University of Louisville

ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository

Faculty Scholarship

12-2019

Shakespeare and Experimental American Poetry

Alan Golding
University of Louisville, alan.golding@louisville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, and the Poetry Commons

Original Publication Information
Golding, Alan. "Shakespeare and Experimental American Poetry." *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures* 3.2 (Dec. 2019).

ThinkIR Citation
Golding, Alan, "Shakespeare and Experimental American Poetry" (2019). *Faculty Scholarship*. 793.
https://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty/793

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact thinkir@louisville.edu.

Shakespeare and Experimental American Poetry

⊙ Alan Golding
University of Louisville

Abstract: Why the particular emphasis proposed in my title on Shakespeare's importance for experimental or avant-garde American poetry? We can take Shakespeare's significance for American poetry *generally*, as for most writers in the English language, as a given. One can certainly trace Shakespeare's presence in a wide range of more mainstream twentieth-century poetry, from John Berryman to Anthony Hecht to Sylvia Plath, and anthologies of poetic responses to Shakespeare abound. But the use of the ultimate canonical Anglophone writer by experimental poets dedicated to changing the context of writing and reception in their own time raises some interesting questions not just about Shakespeare's universal accessibility, availability, and usefulness but about later experimental poets' senses of rupture and continuity. I'm interested in Shakespeare less as a site of continuity and tradition and more one of productive conflict and difference, in what Shakespeare has meant for experimental American poets not just as writer but as symbolic figure, as one of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "representative men." My goal, then, is not merely to point to the multiple American poetic uses of Shakespeare, but more specifically to suggest how some American poets (from Emerson and Williams to such contemporaries as Susan Howe, Harryette Mullen, Jen Bervin, and K. Silem Mohammad) have used or identified with Shakespeare to buttress what is often a particularly American version of avant-garde poetics.

Keywords: Shakespeare, experimental contemporary American poetry, William Carlos Williams, Susan Howe, Harryette Mullen

CLC: I712 **Document Code**: A **Article ID**: 2096-4374(2019)02-0041-15

The original occasion for this essay was a talk to the community in the city of Rajkot, Gujarat, India, on the occasion of celebrating Shakespeare's quadricentennial in 2016—an occasion that inevitably invited some contemplation of Shakespeare in the twentieth-first century.[1] Those concerns have recently been revivified by the demise of Harold Bloom, for whom Shakespeare influentially constituted the foundation of a humanistically and aesthetically based and contentiously defended "Western canon." In this context, I look to destabilize or expand the idea of the "aesthetic" on which Bloom's hypostasized canon rests and complicate our available notions of what, in Anglophone poetry, stems from Shakespeare.

A reasonable question to start with might be this: why the particular emphasis proposed in my title on Shakespeare's importance for experimental or avant-garde American poetry? We can take

Shakespeare's significance for American poetry *generally*, as for most writers in the English language, as a given. (The fact that in many contexts, especially postcolonial ones, that significance may be *controversial* is a separate issue.) It's true that in some contexts where one might expect otherwise, the connection between Shakespeare and later poetry is surprisingly absent: the U.S.-based online journal *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* has never, in twenty-three issues published over fourteen years as of this writing, featured an article on Shakespeare and poetry. But James Shapiro's recent collection *Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now* gathers 240 years of primary texts to track the longstanding American obsession with Shakespeare across all the arts, while Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan's book by the same title offers a scholarly history of that same obsession.[2]

One can certainly trace Shakespeare's presence in a wide range of more mainstream twentieth-century poetry, from John Berryman (who left behind enough writing on Shakespeare for a 396-page posthumously edited book) to Anthony Hecht to Sylvia Plath, and anthologies of poetic responses to Shakespeare abound.[3] But the use of the ultimate canonical Anglophone writer by experimental poets dedicated to changing the context of writing and reception in their own time raises some interesting questions not just about Shakespeare's universal accessibility, availability, and usefulness but about later poets' senses of rupture and continuity. "Rupture" in the American tradition has often involved not so much the radical rupture of the historical European avant-gardes (Futurism, Dada, Surrealism) but a neo-avant-garde version of Ezra Pound's famous modernist injunction to "make it new." If the "it" in Pound's aphorism is both the poetry of the present and the poetry of the past, then Shakespeare has his place in the American poetic avant-garde. I'm interested in Shakespeare less as a site of continuity and tradition and more one of productive conflict and difference, in what Shakespeare has meant for experimental American poets not just as writer but as symbolic figure, as one of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "representative men." My goal, then, is not merely to point to the multiple American poetic uses of Shakespeare, but more specifically to suggest how some American poets—and I can only cover a few examples among many possible—have used or identified with Shakespeare to buttress what is often a particularly American version of avant-garde poetics.[4]

There's a long history of anthologies of British poetry dedicated to the adulation of Shakespeare, and a rather more recent history of collections of American poetry. However, these typically do not contain formally exploratory work of the kind that I want to look at here, work that responds to Shakespeare while also stretching the boundaries of the possible in poetry.[5] As one example of such collections, David Starkey and Paul J. Willis, editors of the 2005 anthology *In a Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare,* sought poets who would "register not so much their appreciation of Shakespeare the poet as their interaction with Shakespeare's works themselves," "poets willing and capable of testing, or even challenging, the plays and sonnets" (1). This is an admirable goal. After all, yet another anthology of adulation dedicated to the proposition that "Shakespeare is great" makes for the least interesting poetic and critical claim imaginable. It turns out, however, that "most of the poems came to us through a call for submissions placed in the January 2003 issue of Poets & Writers magazine" (2), the official organ of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs and of the U.S. creative writing industry. And a call for papers in an industry organ is likely to yield, as this one does, a fair amount of industrial product, low-key and flatly conventional in a way that Shakespeare at his

best never was. I hope to proceed in a different direction.

