

Hamlet and Poetry: Introduction

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Over the years, *Hamlet* reception has become an international and interdisciplinary object of research, with various scholarly communities re-examining their critical and creative discourses, through histories of its adaptation, translation, intertextuality or intermediality. While charting the impact of *Hamlet* is in no way new, the later twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have witnessed a range of publications that pinpoint *Hamlet* as a text-generating force (for books, see Derrida, Gibińska and Limon, Cinpoes, and Owen; for a dedicated journal, see *Hamlet Studies*; for websites, see *hamletworks.org* and *HyperHamlet*). We recognise *Hamlet* as cultural capital that legitimates cultural practice and theory, as well as ideological standpoints. This themed issue of *New Readings* testifies to how intertwined *Hamlet* reception is with national consciousness, modernity, literary cults, artistic experimentation and a self-reflective poetics, but above all with language and politics.

The articles are concerned with tangible questions of how *Hamlet* has inspired and infiltrated lyric poetry in different cultural and historical contexts for linguistic and political effect. They focus on modern and contemporary poetry in various languages and together aim to reach a fuller understanding of the forms of poetic practice that incorporate *Hamlet*. The poems are read in their original languages, with the authors providing their analyses and translations of quotations in the lingua franca of English. In examining how and to what ends poetry has recourse to Shakespeare's play, to fragments of it and translations of it, the issue includes reflections on particular poems, poetic genres, national poetics, and authorial oeuvres. *Hamlet* is here an instance of world literature coming into poetry and poetics to sufficient extent that it might be said to generate those texts.

For cultural materialists, Shakespeare's iconic status and global intertextual presence has been declared no more than a historical coincidence, and his alleged genius appropriately seen as a critical construct more than anything transcendent or quantifiable. As some recent publications underline (Apter, Casanova, Damrosch, Garber, Greenblatt, Moretti, Leerssen, and Tötösy de Zepetnek), the study of world literature underwent a crisis and has been extensively redefined (including in such projects as the book series *The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe*). It has found itself an interdisciplinary space in a rapidly changing interdis-

cursive context. The textual universe that world literature now refers to is informed by postcolonial, multicultural and migrant identities overwriting more straightforward narratives of nationhood and by postmodern subjectivities undermining any unproblematic reflections on the self. David Damrosch opened his enquiry into world literature by taking it to “encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4). *Hamlet* remains an epitome of those circulating works, even as we acknowledge that a “culture of origin” is problematic, not only since works originate across cultures but are sustained by ongoing crossings. Damrosch’s initial definition invites us to map the transnational traces of *Hamlet*—and of the poetry examined in this issue of *New Readings*, which in origin is Venezuelan, German, Polish, British, French, Italian and Hungarian. Our new readings of this poetry already indicate its circulation: Venezuelan poetry read in England, German poetry read in Italy, British poetry read in France, French poetry read in Italy, Italian and Hungarian poetry read in Wales.

Poetry has always found itself in touch with translation. Most of the poems discussed in the issue were written in languages other than English, demonstrating less a blanket universality and rather the intricate ways in which world literature can contribute an intertextual and interlingual fabric of strong but polyvalent meanings wherever it is received. Interpretations of *Hamlet* from previous contexts repeatedly fuel new poetic utterances. The poems and their academic exploration testify to *Hamlet*’s versatility as a source and to the comparability of poetries.

Several of the poems analysed are connected to redefining nationhood or some other sense of communal identity, often confronting ghosts which are skeletons in the nation’s closet. Thus Nicholas Roberts finds that *Hamlet* poems by Eugenio Montejo evoke Latin American ghosts of Simón Bolívar, Juan Vicente Gómez and Hugo Chávez, while Maria Elisa Montironi finds that Bertolt Brecht’s *Hamlet* poems reflect on the German barbarism of his time and articulate an anti-war stance. Katarzyna Burzyńska’s article interprets Zbigniew Herbert’s “Elegy of Fortinbras” as an expression of opposition to totalitarianism and as manifesting a distinctly Polish Hamlet, which emerges in the context of the contemporary political situation.

