with one Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham. While no doubt an interesting historical anecdote, worthy of mention, such attention to historicizing the Shakespearean text consumed our session and, as was clear, consumed much of his own students' class time as well. The research agenda drove the course, but one wonders if knowledge of Falstaff's historical pedigree will be able to create or sustain interest in reading Shakespeare for most undergraduates. Perhaps it should be no surprise that the profession as a whole can no longer justify requiring Shakespeare courses if all that matters is the historicity of the text. Surely a host of Shakespeare's contemporaries, from Middleton to Dekker, have more numerous and equally interesting topical allusions in their plays.

Though there are wide variations in the teaching of Shakespeare, some more heartening than others, I wish to examine a more fundamental consideration; namely, the collected works editions—the teaching or "college editions"—that countless undergraduates are required to purchase in order to begin the formal study of Shakespeare's works. If Shakespearean scholarship is often recondite and pedantic, it nonetheless filters its way into these college editions, and they exercise considerable influence on students' understanding of Shakespeare's writings. These college editions shape and inform students in subtle ways that they will carry with them, both figuratively and literally, for a long time to come.

## I

Collected works editions of Shakespeare have a long and venerable history, beginning with Shakespeare's fellow players'—Heminge and Condell's—First

Folio (F1) edition published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death. In this century alone, college editions of the plays have been widely used, offering as they do introductory essays by some of the finest scholars and readers of the day—Auden, Anne Barton, William Empson, Frank Kermode, Alvin Kernan, and so on. Though individual editions of the plays are increasingly popular in the classroom—with scholarly versions put out by Arden and others, more accessible ones by Pelican and Signet—such individual editions are (collectively) more expensive than a college edition if one is doing around eight or more plays in a semester. Individual editions often offer only one or a few essays on a play, and thus they cannot compete with the range of essays and scholars working collaboratively on a college edition (forty eminent scholars alone, for instance, on *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*). Inexpensive and richly diverse, with crucial introductory apparatuses for undergraduates in their first or second Shakespeare course, the college editions are the standard for teaching undergraduate courses in Shakespeare.

Even with the declining number of Shakespeare courses and requirements, the market is still a large one, and competition among publishers is fierce. College editions of Shakespeare are often a point of pride among publishing houses, which have sought some of the most revered names in Shakespearean scholarship for such defining texts, among them those of Alfred Harbage, general editor for *The Pelican Shakespeare* (1969); Sylvan Barnet (*The Complete Signet Classic* [1972]); David Bevington (*The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 1980); and G. Blakemore Evans, editor of the widely esteemed *The Riverside Shakespeare* (1974; rev. 1997). Given this illustrious tradition, not to mention the drive for market share, it was no surprise when W. W. Norton, always a formidable player in the world of anthology textbooks, entered *The Norton Shakespeare* into the fray in 1997. Its rise in just five years has been nothing short of meteoric: at last count, some 520 professors had adopted the text in their classrooms, making *The Norton Shakespeare* the leading teaching edition of Shakespeare in this country.<sup>3</sup>

Stephen Greenblatt, who chairs the Concentration in History and Literature at Harvard University, serves as general editor of *The Norton Shakespeare*. Greenblatt is one of the best-known Shakespearean scholars in the world today, having almost single-handedly launched the new historicism in literary studies with the publication of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980). Like all good college editions, *The Norton Shakespeare* has an able, if small, cohort of assistant editors, as well as a fine essay on the Shakespearean stage by Andrew Gurr, arguably the foremost Elizabethan and Jacobean stage historian. As one might expect, given Greenblatt's penchant for historicizing the text, *The Norton Shakespeare* reexamines the convoluted question of Shakespeare's composing process, with special attention to the question of whether Shakespeare revised earlier (quarto) versions of some of his plays into different, perhaps final, forms that one finds in the First Folio of 1623.<sup>4</sup>

While this is a controversial question, it is by no means unreasonable that Greenblatt comes down on the revisionist side of the question.

Nor is one surprised to discover that Greenblatt devotes historical essays in the first forty pages of *The Norton Shakespeare* to “Imports, Patents, and Monopolies,” “Haves and Have-Nots,” “Riot and Disorder,” “The Legal Status of Women,” “A Female Monarch in a Male World,” “The English and Otherness,” and “Censorship and Regulation,” all of which are standard fare—the *modus operandi*, if you will—of the new historicism. But Greenblatt’s text is not simply historically and materially *oriented*; the scholarly apparatuses that undergird *The Norton Shakespeare* are unrelentingly moored to these *idées fixes*, to the near exclusion of other ways of reading and interpreting Shakespeare. Ambiguities in Shakespeare’s language are almost always resolved by the editors in the direction of materialist readings that are often prejudicially narrow in scope.