Many discussions of the poetics of U.S. poetry begin with the germinal influence of Emerson, and particularly with major essays like "The American Scholar" and "The Poet." By the time of Emerson's collection *Representative Men*, Shakespeare has become the archetype of "the poet" in his thinking—"Shakspeare; or, The Poet," in the title of Emerson's 1845-1846 lecture and subsequent 1850 essay. What is remarkable about reading this essay from a position within the critical field of contemporary American poetry—poetry marked by extensive use of appropriation, citation, and various techniques for complicating the idea of the "original"—is the extent to which Emerson's Shakespeare, as an appropriator, anticipates the uses to which his own work has been put. The postwar American poet Robert Duncan notoriously described himself as a "derivative" poet, though he packed a very particular set of meanings into that conventionally unflattering term.[6] More recently, contemporary U.S. poetic movements such as flarf and conceptual writing have used multiple forms of borrowing, Google sampling, and rewriting, yielding works of what Kenneth Goldsmith has theorized as "uncreative writing," the products of "unoriginal genius." Yet here is Emerson, in the first paragraph of his Shakespeare essay, reflecting on originality: "Great men are more distinguished by range and extent, than by originality," "nor does valuable originality consist in unlikeness to other men," and "the greatest genius is the most indebted man" (247). He reiterates the idea—as, of course, Emerson was never reluctant to do—that "great genial power . . . consists in not being original at all; in being altogether receptive; in letting the world do all, and suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind" (248). This is the Shakespeare, as we shall see, of William Carlos Williams, the Shakespeare (if he had one) of Kenneth Goldsmith, of uncreative writing and unoriginal genius.

Up to the points I've quoted so far in his essay, Emerson still has not mentioned Shakespeare, but immediately goes on to establish the cultural and literary context that Shakespeare enters, one of broadly familiar, popular, received, and often anonymous texts: "It is now no longer possible to say who wrote them first," so, in this moment that bypasses or precedes the invention of the "author," "Shakespeare . . . esteemed the mass of old plays waste stock, in which any experiment could be freely tried" (249). He continues, "thus all originality is relative. Every thinker is retrospective," and "it is easy to see that what is best written or done by genius in the world was no man's work, but came by wide social labour" (251-252). Contrary to Polonius's advice—"neither a borrower or a lender be"—Emerson's Shakespeare was a lifelong borrower.

Along with its philosophical basis in German and English Romanticism, it is Shakespeare who also provides Emerson a case study for his concept, massively influential in the history of American poetry, of the "meter-making argument." Emerson comments on "the metre of Shakespeare, whose secret is, that the thought constructs the tune, so that reading for the sense will best bring out the rhythm" (250). The thought constructing the tune echoes this well-known claim from "The Poet," arguably the first formulation in American literature of the theory of organic form: "For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing" (186). Emerson's metre-making argument in turn shapes Walt Whitman's thinking about poetic form, replete with organic metaphors. Whitman writes, in the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*: "The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud

from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form" (622). And from here it's chronologically a hundred years but conceptually a short step to Robert Creeley's aphorism, as cited by Charles Olson, "form is never more than an extension of content," from Olson's 1950 essay "Projective Verse" (16), and variations on it like Denise Levertov's "form is never more than a *revelation* of content" (13). (It's worth adding parenthetically that in 1956 Olson, one of the most influentially innovative figures in all of mid-twentieth-century American poetry, wrote a substantial essay on Shakespeare's prosody, "Quantity in Verse, and Shakespeare's Late Plays," and that his archive contains ten notebooks from the period towards a full-length book on Shakespeare. As an advanced graduate student at Harvard, and before launching his poetic career, Olson had been the first scholar to reveal the depths of Herman Melville's debt to Shakespeare, in his 1938 essay, "Lear and *Moby-Dick*," and Shakespeare features centrally in his genre-bending and field-defining 1947 book on Melville, *Call Me Ishmael*.)

Like Emerson, a poet of a later generation, William Carlos Williams, treats Shakespeare as a figure as much as he treats Shakespearean drama and poetry, and indeed Williams's Shakespeare is remarkably Emersonian, a relatively anonymous character through whom the spirit of the age flowed: as Williams has it in his 1927 experiment in generic hybridity "The Descent of Winter," "a nameless fellow whom nobody noticed," with "that mean ability to fuse himself with everyone that nobodies have, to be anything at any time, fluid," "a prime borrower, a standardizer—No inventor" (*Imaginations* 253, 258).[7] To understand Williams's Shakespeare, it will help to recall certain basic principles of Williams's poetics. If Whitman turned out to be the distinctively American poet called for in Emerson's declaration of intellectual independence from England, "The American Scholar," then Williams was surely another, in stressing the intrinsic value of the local, in his Adamic emphasis on making a fresh literary start in new American conditions, and in his insistence that modern American poetry draw on the immediate, the present, the familiar for its subject matter and its language, as Emerson had called for close to a hundred years earlier. Throughout his career, Williams returned to the principle that the local constitutes the only universal, and it is through that lens that he both reads Shakespeare and seeks to construct a non-Eurocentric American modernism.