Other of the poems analysed in this issue are more connected to redefining an individual self, to “Hamletty” brooding, to borrow an adjective cited in Elise Brault-Dreux’s contribution, or to a perverse Ophelia. They do so in order to refute established phrases and challenge established images. Brault-Dreux argues that the speaker of D. H. Lawrence’s poem “The Ship of Death” contemplates “not being” as a passage to a new life, through references to Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be”, whereas Arianna Marmo focuses on a female, sometimes proto-feminist voice in the poetry of Renée Vivien and on her Ophelia who shifts from being an icon of purity to one of perversion.

Ideas of corroboration, competition, appropriation, negotiation and collaboration proposed by Neil Corcoran’s recent study to describe encounters between modern poets, on the one hand, and Shakespeare as a textual corpus, on the other,

highlight the scope and scale of reception. Anna Fochi's article describes shifts in negotiations with *Hamlet* across Giovanni Testori's works. It suggests that the two forms, play and poem, develop in an ongoing process of cross-fertilisation within Testori's oeuvre, between what might be perceived more widely as two "modes of engagement" after *Hamlet*, to take Linda Hutcheon's term (xv). In the end, this recalls Brault-Dreux's idea that Lawrence, in repeating Hamlet's words, performs a fragmented and distorted Hamletian role in the intertextual process. Márta Minier's article, elucidating poems in which Sándor Petőfi is a spectral presence, also identifies Hamlet-poets. For them, Petőfi, like Shakespeare the subject of a longstanding literary cult, is present particularly in his role as a poet with a mandate to serve the broader community. The implications of *Hamlet* for poetics frequently seem to involve some sense of having such a mandate. Thus Roberts detects Montejo's concern with loss and its possible poetic restitution, asking whether opposition is not so much about expressing dissent, but creating as an alternative a poetic space, while Montironi elucidates Brecht's sense of a moral duty to question classic texts in making his sonnets.

The poets examined in this journal issue would probably subscribe to Wales-based poet Philip Gross's declaration that "*Hamlet* is built into the foundations of my imagination, as for many of us".¹ His brand new, multi-part long poem "The Same River: Thirteen Variations", indeed, absorbs Hamlet's phrase "the play's the thing" into the ending of part 12. The absorption is absolutely casual, brief, taken for granted. It may be on a slighter scale than the type of absorption with which the enquiries in this journal issue are concerned, but it makes a metatextual acknowledgement of the poem's preoccupation with playing on a theme, and in this demonstrates the type of rapid expansion of meaning possible wherever known *Hamlet* phrases are deployed in poems.

The title poem from Norman Schwenk's latest collection *The More Deceived*, written by an American who has been resident in Wales for most of his adult life, is less casual in its use of Ophelia's line from Act 3, Scene 1. This recent poem, like Gross's and those discussed in the articles, utilises *Hamlet* for its shared cultural fragments. Schwenk's collection of love poetry makes overt allusion to the complex Hamlet–Ophelia relationship which functions as a transnationally recognised reference point. The rhetorical skeleton of his poem is an antithesis between the "less deceived", which phrase follows Philip Larkin's 1955 collection *The Less Deceived*, and the "more deceived", among whom are the speaker and the beloved addressee in Schwenk's poem. Most poems discussed in this journal issue likewise mark their place in a language's tradition of *Hamlet* reception and are read here in the knowledge of a *Hamlet* already lifted, fragmented and acculturated before the poets begin.

Although from the Bloomian critical tradition we recognise that Shakespeare as an ur-intellectual of Western culture has often led to intellectual and poetic anxiety, Corcoran reminds us that "[t]he theory of the anxiety of influence [. . .] does

¹Philip Gross, e-mail to Márta Minier, 18 June 2013.

not tell the whole story” (2). Lyric *Hamlet* reception, even more emphatically than literary and cultural reception generally, is always also about something else, especially power politics, gender politics or cultural politics. While for some modern artists and intellectuals Shakespeare is “the most anxiety-inducing of all” (Corcoran 3), the poets examined here seem remarkably unanxious about writing *Hamlet* into their poems. Rather their anxiety attaches to contested political histories, the pressing role and mandate of the poet in their society, and the liberties and limits of linguistic expression there. We might form the impression that they use *Hamlet* as a means of deflecting such anxiety. By offering close readings of the poetry within broader historical and theoretical explorations, this journal issue goes beyond *Hamlet*’s mere allusivity or citationality to reveal poetry at times deploying a linguistic authority, at times recasting or rejecting the connotations familiar characters, dialogues, soliloquies or phrases bring, but always making use of *Hamlet* to engage with the times and places of the writing.

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