Materialist readings, glosses, notes, and commentary in *The Norton Shakespeare* are not necessarily wrong—indeed, Shakespeare’s language often invites such interpretations—but they are not all there is to the richness of his works. In short, not only is the teaching of Shakespeare declining in sheer numbers, but also, if *The Norton Shakespeare* is any indication of the direction in which the profession is heading, the teaching of Shakespeare is driven more by narrow ideological concerns rather than by disinterested inquiry into Shakespeare’s complex thought and language.

## II

Materialist literary critics, be they Marxists, American new historicists, or British cultural materialists, insist on the exclusive materiality of Shakespeare’s work as artifacts or products of their time and place; what matters in the plays is the nature of matter—be it physical power, coercion, the acquisition of property, or, to use the Foucauldian term, “discourse regimes.” Of whatever stripe, such critics are first and foremost materialists—that is, they assume that physical matter is the fundamental reality, “the opinion,” as the *OED* informs us, “that nothing exists except matter.”<sup>5</sup> Entities traditionally understood as immaterial, such as God (who in a most immaterial way is said to create the universe not out of preexistent matter, but *ex nihilo*), do not fare well in the editorial crucible of materialism. But the problem is not that *The Norton* has a bias against theism, which it surely does, but rather that materialist critics are philosophically predisposed to see scant else beyond issues of power and commodification as they inform the academic trinity of race, class, and gender. When cultural materialist Jonathan Dollimore, for instance, insists that “*King Lear* is, above all, a play about power, property and inheritance,”<sup>6</sup> he is only partially right: yes, power and property are aspects of the play, but not its sum. Suffering, penance, self-abnegation, and selflessness as well (even the villain Edmund in the end benevolently claims, “Some good I mean to do, /

Despite of mine own nature”<sup>7</sup>)—terms that do not fit well in a materialist lexicon—need room in any comprehensive treatment of the play.

Let me begin to substantiate the materialist bent of *The Norton Shakespeare* by reference to what appears to be a minor, almost innocuous, editorial note on a famous passage from *King Lear*. Having been cast out by his daughters by the end of Act 2, Lear is homeless, cold, wet, nearly naked, and at the point of mental exhaustion. Feeling firsthand what the truly poor of his kingdom have always suffered, he begins to empathize as he never had before:

O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the *superflux* to them  
And show the heavens more just.<sup>8</sup>

The word “superflux,” as the *OED* tells us, which first appears in print here and thus is presumably of Shakespeare’s coinage, is glossed in a note as meaning “Superfluity; bodily discharge, suggested by ‘physic’ (which also has the meaning of ‘purgative’) [. . .] Excess here is also excess of wealth.” A student of mine pointed out her confusion about this note, which struck me as odd, given that notes are intended to clarify difficult passages, not obfuscate them. What I soon discovered, however, was that this confusing note is entirely consistent with the narrow orientation of the *apparatus criticus* in *The Norton Shakespeare*.

“Superflux” can refer to “superfluity,” which usually and primarily refers to an excess of wealth. This in fact appears to be Lear’s primary meaning for “superflux”—shake your excess wealth, the overflow (“super” “flux”), to the poor; give alms. But “superfluity” is too difficult as a gloss for the already taxing “superflux.” Perhaps in an effort to help their readers, the editors then tie “superfluity” by means of a semicolon to “bodily discharge,” “physic,” and “purgative.” But this suggests something quite different—the abundance (a secondary meaning of “superfluity”) or overflowing of bodily fluids induced by a medicinal purgative. Though such a reading is possible, especially given Lear’s near-deranged state, “physic” refers primarily to metaphorical medicine (the wisdom of suffering) and only incidentally, if at all, to a literal purgative (the early modern version of Ipecac) as a means of disgorging whatever comes up for the poor. The wealthy are not to shake their “bodily discharges” for the impoverished to glean.

Only if one wants to read “superflux” reductively on the literal, physical level—far too often a *sine qua non* of materialist criticism—as a reference to one’s bodily discharge, then one might say that Lear is asking the rich to give the poor their vomit, which is largely nonsense. It is inconsistent with the language—one does not “shake” one’s vomit—and inconsistent with the notion that throwing up could somehow “show the heavens more just.”<sup>9</sup> Lear means, as the editors note secondarily, to shake their excess of wealth to the poor.