In this restless American experimenter's posthumously published notes on the place of the arts in education from the late 1920s, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, "Shakespeare" is exactly the figure or name for that place, standing as an antidote or under-developed alternative to the deadening forces of "science" and "philosophy" (terms that Williams never uses very precisely). Seven sections of *The Embodiment of Knowledge* feature "Shakespeare" in their title. For Williams, part of Shakespeare's great value lies in anticipating twentieth-century linguistic self-reflexiveness or preoccupation with what the Russian Futurist Vladimir Khruchenykh called "the word as such": "the only real in writing is writing itself," Williams asserts, and Shakespeare, uninterested—in Williams's reading—in thought, philosophical abstraction, or realism, offers "pure writing that can't get away from itself to be thought" (*Embodiment* 13). (This foregrounding of language becomes a trend in later innovative poets' reading of Shakespeare, with, for instance, the poet and Shakespeare scholar Stephen Ratcliffe arguing that "words . . . are what *Hamlet* itself is all about" [52].)[8] Now we might argue that Williams offers a pretty tendentious reading of Shakespeare—a Bard without thought or philosophical abstraction—

but he has other goals than scholarly objectivity or critical accuracy. He constructs a Shakespeare who stands in direct contrast to the "scholars" whom Williams persistently damns, who are the negative "other" to Shakespeare throughout *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, and who represented the intellectually regressive forces obstructing Williams's version of American modernism.

What does Williams mean by setting Shakespeare in opposition to the "scholarly?" "His words are lived particles—the antithesis of the scholarly which is the simulacrum of which I speak. His words are knowledge in themselves" (*Embodiment* 99), or, in the terms of Williams's title, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*. Williams finds in Shakespeare "the surge of the unscholarly gist, the disordered inclusiveness" (137)—certainly a feature of his own poetics, and of his effort to enlist Shakespeare as unlikely ally in the project of creating a locally based and distinctively American modernism. That enlistment reads as follows: "as a new people we cannot go back to the classic mode but in the manner of Shakespeare (not in the style of Shakespeare) follow his naturalism to a neglected conclusion—a wholly new literature" (138). "Classic": in Williams, that's code for the intellectually oppressive, the imaginatively narrowing, the scholarly, received wisdom. Nor does he use "naturalism" here in the sense that we might mean it today, to refer to a set of philosophical beliefs and quasi-realist conventions marking a particular strain of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American fiction, the work of Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser. Williams's "naturalism" is local, culturally specific, grounded in and responsive to the immediate environment, and it stands, as embodied in Shakespeare's work, "outside the scholarly tradition" (138), his shorthand for the institutional imposition of literary convention. Continuing his identification with Shakespeare, then, Williams, writing in the 1920s, suggests of his own cohort of American modernists that "our problem before the world is precisely his [Shakespeare's]: shall we be accepted because of our species of 'naturalism' or rejected because we do not meet the qualifications of scholarship?" (*Embodiment* 139). As a "discoverer" (the term of high praise that Pound used around the same time in his essay "How to Read" for the highest category of writer), Shakespeare is a model for Williams's experimental peers in the 1920s: "It is he who breaks the school to escape who has the best chance of survival" (140).

Though Williams does not comment, as far as I'm aware, on Shakespeare as sonneteer, he has strong opinions on the sonnet as a form, remarking famously in the 1944 "Author's Introduction [*The Wedge*]" that "all sonnets say the same thing of no importance" (*Selected* 257). Why? Because in the binary distinction between "saying" and "making" that Williams invokes as central to his poetics, between expression and construction, we might say, the sonnet is not a compositional form responsive to the immediate pressures of the poet's contemporary speech, that "speech" that must be "compose[d]" or "made" into a poem. (An unspoken argument with Robert Frost's essay "The Figure a Poem Makes" lurks in the background here.) If "there is no poetry without formal invention" (257)—a fundamental Williams tenet—then "all sonnets" betray their literally pre-scribed structure, form as repetition rather than as invention.

"Why NOT write sonnets?" Williams begins one section of *The Embodiment of Knowledge*. Despite the presence of major sonneteers such as Robert Frost, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, or Edna St. Vincent Millay among his contemporaries, Williams considered the writing of sonnets in the modernist period as a fetishizing of a received form disconnected from any demands or exigencies of content. While Williams does not notably associate the sonnet with Shakespeare (his Shakespeare is

the dramatist), the passage is worth quoting at length:

> Why NOT write sonnets? Because, unless the idea implied in the configuration can be de-formed it has not been *used* but copied. *All* sonnets mean the same thing because it is the configuration of the words that is the major significance. Because it is a configuration (the sonnet) whose meaning supercedes any idea that may be crammed into it. It is not an invention but anchors beyond the will—does not liberate the intelligence but stultifies it—and by its cleverness, apt use stultifies it the more by making pleasurable that which should be removed. (*Embodiment* 17)

