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Shakespeare and the Critic's Idolatry of the Word

Even in a volume centering on Shakespeare's influence, where exaggerated claims are part of the ritual, it may appear excessive to suggest that he be treated as a shaping force in modern literary criticism. Yet this is the suggestion I shall make and try to justify here. Of course, I shall speak only for one variety of modern critical theory and practice, one with which I associate myself and which I therefore cannot help but see as a dominant variety: it attributes marvelous (I shall later say "miraculous") powers to poetry and centers these powers in its dislocations of normal language. Critics of this sort accord Shakespeare his special and unchallenged place as first without peers in the poet's pantheon by virtue of his capacity for the manipulation of language. Other poets—all substantially lesser poets—are to be subjected to the same measuring instruments, as the verbal analysis found

This essay takes the shape it does largely because it was written to be included in the volume of Harvard English Studies entitled *Shakespeare: Aspects of Influence*. I was asked to treat the influence Shakespeare's work has had on criticism in our time.

I must at once confess that I have already written a book organized around this suggestion, as can be seen from the two rather oddly conjoined parts of its subtitle: *A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Modern Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).
Critical History

uniquely appropriate to Shakespeare is extended into a general critical method. For these critics Shakespeare functions as a sacred book, the enabling text for their commitment to the special magic of poetic discourse. Thus, in its most recent version, bardolatry is collapsed into wordolatry.

This is hardly the first time that Shakespeare's works have served as models that are seen to justify a critical movement. Indeed, the history of criticism in English seems again and again to reveal Shakespeare as the supervising spirit of its several major moments. One might claim that the abiding liberalism of the English critical tradition was largely the consequence of Shakespeare's having been the special gift to English critics, the greatest writer given into the charge of any critics. Certainly a succession of critics credited their need to resist dogma to their need to include Shakespeare as chief among those for whom their theories had to account. For here was a writer obviously at odds with many of the conventions critics had too often invented to guide them—and, ex post facto, to guide the writer they treated, lest he be subject to the critics' wrath. So the critics could not retain an uncritical allegiance to those conventional "rules" and to Shakespeare too. Surely by at least the late seventeenth century—say, with Dryden—it had become clear that critical practice had to find a shape that reflected in some measure the stubborn and uncooperative fact of Shakespeare's lasting presence among us. Since that time, I would suggest, the best English criticism has continually yielded under his incomparable pressure.

One might argue that we cannot know whether, as I have indicated, it was Shakespeare whose presence breathed a special liberal spirit into the English critical tradition that had to accommodate him, or whether he himself was a product of that same liberal spirit, which we can see at work, for example, much earlier in the grand independence of Chaucer. In other words, we can ask—uncertain of ever finding a satisfactory answer—whether Dryden confronted his French antagonists with a tolerance for dramatic and poetic flexibility because he had to respond sensitively to Shakespeare or whether Dryden and Shakespeare were both moved in that freer direction we associate with English literature and criticism by a similar characteristic deep in the English literary consciousness. Is it, then, that Shakespeare is responsible for the openly empirical bent of English criticism or that he has been shaped by that English bent himself, and Dryden and others later shaped with him, though he serves as so excellent an excuse or precedent for them?

Very likely it does not finally matter which of the two is the case, so long as we note that, in "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," for example,
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Dryden resists the extremes of French neoclassical dogma in the name of moderate liberality and that he uses the example of Shakespeare as the special justification for the more open attitude appropriate to the English critic. Dryden, of course, hardly goes all the way, confessing that he must temper his love for the imperfect Shakespeare with his unsurpassed admiration for the "correct" Ben Jonson; but he has set the pattern which later critics can expand as they follow it. The gap between Shakespeare and his more correct rivals widens as later neoclassical critics seek to balance artful regularity with the sublimity of original genius and use Shakespeare to authorize their heterodoxy. As the Renaissance-Enlightenment pseudo-Aristotle gives way to Longinus, the critic justifies the change by waving Shakespeare's works before him as he goes. Addison treats Shakespeare as one of "these great natural geniuses," "nobly wild and extravagant"; Pope sees him as the archetypal "original," producing, "Nature herself" rather than mere "copies of her"; and Dr. Johnson extends this notion of Shakespeare as "the poet of nature" to the point where he justifies the confluence of the genres and the explosion of the unities by making "an appeal...from criticism to nature," in the interest of opening poetry from the rigidity of convention to the variety of life.2