The image Lear initially uses, “take physic, pomp,” is indeed one of purgation, but it changes, as metaphors so often do when Shakespeare engages them, in the course of the evocation. Lear’s mixed metaphor soon (as soon as “That thou mayst shake the *superflux* to them”) becomes one of ears of corn falling to the ground during harvest time; this remnant of the harvest, known as the “gleanings,” is traditionally reserved for the poor. The allusion is biblical: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap right into the edges of your field; neither shall you glean the loose ears of your crop [. . .] You shall leave them for the poor and the alien.”<sup>10</sup> Such a reading is corroborated by Lear’s concluding statement that such beneficence will “show the heavens more just” (36). That is, human beings are allowed to work in concert with divine grace to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and give hope to the hopeless. Interestingly, the editors do not note what Lear means when he implores his listeners to “show the heavens more just” through their acts of charity.

Why, one may ask, have the editors made such a mistake with “superflux” and such an omission with his last line? Well, if one reads much fine new historicist criticism, one will find innumerable articles on the physicality of the body, its bleeding, apertures, grotesqueness, maladies, and commodification. The editors are focusing on what good materialists do—they relentlessly affirm the physical nature of reality, often to the exclusion of other, in this case more primary, readings. What is particularly telling about this note in *The Norton Shakespeare*, and quite representative, is the editors’ failure to identify the religious resonance of the passage.

In his “General Introduction” to *The Norton Shakespeare*, Greenblatt attests to the “staggering richness of Shakespeare’s language” that makes it impossible to “gloss everything.”<sup>11</sup> While true, this does not mean that materialist readings alone should be, as deconstructionists like to say, “privileged.” Indeed, the post-structuralist project, of which the new historicism and deconstruction are part, attempts not to privilege one meaning over others; to avoid “hegemonic” readings; and to attend to the marginalized voices in discourse. *The Norton Shakespeare* ought to be aware of preaching the “staggering richness of Shakespeare’s language” when its own interpretations walk the primrose path of materialist dalliance. Literary critics today hasten to assert that any editorial approach will necessarily be biased in one direction or another, but this hardly constitutes a compelling argument against the attempt at disinterested, even-handed editorial practice. One may never be completely unbiased (a point so trite as hardly to be worth mentioning), but there is surely a distinction between attempting to be as neutral as possible and dismissing the alleged naiveté of the idea in favor of one’s own biases.

### III

Let us move to another of the materialist assumptions in *The Norton Shakespeare*, one that foregrounds the editors’ obliviousness to the immaterial,

especially to manifestations of religious belief and practice in the plays. In his introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Stephen Greenblatt writes about Egeus's threat to have his daughter Hermia marry Demetrius instead of her beloved Lysander: "Not only does the play exaggerate the actual punitive power of the father—Egeus threatens his disobedient daughter with death (to which Theseus offers, as a grim alternative, the nunnery) [. . .]"<sup>12</sup> The passage continues, but let us consider Greenblatt's parenthetical aside. Just how "grim" is this alternative in the play itself? Theseus explains to the defiant Hermia that if she refuses to marry her father's choice of spouse for her, only two other options exist under Athenian law: "Either to die the death, or to abjure / For ever the society of men."<sup>13</sup> For a heterosexual woman in the throes of passionate love, this seems dire enough, but Theseus spells out the terms of the forced contract, asking her whether she can

endure the livery of a nun,  
For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd,  
To live a barren sister all your life,  
Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.<sup>14</sup>

If the passage were to end there Greenblatt would be right that this is indeed a "grim" alternative to marital consummation, a kind of living death. Theseus continues, however, in a vein quite different from the one Greenblatt identifies:

Thrice blessed they that master so their blood  
To undergo such maiden pilgrimage;  
But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd,  
Than that which withering on the virgin thorn  
Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness.<sup>15</sup>

Sublunary, mundane happiness is happiness certainly, but it is clearly, in Theseus's own words, a secondary, lesser calling than that of the life of celibacy. For Hermia, lifelong virginity would indeed be a "grim" prospect. Theseus, too, himself no celibate, refers to chastity as the speaker in Sonnet 3 does, who warns the fair youth, "Die single, and thine image dies with thee."<sup>16</sup> But Theseus himself is ambivalent, his words richly loaded with conflicting views of happiness—one material, one immaterial. Theseus recognizes, however, both that celibacy is a higher calling—nuns are "thrice blessed"—and that earthly happiness, the pleasures of this life, pale in light of happiness *sub specie aeternitatis*. In Greenblatt's introduction, however, the life of celibacy is "grim" without qualification.