As we shall see, de-forming the sonnet becomes a notable aspect of experimental American poetics decades later. Meanwhile, "invention" as a key term in Williams's poetics takes us back to Shakespeare, who on the previous page of *Embodiment of Knowledge* has been put forward as a kind of localist Elizabethan Williams: "He did not invent story or form, he did invent reality in the words which stemmed back directly to things, to the ground, to his own simplicity, directness, and after all emptiness" (16). From one point of view, Williams describes Shakespeare in thoroughly insulting terms: "Shakespeare has had no influence on English literature that is not a bad one," "probably was a fairly ignorant man" (137), and is "stupid," "ignorant" (89) insofar as he didn't move into philosophy like Goethe or Francis Bacon. But this so-called "ignorance" of Shakespeare's is, for the localist modernist Williams, precisely the source of his power. In a 1927 note seeking to understand the roots or nature of Shakespeare's imagination in the absence of much information about his life—an ongoing preoccupation for Williams as for many readers—Williams again reads Shakespeare as a kind of rooted localist like himself: "This is the sort of person who lives in one place, having no need to move his carcass in order to keep alive. It is the imagination that travels" (*Selected* 55).[9]

Approaching Shakespeare a little more obliquely, in her now-classic 1985 book of poet's criticism, *My Emily Dickinson*, the contemporary American poet Susan Howe works through Shakespeare's significance for Emily Dickinson, and indirectly for herself. (As with Olson and his *Call Me Ishmael*, American poets' interest in Shakespeare often takes the form of analyzing Shakespeare's presence in another beloved writer's work, creating a triangulated relationship—Olson-Melville-Shakespeare or Howe-Dickinson-Shakespeare—through which one can read the more recent poet's work.) The core of Howe's book is a 106-page tour-de-force reading of—or perhaps "reading with" would be more precise—Dickinson's "My life had stood a loaded gun." The fifth line of that poem, "And now we roam in Sovreign woods," launches Howe into a ten-page discursus on the idea of the "sovereign" in Shakespeare, mainly in the Wars of the Roses tetralogy culminating in *Richard III*. Howe writes "Sovereign lingers on in language, distillation of S, sun—the source, its worldly message muffled, hubris, history, and halting, in the liquid suggestiveness of 'reign'" (*My Emily* 83). On the basis of this kind of microscopic unpacking of syllables, Howe goes on to speculate that Dickinson "instinctively understood the profound linguistic skepticism that forced Shakespeare to undercut what characters in history were saying at the same time they said it" (93). In this remark, she is picking up on an earlier, similar observation about language in Shakespeare, and in *King Lear* in particular:

> [Dickinson's] poems are monologues without a named narrator, their supreme source

> is Shakespeare. *Lear* is a play charged with linguistic energy, dissimulation, consecration, invocation, quibble, sleight-of-hand, and illusion; constant reversals of meaning, constant wordplay on "seeing" and "nothing." (71)

In this triangulation, then, Shakespeare's "profound linguistic skepticism"—recall Stephen Ratcliffe's "words . . . are what *Hamlet* . . . is ultimately all about"—is equally that of the postmodern poet and of Dickinson's own practice.

Given Howe's account here of *King Lear*, it is unsurprising to find her working with the play's sounds, themes, and characters in her 1980 work "The Liberties," a feminist excavation of women's treatment in literary history and their relationship to powerful men via the figures of Jonathan Swift's companion Hester Johnson, known as Stella, and Lear's Cordelia, as well as Howe herself. For the purpose of thinking about Howe and Shakespeare, the key section is the one titled "WHITE FOOLSCAP / Book of Cordelia." "Foolscap" has come to refer to paper by derivation from its original use as a watermark, but it comes to us with the associations of *Lear*'s Fool, of a buried image within the paper, and with the idea of the blank sheet to be written upon. The epigraph that begins "WHITE FOOLSCAP" is the famous exchange from the first scene of *King Lear* in which Lear, testing his daughters' love, comes at last to Cordelia:

> Lear: . . . what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
> Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.
> Lear: Nothing?
> Cordelia: Nothing.
> Lear: Nothing will come of nothing: speak again. (1066)

This "nothing" becomes figured on the first page of Howe's text as "O"—zero, nothing, the shape of the speechless female mouth confronted with the demands of male power, even beloved power, and, not least, the vagina in Elizabethan slang. Lear's injunction is echoed or repeated in Howe's fourth line: "take pity spittle speak" (*Europe* 171). Indeed, much of this first page of the sequence is preoccupied with the tension between utterance (rational or otherwise) and silence: "spittle speak," "mouthing O," "only nonsense," "S(golden)," "bellowing augury," "NEMESIS singing from cask."[10]

In its characteristically fractured and fragmented poetics, its almost complete refusal of full predication, "WHITE FOOLSCAP" is hardly paraphraseable, but Shakespeare, and Cordelia in particular, is central to its main concerns. The three-word sequence "corona / chromosphere / Cordelia" (*Europe* 172) establishes that centrality. "Corona" as crown and as the outer layer of the sun's atmosphere and "chromosphere" as the reddish layer of gases around the sun, juxtaposed contrastively with Cordelia, invoke the center of the solar system, the "son" of patriarchy in the obvious pun, and Cordelia's distance from sun / son-ship. (If I seem to be inflating the significance of the son / sun pun here, let's realize that the passage anticipates the resonant statement on the next page, "Copernicus / the sun / is a cloud / of dust" [173].) If "nothing" is the term of Cordelia's first refusal or resistance, the "no no no" of the following line is the term of Lear's final anguish in Act V, scene 3 of the play. The next passage is quite remarkable:

the hoth(heath
sline(clear
crystal
song
le
lac
pure
semblance
apercu (173)

Here we have invoked the heath of *King Lear* standing in a half-rhyme with "hoth" (the Old English root of "oath"); "sline," the vertical seam crossing a coal face or the surface of a coal face, calls up ideas of excavation at the same time as it is an "S-line" (for Stella and Susan). We can note the predominance of sibilants and of the letter C itself, both hard and soft, in this small passage (clear, crystal, lac, semblance, apercu)—a passage the right-hand margin of which, through Howe's arrangement of short and slightly longer lines, itself takes on the shape of a C, for Cordelia. (We find an "S" shape, for Stella and Susan, later in the sequence.)