The polarization between Shakespeare and the rule-bound alternative increases as we move through the eighteenth century. Thus, in comparisons between the two, the balance between Shakespeare and Jonson is gradually shifted until all the weight seems on Shakespeare's side. Early in the century Addison is anxious to defend the restrained genius "formed...by rules" as a kind separate but equal, in comparison to the natural genius. In his Preface, Pope seems disturbed even by the suggestion of polarity in Dryden's opposition between the poet of wit and the poet of correctness, between his love for Shakespeare and his admiration of Jonson. So Pope denies that there need be a mutually exclusive relation between the two: he prefers to find neither of the two to be without wit on the one side or without art and learning on the other, while his regret over Shakespeare's flaws leaves the neoclassical canon unthreatened.3 But it is just this mutually exclusive opposition which Edward Young insists upon, in order to praise Shakespeare as the unlearned original and to denigrate Jonson

2 See Addison's Spectator no. 160 and Pope's and Johnson's Prefaces to Shakespeare. My later reference to Young is to "Conjectures on Original Composition."

3 It is also true that, in allowing Shakespeare his own bailiwick, he is not without condescension. Though it sounds generous to decline to judge Shakespeare "by Aristotle's rules" ("like trying a man by the laws of one country, who acted under those of another"), Pope is keeping his own legalistic country secure and unchallenged—and superior to the popular realm (of actors and audiences) granted to Shakespeare.
as the imitative slave of his learning. By the time we get to Johnson's Preface, the either/or becomes absolute; and, by referring to the outrageous comparison by Voltaire, Johnson allows the Addison of Cato to take the place usually reserved for Ben Jonson as the learned author who is dwarfed by Shakespeare's genius, thus making the disjunction the more obvious.

By now we have come a long way toward the exaltation of Shakespeare for those characteristics most at odds with the neoclassical ideal. That other country to which Pope consigned him is surely cut off from the safe neoclassical domain securely held under what Pope saw as the laws of Aristotle. It often seemed to have no laws, this wilderness produced by genius—no country for old men, or sane ones either. The youthful Edmund Burke only emphasized the irrationalist nature of this alternative to trim aesthetic propriety when he tried to institutionalize the dualism that distinguished the awesome sublime from the merely beautiful, the unclear vastness from the lucidity of finitude. In his treatise he exaggerated the association of the sublime with the limitless—and hence with our sense of mystery. This association is one we have observed to be growing since Dryden first began putting Shakespeare beyond rational criticism. The eighteenth-century notion of Shakespeare as lusus naturae, outside the natural order and thus beyond natural law, accentuates his inaccessibility to the critic's normal measuring instruments. The unmatched and often unexplained (or even confessedly inexplicable) depths of response to him by such critics would seem to be testimony supporting the magical character of his work and, by extrapolation, of all the work of Pegasus-poets who, with "brave disorder," "snatch a grace beyond the reach of art," though such graces are "nameless" and teachable by "no methods." This je-ne-sais-quoi mysticism pervades the exemptions accorded Shakespeare's work and, through the accompanying cult of original genius, prepares the way for the idolatry that not only makes him our one exceptional poet but enshrines him as the prototypical poet, the Platonic idea of the poet on whom all other poets must try—however in vain—to pattern themselves, with romantic critics using their instincts to judge them accordingly.5

If the critic uses Shakespeare to represent the intrusion of "disorder" into the natural order, and a disorder worthy of the highest praise as furnishing the deepest insight, then he seems to be positing an unaccountable mystery at the heart of the universe, which poets

4 Pope, An Essay on Criticism, lines 141-55.

5 May I remind the reader that what I mean to offer here is not a thumbnail sketch of directions in the history of Shakespearean criticism so much as the history of Shakespeare's influence on the shape taken by general poetics itself?
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like Shakespeare alone can touch. But no matter how "brave," the disorder introduces an element of chaos which imperils any unmodified rational hypothesis that would account for the real or the literary universe.\(^6\) It is this utter polarity, fully developed by the late eighteenth century, between chaos and order or the sublime and the beautiful or the instinctive and the learned—oppositions in nature as in art—that organic theorists like A. W. Schlegel and his adapter-translator Coleridge tried to bridge, to the advantage of Shakespeare.