One should not of course press Greenblatt's parenthetical aside too far, but his comment is in keeping with the tenor of his editorial notes elsewhere; cumulatively, such comments and notes become a thoroughgoing materialist accounting of the plays. Simply put, materialism views a physical pleasure delayed as a pleasure grimly denied; eternal blessedness does not enter the equa-

tion of Greenblatt's introduction, nor into the metaphysics of materialism. If one does not see Greenblatt's bias, imagine a similar error from the opposing direction: a critic with a *contemptus mundi* sensibility who could read the same words by Theseus and argue that Hermia should renounce marriage for the cloister. Such an approach would be resolving the passage's ambivalences as reductively in one direction as Greenblatt is in the other; neither comprehends the fullness of the passage. One would hope that any editor, if he or she wants to be responsive to the language of the text, would attempt to be fair to other perspectives. Unfortunately, a religiously oriented sensibility is often seen as a mask for the real, and deeper, political maneuvering. Occasionally of course this is true, but not always; religious belief simply cannot be reduced to power politics.

Nor can the notion of deity be shunted off to the fictive realm. To return to *Lear*, Greenblatt tells us in his introduction to the play that

Lear and the Earl of Gloucester [. . .] repeatedly look up at the heavens and call upon the gods for help, but the gods are silent. The despairing Gloucester concludes that the universe is actively malevolent—"As flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods; / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.37-38)—but the awful silence of the gods may equally be a sign of their indifference or their nonexistence.<sup>17</sup>

Quite true, though he neglects to mention a fourth possibility; namely, that the gods may exist and yet not respond instantaneously to human prayers. The belief that no immediate response from the heavens indicates divine nonexistence is an argument from silence; to draw conclusions from such absence of evidence is a dubious practice at best. As with all of Shakespeare's plays, *Lear* is not a morality play where God intervenes every moment as a kind of *deus ex machina* device. Such a belief in immediate divine intervention was naïve in Shakespeare's day, and it is nearly impossible that a writer as sophisticated as he held such a primitive view of the religious life. Real life, and the life that *Lear* and Gloucester encounter, is different. Even Greenblatt's statement here that Gloucester sees the heavens as malevolent is not a definitive reading, as Gloucester shows signs later in the play of resignation both to his own benighted human condition and to the divine will, telling Edgar before the decisive battle, "Grace go with you, sir!"<sup>18</sup> Invoking divine grace would be an odd statement for one who always already views the heavens as malevolent.

Greenblatt begs the question on the issue of divine existence here and elsewhere. Rightly commenting that *King Lear* is "set in a pagan world," he nonetheless continues and insists that the play "resists the redemptive optimism that underlies the Christian vision."<sup>19</sup> His main argument for this, here and in previous scholarly work he has done, is that Cordelia and Lear, characters for whom we sympathize, die in the end. How their death is a frustration of, much less a comment on, the Christian vision of redemption is not clear. The Chris-



tian vision of redemption makes no specific promises about the good guys winning in this world (see Job) or that people do not suffer and die in this world (see the central story in the New Testament). Besides begging the question of God's existence, a question that *King Lear* most pointedly does not attempt to answer, Greenblatt constructs a straw man out of religious belief and practice that is little more than facile.

#### IV

Having looked at a comedy and tragedy, let us take a look at the materialist prejudice in the histories, in this case the Henry VI plays. One of the striking features of *The Norton Shakespeare*, a text that attempts to historicize Shakespeare's work, is its assumption of near total literary ignorance on the part of undergraduate readers. In *The First Part of Henry the Sixth (1H6)*, for instance, Alençon tells his French compatriots that England sends to battle "none but Samsons and Goliases." In the note to this reference, the editors inform us that "the biblical warriors Samson and Goliath were noted for their exceptional strength."<sup>20</sup> Do undergraduates need to be told this? I am not so sanguine as to believe that every undergraduate understands such references or is on intimate terms with the Bible, but can one not assume a modicum of what E. D. Hirsch calls basic cultural literacy? If the answer to that question is "no," then what references and allusions must the editor note in the text? Every single one? One can certainly note all of the biblical allusions in Shakespeare, but one wonders whether doing so will help students who do not already know that Samson and Goliath were known for their strength come to terms with the variety of more subtle ways in which Shakespeare's language resonates with biblical thought and language?