In the figure of Lear, we have the abuse and later the breakdown of male power: "giggling in a whistling wind / unbonneted he runs" (173) and later "blind (folded) / bare (footed) / nuclear (hooded) / w i n d b r i d l e d" (174). Though it is Gloucester, another shattered father, not Lear, who "has holes instead of eyes" (174), Howe's tender conflation of the two broken fathers suggests both the blindness and failure of patriarchy, even as the phrasing recalls another Shakespearean image, this time from *The Tempest* via another American poet, T. S. Eliot: "Those are pearls that were his eyes."（Shakespeare 1378; Eliot 59）There's a real question, however, as to whether Cordelia as symbolic woman / daughter is or can be rescued from the patriarchy's breakdown: "Cordelia dies," and the moment is "(heartrending)," but the immediate next move in the poem is to "reclasp her hands into obscurity" (175) in a perfectly measured iambic pentameter. The sequence soon turns again, then, to the silencing or breakage of female speech—"give tongue / are you silent o my swift" (176). In one reading, this moment of *apo koinou* recalls Lear as he insists on the appropriate or expected form of speech from his daughter: "give tongue / are you silent." It also suggests the largely unheard-from Hester Johnson, Swift's Stella, briefly and poignantly expressing her love: "o my swift." Or is it Swift who is silent, about his relationship with Hester Johnson? The possibilities here are numerous, but still, for female speech "all coherence [is] gone" and "Thrift thrift / we are left darkling" (*Europe* 176), including on the darkling plain of Matthew Arnold's canonical "Dover Beach."

In "The Liberties," Howe adopts Shakespeare for late-twentieth-century avant-garde feminist poetics by placing Cordelia at the center of a serial poem involving failed speech, stutter, and the regulation or policing of speech. She traces forms of silencing through myth and fairy tale, history, literature, autobiography, with the links among the fathers and daughters of her poem established phonically, through alliteration, assonance, and "feminine" rhyme: the mythical Celtic god Lir, Lear, Cordelia, Stella, Cinderella, Susan. In a later serial poem, "Melville's Marginalia," Howe's extended

poetic celebration of Herman Melville via the marginalia recorded in his personal library, Cordelia reappears with other Shakespearean heroines. Among its many other registers, “Melville’s Marginalia” is an insistently (though not polemically) feminist project, organized partly around the feminized Irish poet James Clarence Mangan (one speculative model for Melville’s Bartleby) and the female partners of canonical male writers: Mary Shelley as amanuensis for Percy, as one example. In an analogy for the unpacking of a predominantly patriarchal literary history, Howe will pick through Melville’s marginalia to find the submerged women in a canonical male’s reading: “I will dismember marginalia / ‘l’ for ‘i’ and ‘i’ for ‘l’ / Ophelia Juliet Cordelia” (*Nonconformist* 146). Here, through rhyme, assonance, and consonance, Howe transforms Alexandre Dumas’ classic statement of male bonding from *The Three Musketeers* (“All for one and one for all”) into a simultaneous uniting of Shakespearean women (Ophelia, Juliet, Cordelia) and the suggestion that—at least in relation to the male protagonists of the plays in which they appear—they are, at a certain level, “marginalia.”

A number of the concerns animating Howe’s engagement with Shakespeare in the interests of an experimental feminist poetics persist in two poets of a later generation, Harryette Mullen and Jen Bervin, who also take on the necessary de-forming of the sonnet called for by Williams. In his introduction to *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*, the British poet Jeff Hilson, after reviewing a number of recent sonnet anthologies, observes that “if the available anthologies were anything to go by, . . . linguistically innovative poets were clearly not interested in the sonnet as a form” (9). Hilson cites John Fuller’s comment from his 1972 historical study *The Sonnet* that “there is not ‘very much to do with [the sonnet] that has permanent significance for the form,’ suggesting that it had had everything done to it that could be done” (11). Hilson’s point, of course, is that recent sonnet anthologies ignore experimental poets’ work, and I would propose, similarly, that this work may well have “permanent significance for the form” and that the sonnet is robust enough to sustain having a lot still done to it. Harryette Mullen’s “Dim Lady,” from her 2002 volume *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, is a prose poem treatment of Shakespeare’s sonnet 130, “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.” Let me juxtapose the two texts, starting with Shakespeare’s:

> My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
> I have seen roses damask’d, red and white,
> But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
> And in some perfumes is there more delight
> Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
> I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
> That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
> I grant I never saw a goddess go;
> My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:
> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare. (1475)

And here is Mullen's poem:

> My honeybunch's peepers are nothing like neon. Today's special at Red Lobster is redder than her kisser. If Liquid Paper is white, her racks are institutional beige. If her mop were Slinkys, dishwater Slinkys would grow on her noggin. I have seen tablecloths in Shakey's Pizza Parlors, red and white, but no such picnic colors do I see in her mug. And in some minty-fresh mouthwashes there is more sweetness than in the garlic breeze my main squeeze wheezes. I love to hear her rap, yet I'm aware that Muzak has a hipper beat. I don't know any Marilyn Monroes. My ball and chain is plain from head to toe. And yet, by gosh, my scrumptious Twinkie has as much sex appeal for me as any lanky model or platinum movie idol who's hyped beyond belief. (20)