Their work on Shakespeare—with results they made applicable to poetry and drama generally—was intended in large part to claim, in Coleridge's words, "Shakespeare's Judgment equal to His Genius." What was being denied was that original genius precludes judgment, and vice versa. Quite the contrary: it is in the brilliant display of form-making judgment that genius is to manifest itself. As the argument runs, the neoclassical critic had to associate genius with wild irregularity because his definitions of order and judgment were narrowly circumscribed by mechanical, inflexible, externally imposed rules inherited from earlier poetic practice. Either the poet conformed or he was wild and—unless rescued by genius as in the rare case of Shakespeare—to be rejected. But the disjunctive is overwhelmed if, as with Shakespeare, a more subtle notion of form joined originality to a newly created order. "Are the plays of Shakespeare works of rude and uncultivated genius, in which the splendor of the parts compensates, if aught can compensate, for the barbarous shapelessness and irregularity of the whole?—Or is the form equally admirable with the matter, and the judgment of the great poet, not less deserving our wonder than his genius?" This passage, from Coleridge's "Shakespeare, a Poet Generally" (from the portion headed "Shakespeare's Judgment equal to His Genius"), goes on to claim that Shakespeare's greatness is as much the result of his differences from the ancients as of those elements he shares with them. For while the similarities can arise out of "servile imitation," a "lifeless mechanism," his "free and rival originality" is evidence "of living power."

This is the contrast that leads to the distinction between mechanical and organic form which Coleridge draws in the well-known passage that is little more than a translation from Schlegel. Mechanical form, the indifferent imposition of a universal formula on whatever the materials at hand, is apparently what Coleridge sees as the only kind of form the neoclassical critic could recognize. If Shakespeare did not display form of that kind, then he was put down as being wildly

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formless. Coleridge is arguing that Shakespeare has a far more profound kind of form, however unrecognized earlier, a form that "shapes, as it develops, itself from within; and the fulness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form." So Shakespeare is to be seen as reshaping whatever materials have been given him from outside until they are forced to grow into the very entity they are forming in the act of becoming it. Such is the organic interrelationship he creates between part and whole. And of course the organic doctrine carries with it a mystique of its own in its attack upon the rationalistic notion of order as a mechanistic one.

This notion—the transformation of generic, borrowed materials, by way of a creativity that is at work in both a unique act and a unique product—marks that variety of recent criticism which draws much of its spirit from Coleridge. But since this criticism begins in our time as the so-called New Criticism, it tends to be language-centered, so that it usually limits the borrowed elements, whose transformation it must trace, to verbal ones. It is the manipulation of words, their conversion from the empty and transparent signs they are for most of us (and were for the poet when he picked them up) into the dense opacity of symbol, that for this criticism enables Shakespeare to work his magic. Later modifications by such critics, still being pressed by Shakespeare, will extend verbal insights (by then seen as inadequate) back into the realms of genre and dramatic structure, though they will not deny that the word retains its primary function in their analysis however it grows into elements with which it has dynamic relations of conflict and resolution.

It is surely ironic that Shakespeare enters the New-Critical dialogue not only as a minor figure but as anything but a model poet. Indeed, if any one poet was the model for the shape of verbal criticism from T. S. Eliot to John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks, he would be Donne and not Shakespeare. This undisputed fact of poetic influence on modern theory would appear to make the opening paragraph of this essay, and my major claim in it, untenable. Certainly, when Ransom wrote his regrettable essay, "Shakespeare at Sonnets," his readers would hardly have predicted that—almost four decades later—one could claim (as I am claiming here) that Shakespeare was both source and model for a verbal criticism further down the line in the same critical tradition.\(^7\) Since he was using the metaphysical strategy as the universal strategy for poets and had selected

Donne as the exemplary practitioner of that strategy, it was not difficult for Ransom, measuring Shakespeare by this single gauge, to find him failing precisely where Donne succeeded.

Ransom defined the metaphysical strategy as the rigorous logical extension of the selected conceit, carried out by the poet who had "the courage of [his] metaphors." The critic's verbal analysis, then, was to concentrate on the ways in which words carried forward this lean line of metaphorical development. Firmly committed to the antiromanticism that moved the early New Criticism, Ransom was careful to encourage clarity, logic, and denotation in language as an alternative to romantic vagueness, the willingness to indulge connotation and its blurred effects. His devotion to logicality in poetry led him to distrust even New Critics like Empson or Brooks whose cultivation of verbal ambiguity and irony in poetry would make them less inimical to some romantic practices. But, more certainly, it led Ransom to underrate seriously—and to misapprehend—the strategy of Shakespeare's language, forced as he was by his theory to see Shakespeare as trying to do poorly what Donne was to do so well. He observed correctly that Shakespeare did not pursue the single line of logical development which we find in the typical extension of the metaphysical conceit, that in Shakespeare there are detours and false starts and multiple paths and surprises. But, of course, if the logical line is weak, the words which—from Ransom's point of view—seem to weaken it may be doing so in order to create a heretofore hidden strength in themselves. So the critic's problem is to determine and account for what it is that Shakespeare is doing, and doing inimitably well.