Likewise, when Hercules is referred to in *3H6*, the editors note that Hercules was "a mythic hero of enormous physical strength [. . .]"<sup>21</sup> Again, do students need to know this? They may not have read Euripides or Ovid, but have they not seen the eponymous Disney movie? Lest this point be merely facetious, I should note that the editors rightly gloss references such as those to the first British Christian martyr, St. Alban, as well as other obscure allusions. But the task of any editor is to separate the wheat from the chaff, to note and gloss those words and things that most readers will not know, and to leave other things alone so as not to bog down the reader in supererogatory notes. Otherwise, they begin to point out everything, becoming like poor Moonshine in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* who thinks he has to tell his audience everything: "All that I have to say is to tell you that the lanthorn is the moon; I, the man i' the moon; this thornbush, my thornbush; and this dog, my dog."<sup>22</sup> And if these mythological and historical references were not bad enough as an overly intrusive editorial practice, such practices take on a decidedly materialist tint when they are applied to religious allusions.

Margaret in *2H6* says of the pious Henry VI that “all his mind is bent to holiness, / To number Ave-Maries on his beads.”<sup>23</sup> Roman Catholic practice apparently needs a gloss, which the editors duly supply: “Referring to a Roman Catholic devotion in which a string of beads (a rosary) is used to keep track of prayers said in a particular sequence.” While this is unobjectionable, especially for those unfamiliar with Catholic practice, we are further informed, “Among the prayers are [*sic*] ‘Ave Maria,’ or ‘Hail Mary,’ addressed to the Virgin Mary.” Do students not know that the “Mary” of the Ave Maria is Mary the mother of Jesus? Is there another candidate?

Worse yet, and the capstone to the editors’ intervention, is King Henry’s pious invocation later in the play, “O Thou eternal mover of the heavens,”<sup>24</sup> which the editors gloss in the right-hand margin, if one can believe it, as a reference to “(God).” Does God need a gloss; can students not figure out who the *primum mobile* is? Though students may not recognize the familiar Latin tag, they surely must know that God, “the eternal movers of the heaven,” is Henry’s addressee here. (One wonders why parentheses were used around “God”; perhaps out of embarrassment at the felt need of pointing out to whom Henry was actually praying.) A comment by Richard Strier is apposite here: “Religion in general is something of a problem for New Historicism, which tends—unlike Renaissance English culture—to have a radically secular focus.” Indeed, for theists of all stripes who read *The Norton Shakespeare*, “Greenblatt’s approach,” as Strier notes, “is like that of a keenly observant anthropologist who does not speak the language of the community he is observing.”<sup>25</sup> References to God and Mary become in *The Norton Shakespeare* not the rich resonance of biblical language and faith, but the arcana of alien religious ritual and language. Greenblatt’s own admirably candid admission that he “scarcely know[s] how to pray”<sup>26</sup> renders him like the proverbial fish out of water when dealing with what Park Honan calls the “profound religious and moral sense that underlies Shakespeare’s urbanity.”<sup>27</sup>

I hasten to add that it is not the editors’ intention to insult anyone’s intelligence; it is simply the case, at least with the editor-in-chief, that he is less conversant with religious language and sensibilities than are many of his readers, whether they profess religious belief or not. Greenblatt simply views the world as any materialist would and assumes that his audience does too. In his “General Introduction” to *The Norton Shakespeare*, for instance, Greenblatt also has a two-page section on “The English Bible.” Do we learn how Shakespeare engages religious language and sensibilities, that many of his own cadences rely upon biblical models, and so on? No; the approach is typically—myopically—historicist in its approach, telling us of the material conditions out of which various translations of Scripture, including the Geneva Bible (Shakespeare’s Bible), came into being. At the end of the historical overview, we are told quite succinctly, in one short phrase, that “the Scriptures had a powerful impact on his imagination” (18). Indeed, this is so,

but one would hardly know it from the explanatory apparatus of *The Norton Shakespeare*.