While Mullen deserts Shakespeare's sonnet structure for a quintessentially twentieth- and twentieth-first-century form (granted the precedents of Bertrand and Baudelaire), the prose poem, she preserves his syntactic structure, the number of grammatically complete statements (ten in each poem), and the (presumptively) male speaker describing the beloved in a parody blazon. Mullen's version is unmetered, except for two sentences in the middle audible as a rhymed iambic pentameter couplet: "I don't know any Marilyn Monroes. / My ball and chain is plain from head to toe." Formally, Mullen uses all the tropes of the Shakespeare original: assonance, alliteration, internal rhyme, half-rhyme, simile. She adapts that original, however, to raise issues of gender and race. In the hands of a highly self-reflexive black poet, the title, "Dim Lady," talks back to the tradition of Shakespeare's "dark lady" in complexly racialized ways. This "dim lady" is neither Ben Jonson's radiant "goddess excellently bright" (and Shakespeare's original itself presses the distinction between "goddess" and everyday "mistress") nor is she the Anglo-Saxon rose—blushing pink cheeks, translucent skin, ruby lips—of the predominantly white love poetry tradition. She confounds objectification in such terms. Her eyes and lips are unremarkable or nondescript ("nothing like neon"), her skin is "institutional beige," her breath smells of garlic, she is as behind the times as the diction used to describe her, and overall, she is "plain from head to toe." And yet the speaker loves her more than "any lanky model or platinum movie idol who's hyped beyond belief" in the entertainment media, the contemporary version of the love sonnet's hyperbole. As if to acknowledge that it's invoking a dated tradition, a dead rhetoric, the poem consciously uses brand names from another era or of no-longer-viable U.S. businesses, and worn-out vernacular: "honeybunch," "kisser," "noggin," "main squeeze," words that have already been relegated to dictionaries of slang.[11]

The canonical original of sonnet 130 gets stretched even closer to breaking point in another Mullen prose poem, "Variation on a Theme Park," inspired by living near Disneyland and visiting it with her nephew:

> My Mickey Mouse ears are nothing like sonar. Colorado is far less rusty than Walt's lyric riddles. If sorrow is wintergreen, well then Walt's breakdancers are dunderheads. If hoecakes are Wonder Bras, blond Wonder Bras grow on Walt's hornytoad. I have seen roadkill damaged,

> riddled and wintergreen, but no such roadkill see I in Walt's checkbook. And in some purchases there is more deliberation than in the bargains that my Mickey Mouse redeems. I love to herd Walt's sheep, yet well I know that muskrats have a far more platonic sonogram. I grant I never saw a googolplex groan. My Mickey Mouse, when Walt waddles, trips on garbanzos. And yet, by halogen-light, I think my loneliness as reckless as any souvenir bought with free coupons. (75)

The high-culture associations of "Variation on a Theme" with the classical music tradition are conjoined with popular culture via the simple addition of the word "park." As with "Dim Lady," the poem follows the model of sonnet 130, and actually does so rather more closely than the previous poem. Interestingly for a black poet in explicit conversation with her white fellow travelers and with the white tradition, it follows exactly the pattern of the original. In a variation of the Oulipo S + 7 procedural technique, in which the writer reworks a prior text by choosing a word (usually a noun) and substituting for it the seventh noun that follows in a dictionary of the writer's choice, here Mullen has substituted words beginning with the same letter, and sometimes also a word of directly opposite sense, for Shakespeare's originals. Thus "my mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" becomes "my Mickey Mouse ears are nothing like sonar," with appropriate aural echoes (sun-sonar); "Coral is far more red" becomes "Colorado becomes far less rusty," and so on. Her particular use of the S + 7 technique allows Mullen to follow not just the original's syntactic patterns, as she does in "Dim Lady," but its sound patterns: thus "I grant I never saw a goddess go" becomes "I grant I never saw a googolplex groan." This is play, but serious play, reinserting Shakespeare back into the popular culture from which he derived his work.

In a different treatment of sonnet 130, Jen Bervin uses a poetics of erasure to fade out everything but the "I have seen roses . . . / . . . no such roses" of lines 5-6, bringing to the surface the subversive, parodic center of that poem, in which Shakespeare himself acknowledges that there are "no such roses" as those constructed in and by the English poetic tradition. Bervin invokes here the now-substantial body of poetic and critical commentary on the "rose" as a feminized trope encapsulating the gendered history of Anglophone poetry. She speaks to this history in her "Working Note" in *Nets*, where she describes her process: "I stripped Shakespeare's sonnets bare to the 'nets' to make the space of the poems open, porous, possible—a divergent elsewhere. When we write poems, the history of poetry is with us, pre-inscribed in the white of the page; when we read or write poems, we do it with or against this palimpsest." "Palimpsest" is exactly the right term, for *Nets* does not actually white out or erase swathes of Shakespeare's text; it preserves it in a faded, barely legible gray, and the palimpsest remains visible, not merely thematic or conceptual. Shakespeare becomes the ghost in this rewriting of his own text, with Bervin releasing the poems buried within the sonnets as the traditional sculptor releases a form from the stone. Michael Davidson's notion of the "palimtext" captures usefully both the material form of Bervin's layered intertextuality and its ideological implications: "As its name implies, the palimtext retains vestiges of prior inscriptions out of which it emerges. Or, more accurately, it is the still-visible record of its responses to those earlier writings" (68). When this mode makes marginal(ized) and so-called authoritative texts collide, as it does in Bervin's hands, "the poem as palimtext becomes a window onto forces of stabilization in the culture at large" (92). And these palimtextual "prior inscriptions" are partly the (gendered) history of poetry. Though *Nets* does not