## V

Having decided to give *The Norton Shakespeare* a try one semester several years ago when it was first on the market, I learned that Shakespeare still had a way of connecting with students in spite of the various encumbrances the textual apparatus presents. From my own anecdotal experience I can report that students recognize the materialist biases of *The Norton Shakespeare*; that they are not in need of being told who Mary is; that they recognize Shakespeare does not simply “evacuate” religious symbols of their significance; and that the language of Shakespeare attends to very material concerns even as it gestures toward some of the most moving, ethereal, transcendent language that anyone has ever written.

In the end, does it matter that *The Norton Shakespeare* is so thoroughly materialist in its editorial orientation? The problem is not that attention to the history and materiality of the plays in and of itself is a mistake; on the contrary, materialist critics have done a great deal to situate the text historically and to illuminate much of the physicality and “texture” of these works. The problem is that materialism is reductive and simply cannot accommodate the full resonance of Shakespeare’s language and thought.

Consider, for instance, the transcendent language Shakespeare gives to Desdemona. Clearly a type of the long-suffering “Patient Griselda” of literary tradition, Desdemona transcends her stereotype and becomes a powerful woman whose religious faith informs her sense of marital fidelity. When Othello asks her to “Swear thou art honest,” she replies with swift stichomythic indignation, “Heaven doth truly know it.”<sup>28</sup> Shortly thereafter, out of Othello’s company, Desdemona offers a prayer in light of her impending death:

for by this light of heaven,  
I know not how I lost him. Here I kneel:  
If e’er my will did trespass ’gainst his love,  
Either in discourse of thought or actual deed,  
Or that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense  
Delighted them in any other form;  
Or that I do not yet, and ever did,  
And ever will (though he do shake me off  
To beggarly divorcement) love him dearly,  
Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much,  
And his unkindness may defeat my life,  
But never taint my love.<sup>29</sup>

The magisterial iambic pentameter of her prayer is powerfully evocative, even as it borders on a Griselda-like idolatry where the husband is almost in the place of God: she transgresses not God’s laws or love, but “his,” Othello’s.

Desdemona is, in effect, a bit of a materialist herself, focusing as she does on the person of Othello, her unswerving devotion to him, and on her body's (eyes, ears, sensory) delight in him. But that is not all. Desdemona prays to God, imploring divine aid to acknowledge, if only implicitly, her marital fidelity. Chaste as the scriptures command her, she now looks, in her confused state, for an answer as to why her husband so maligns her. Desdemona's prayer is a profound one for divine justice, for a *deus ex machina* that will never take place. She has nowhere else to go, though, and this, her last recourse, is to God, whom she believes listens even if no response is vouchsafed. A materialist account of this scene, like its accounting of much of Shakespeare, would reduce her prayer to delusion, or to her status as the oppressed other, or to the material inefficacy of prayer. Such would not have been the reaction of most of Shakespeare's audience, nor is it the reaction of most of those who see or read the play. It is, unfortunately, the already ideologically committed response of certain intellectuals, a reading that diminishes the experience of reading Shakespeare. Materialism alone simply cannot accommodate the wonderful profusion of Shakespeare's language.

Were he here, perhaps Shakespeare would say of *The Norton Shakespeare* what Hamlet says of Guildenstern: "you would pluck out the heart of mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak."<sup>30</sup> Teaching Shakespeare well means, as William Empson continually reminded us,<sup>31</sup> attending to the fullness of the language, to the interplay of the religious, the secular, power, love, the numinous, the mundane, and to life itself. *The Norton Shakespeare* is tilted unduly in the direction of materialism to the detriment of the richness of Shakespeare's creative imagination.

What shall I do with my *Norton Shakespeare*? It will prove an interesting historical anomaly, I am sure, but now it must go back on my shelf and gather some dust; *The Riverside Shakespeare* has regained its rightful place.

## Notes

1. See the introductory chapter in Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: the books and school of the ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994). I am greatly indebted to Scott Parsons for the comments and suggestions he offered on a draft of this essay, and to Peter Koritansky for his comments on the metaphysical and ethical aspects of materialism.
2. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, second edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (New York: Rinehart, 1997), 5.1.16–17. All play references are to this edition unless otherwise noted.
3. Norton's college sales representative in my area graciously supplied the data.
4. Whether the folio versions of plays represent authorial revision or some other combination of processes (revision, corruption in textual transmission, possibly scribal or printing error, and so on) is unclear. Greenblatt, however, while taking pains to assure us of the literary Heisenberg principle at work in textual editing—namely, that the "dream" of finding a master text, uncorrupted by time or our scrutiny of textual transmission, is impossible—nevertheless feels comfortable offering some revaluations of earlier college editions such as *The Riverside Shakespeare* that often conflated differing