read overtly like a feminist text, that palimtext or palimpsest for many women writers has historically been a patriarchal one, and Bervin's fragments have been a quintessentially female poetic form, from Sappho to Emily Dickinson to Kathleen Fraser. Meanwhile, to produce the title "nets," what has faded into gray is the patrilineal, "the son[nets] of William Shakespeare." Bervin's text is a trace of the original—but are the "nets" the original sonnets, catching or holding the words now being released, or are they Bervin's poems themselves, trawling key words out of the sea that is Shakespeare? Bervin can be seen as responding to the question that Susan Howe poses in *My Emily Dickinson*: "How do I, using messages from the code of others in order to participate in the universal theme of Language, pull SHE from all the myriad symbols and sightings of HE [?]" (*My Emily* 17).

For one final revisioning of Shakespeare's sonnets among contemporary experimental writers, we can turn to K. Silem Mohammad's "Sonnagrams" project. The title combines Shakespeare's sonnets, a sonogram (featured, for instance, on the cover of *Sonnagrams 1-20*, but with Shakespeare's head superimposed on it), and the anagram. That each poem is a sonnagram and not a sonnagraph counts for something: sound is central, "son" as the French "sound." In this Oulipo-based project, and unlike the original sonnets, the iambic pentameter is almost metronomically regular. Mohammad brings the music of the sonnets into the twentieth-first century by finding it in absurdist contemporary diction, with a comically *inorganic* sense of the relationship of form to content. In contrast to Emerson's Shakespeare, in whom prosody was intimately shaped by thought, form is so *disconnected* from content here that the question seems ridiculous to raise, even as Shakespeare becomes a source of humor and play (though not an object of mockery).

The method works as follows, according to Mohammad:

> I feed Shakespeare's sonnets one line at a time into an anagram machine, thus generating a new group of words from each line, which I then paste into a Microsoft Word document. This initial textual output gives me a bank of raw material that is quantitatively equivalent to Shakespeare's poem at the most basic linguistic level: the letter. At the same time, it sufficiently alters the lexical structure of the original poem so that I am not overtly influenced by Shakespeare's semantic content. I click and drag the text generated by the anagram engine letter by letter until I am able to rework it into a new sonnet in iambic pentameter, with the English rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. The letters that are inevitably left over are used to make a title. (*Sonnagrams* 27)

Thus, the structural and sonic features of the original sonnet are preserved, but not content, thematic and rhetorical conventions, conventions of imagery, diction, and voice. To compare Bervin's and Mohammad's treatment of the same sonnet—sonnet 135, "Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will"—is to see what different results their methods produce. Bervin's version preserves every appearance—thirteen of them—of the word "will" in the original poem while graying out all the other words, creating a complex combination of futurity, legality, and forceful intentionality that could be read as coded masculine. Mohammad goes her one better numerically, with his version consisting of an anaphoric list of fourteen one-line questions, each beginning with the word "Will" (and including, also, two variations, "Willy" and "Willa"), that follows both the prosody and the rhyme scheme to

deliriously absurdist effect:

> Will refried catnip addicts find a cure?
> Will daytime televangelists go broke?
> Will Algorithmic Horses go on tour?
> Will nineteen shekels buy one thin, thin Coke? (“Uh Huh” web)

Here Shakespeare, revisited via a kind of digital proceduralism, is literally generative, the combination of sonnet and anagram engine “generating fourteen lines of text that is quantitatively equivalent to Shakespeare’s poem at the level of the letter,” in the terms of Mohammad’s note on the poem (“Uh Huh” web). And somewhat in the mode of Mullen’s rewritings, this procedure returns Shakespeare to the American everyday, the world of catnip, daytime televangelists, and Coke.