- versions of the same play. Greenblatt adopts the playtexts of recent revisionist scholars, notably those selected by the Oxford Shakespeare (edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor), which argues forcibly for signs of Shakespearean revision in the folio versions of the plays. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, for instance, collates and conflates a quarto version (Q1) of *King Lear* with the substantially different folio version (133 additional lines in F1). The *Norton Shakespeare's King Lear* adopts the argument of the revisionists and offers Q1 and F1 in parallel texts, with the conflated version following as a concession to tradition. G. Blakemore Evans commented on this choice in the second edition of *The Riverside Shakespeare*: "the premise on which the proponents of the two-Lear theory [i.e., distinct quarto and folio versions] build their case—that the F1 text represents Shakespeare's own revision of the play as it appears in Q1–2—is, so far as any hard evidence is concerned, grounded on subjective interpretations of the 'facts' by critics, who, taking Shakespeare's full involvement as a given, discover exaggerated indications of a planned revision even in the most trifling differences[. . . ]," 1344. To his credit, Evans notes that untangling the discrepancies between versions is a difficult business, and he does not discount the possibility that the revisionists may be right.
5. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1. I am relying here on the metaphysical dimension of materialism, but it is worth noting that materialism also has an ethical component that denies the possibility of, among other things, free will. Any reader of materialist criticism will note one or both of these elements articulated in one form or the other.
  6. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 197.
  7. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.3.244–45.
  8. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.4.33–36, italics mine.
  9. The *OED* does not cite "physic" as meaning cathartic until 1617. Even if one were to concede that Shakespeare is ahead of the *OED* here, and that Lear often invokes divine wrath, as he does, this is not one of those moments; this passage in particular is less a call for divinely induced disgorgement than simple almsgiving out of mercy and compassion.
  10. *The Revised Standard Version* (Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1972), Leviticus 19: 9–10.
  11. Stephen Greenblatt, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 1997), 74.
  12. Stephen Greenblatt, Introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 805.
  13. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1.65. I am citing *The Riverside* edition, but it is identical here to the text in *The Norton Shakespeare*.
  14. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1.70–73.
  15. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1.74–76.
  16. Shakespeare, Sonnet 3, line 14.
  17. Greenblatt, 2307–08.
  18. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.2.4.
  19. Greenblatt, 2313.
  20. Shakespeare, *1H6, The Norton Shakespeare*, 1.3.12, note 3.
  21. Shakespeare, *3H6, The Norton Shakespeare*, 2.1.53, note 5. In contrast, *The Riverside Shakespeare* offers no note or gloss on the reference to Hercules.
  22. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.257–59.
  23. Shakespeare, *2H6*, 1.3.59–60.
  24. Shakespeare, *2H6*, 3.3.19.
  25. Richard Strier, *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 75.
  26. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 9. Greenblatt's atheism, a matter that he has made public record in a number of his books, may possibly account for some of his attempts to discount religious images and language in Shakespeare. He often claims (in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, for instance) that the performance of religious ritual on the early modern stage is most

often an attempt to appropriate, desacralize, and, as he says, “evacuate” the religious of its pre-Reformation significance. No doubt he is sometimes right, though such comments appear most often to be the anachronistic misreading of a postmodernist who would make Shakespeare in his own image. To Greenblatt’s credit, after noting needlessly for some 200 pages in *Hamlet in Purgatory* that most post-Reformation Protestants were uneasy with the concept of Purgatory, Greenblatt acknowledges, “It is conceivable that Shakespeare, with his recusant family background, his education in Stratford by teachers linked to [Edmund] Campion and the Jesuits, [and] his own possible links to Lancashire recusants, felt a covert loyalty to these structures and a dismay that they were being gutted,” 254. Further, “Hamlet does not know that Purgatory is a fiction,” and “Plays can borrow, imitate, and reflect much of what passes for everyday [spiritual] reality without necessarily evacuating this reality or exposing it as made-up,” 253. There is hope for Professor Greenblatt yet.

27. Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 50.
28. Shakespeare, *Othello*, 4.2.38.
29. Shakespeare, *Othello*, 4.2.150–61. The recent Oliver Parker film (1995), with Irene Jacob as Desdemona, brings this scene powerfully to the screen.
30. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.2.365–69.
31. See, for instance, William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1947).

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