To return to my beginning: in much of his work, Harold Bloom has made curmudgeonly use of Shakespeare to critique multiculturalism, his argument resting on the notion that if the best literature is always already multicultural, social imperatives are somehow unnecessary or at least literarily irrelevant. To take one representative statement among many possibilities: “Shakespeare, precisely because he is the only authentic multicultural writer, demonstrated that our modish multiculturalism is a lie, a mask for mediocrity and for the thought-control academic police, the Gestapo of our campuses” (web). But this argument founders on the fact of Shakespeare’s nuanced and often affectionate *détournement* precisely *by* writers of an experimental bent and often writing from historically underrepresented or marginalized positions, as we move from Williams’s localist modernist Shakespeare to Howe’s and Bervin’s differently feminist and visually charged destabilizing of the Shakespearean text to a contemporary “dark lady,” Mullen, claiming Shakespeare for her own and for the popular culture of the recent past and present, to Mohammad’s reinsertion of Shakespeare into popular culture through comedy. Well into the twentieth-first century, it turns out, the core of the Anglophone literary canon continues to fuel experimental and counter-canonical American poetry.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the Government of India and the GIAN program, Saurashtra University, and program coordinator Prof. Sanjay Mukherjee for the invitation to deliver the original talk.
2. James Shapiro, *Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now*. Library of America, 2014; Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America*. Oxford UP, 2012. See also the anthology by Peter Rawlings, editor, *Americans on Shakespeare, 1776-1914*. Ashgate, 1999; reprinted Routledge, 2018.
3. In an alternative tradition, I should note Louis Zukofsky’s massive *Bottom: On Shakespeare*. 1963. U of California P, 1987.
4. For a related project, see Giovanni Cianci and Caroline Patey, editors, *Will the Modernist: Shakespeare and the European Historical Avant-Gardes*. Peter Lang, 2014, which explores Shakespeare’s presence in, among others, Pound, Eliot, Laforgue, Wittgenstein, Pessoa, Yeats, Woolf, Lewis, Tzara, Brecht, Pirandello, Joyce, and Beckett. See also Vincent Broqua, “Living-with Shakespeare? (Three American experimental poets’ compositions with Shakespeare’s sonnet 130),” *Transatlantica*, no. 1, 2010, journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/4815.
5. An exception to this generalization: Sharmila Cohen and Paul Legault, editors, *The Sonnets: Translating and Rewriting*

Shakespeare. Telephone / Nightboat, 2012. For further discussion, see Christy Desmet, "Quoting Shakespeare in Contemporary Poetry and Prose," *Shakespeare in Quotation*, edited by Julie Maxwell and Kate Rumbold, Cambridge UP, 2018, pp. 231-246.

6. For sustained critical discussion of Duncan's "derivativeness," see Stephen Collis and Graham Lyons, editors, *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation*. U of Iowa P, 2012.
7. In the 1923 *Spring and All*, the methods of which "The Descent of Winter" extends, Williams writes of Shakespeare that "his form was presented to him by Marlowe, his stories were the common talk of his associates or else some compiler set them before him" (52). Later in *Spring and All*, Williams implicitly links *Shakespeare* to Marinetti's *parole in libertà*. With regard to a speech by John of Gaunt in Richard II, he argues that the words occur not referentially "but as a dance over the body of his condition accurately accompanying it," that the "words occur in liberation" and "to understand the words as so liberated is to understand poetry. That they move independ[e]ntly when set free is the mark of their value" (90-91).
8. On Ratcliffe's Shakespeare, see Michael Cross, "Stephen Ratcliffe's 'Hamlet,'" *Jacket2*, 20 Oct. 2011, *jacket2*.org/article/stephen-ratcliffes-hamlet.
9. As is well known, Williams lived in the same house, 9 Ridge Road, Rutherford, NJ, for fifty years until his death in 1963.
10. "S(golden)" also suggestively anticipates the aforementioned "distillation of S, sun" in *My Emily Dickinson*.
11. In a 2009 interview with Barbara Henning, Mullen says that in "Dim Lady" "I used synonyms mostly from my Dictionary of Slang. Those slang words and brand names are all reminiscent of a previous era. Usually by the time slang gets published in dictionaries, it's already been abandoned by its creators." The technique echoes her use in *Muse & Drudge* (Singing Horse, 1995) of early twentieth-century African American slang learned from Clarence Major's *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* (Puffin, 1994).

Works Cited

Bervin, Jen. *Nets*. Ugly Duckling, 2004.

Bloom, Harold. "They Have the Numbers; We, the Heights. On *The Best American Poetry, 1988-1997*." *Boston Review*, 1 Apr. 1998, bostonreview.net/forum/harold-bloom-they-have-numbers-we-heights.

Davidson, Michael. *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word*. U of California P, 1997.

Eliot, T. S. *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*. Vol. 1. *Collected and Uncollected Poems*, edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, Johns Hopkins UP, 2015.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*. Edited by Joel Porte and Saundra Morris. W. W. Norton, 2001.

Henning, Barbara. "Conversation with Harryette Mullen: From B to D." *EOAGH*, 2009, eoagh.com/conversation-with-harryette-mullen-from-b-to-d/.

Hilson, Jeff, editor. *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*. Reality Street, 2008.

Howe, Susan. *My Emily Dickinson*. 1985. New Directions, 2007.

——. *The Nonconformist's Memorial*. New Directions, 1993.

——. *The Europe of Trusts*. Sun and Moon, 1990.

Levertov, Denise. *The Poet in the World*. New Directions, 1973.

Mohammad, K. Silem. "Uh Huh: Hi, Hula Tooth." *Poetry*, Feb. 2014, www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56767/from-the-Sonnagrams.

——. *Sonnagrams* 1-20. Slack Buddha, 2009.

Mullen, Harryette. *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. U of California P, 2002.

Olson, Charles. *Selected Writings*. Edited by Robert Creeley. New Directions, 1966.

Ratcliffe, Stephen. *Reading the Unseen: (Offstage) Hamlet*. Counterpath, 2010.

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*. Edited by Alfred Harbage, et al. Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1969.

Starkey, David, and Paul J. Willis, editors. *In a Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare*. U of Iowa P, 2005.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. Edited by Michael Moon. W. W. Norton, 2002.

Williams, William Carlos. *Spring and All*. New Directions, 2011.

——. *The Embodiment of Knowledge*. Edited by Ron Loewinsohn. New Directions, 1974.

——. *Imaginations*. Edited by Webster Schott, New Directions, 1971.

——. *Selected* Essays. New Directions, 1969.