In an essay responding to Ransom's, Arthur Mizener undertook just this task, thus setting in motion a verbal analysis of Shakespeare's sonnets that focused on a strategy different from the metaphysical and yet brilliantly effective. After Mizener's essay, instead of this criticism shaping Shakespeare, it would come to be shaped by him. It no longer had to reduce Shakespeare to its method; rather it could claim a method which, derived from his works themselves, not only could account for them but—using them as its supreme examples—could account for many other works as well. This was still to indulge in

8 One might well argue that this latter possibility is more in accord with the Coleridgean notion of organic development within the poem, while Ransom's view of the metaphysical strategy, limited as it is to the logical argument within the conceit, would appear to Coleridge as a rather mechanical, universal, externally applied criterion, one which did not submit the poem wholly to the control of the developing elements themselves.

methodological imperialism (the application of a method beyond its native grounds, the works that originally nourished it), but Shakespeare was now claimed as its author and beneficiary.

Mizener argues that, just as Ransom charged, Shakespeare's language in a sonnet is not totally responsive to the narrow demands of an extended conceit, but that its seeming waywardness has a method of its own. Using as his example Sonnet 124 ("If my dear love were but the child of state"), he shows the many levels on which the poem's key words operate, from private to public life and the great world, and from the merely political to the cosmic realm. He finds this broad range of simultaneous meanings spreading from the first line, with that endlessly polysemous word *state*. Its echoes in subsequent words and phrases which also have multiple possibilities persuade him that the reader is to press ahead on all levels, eliminating none of the meanings, indeed rather exploiting all of them at once. Unlike the logical delineations of the metaphysical conceit whose effect may amaze us with its farfetched lucidity but whose lucidity domesticates that amazement, the effect here is one of "soft focus," each of the meanings crowding in with the others without being sufficiently developed to prevent us from holding the others simultaneously with it. Mizener's phrase "soft focus" emphasizes a lack of developed precision in the individual images—almost, indeed, as if they formed a group of simultaneous associations. His own description suggests as much: the meanings in the sonnet are "very like the pattern of the mind when it contemplates, with full attention but for no immediately practical purpose, an object in nature." The pattern "is built for all the kinds of relations known to the mind," so that the figurative language "approaches, in its own verbal terms, the richness, the density, the logical incompleteness of the mind."

My own feeling is that, while many of Mizener's observations about words and lines are striking and important because they force us to reorient ourselves as we address the language of the sonnets, he reveals the weakness which Ransom would expect of Shakespeare and his defenders: that of resorting to romantic vagueness as the characteristic of Shakespeare's strategy which makes it worth justifying. Mizener's notion of "soft focus" seeks to justify Shakespeare's use of companion elements which, if presented clearly, might be mutually incompatible; it is thus a defense of imprecision that suggests the blurred diction of the romantic who could not totally make up his mind about what he meant. What rather is the case and what, indeed, we see, despite Mizener, to be the case even in his most striking observations, is that in Shakespeare the effect of an extravagant structure of puns is anything but imprecise.
I have written a much later essay which also takes off from Ransom's and from the dichotomy between the metaphysical and the Shakespearean strategy of wit. In that essay, although many of my observations may seem similar in intention to Mizener's, I use them to support a claim to a precision of multiple meaning through Shakespeare's remarkable choice of just the word to contain that multiplicity. Although I see his strategy as an alternative to the metaphysical, I would not concede any more wit to the metaphysical than to his. The issue between them, I argue, is whether the wit is apparent, like the metaphysical, or whether it is hidden behind a disguise of innocence, as often in Shakespeare, where—as Ransom charges—little more than random association seems to prevail. But, in contrast to Mizener, I insist that Shakespeare's poems neither should be nor are like the incompleteness and randomness of the contemplating mind, though they may initially fool us with the illusion of such a resemblance. So I see "the innocent insinuations of wit" resulting from devices like "association as dialectic" and "pun as argument." All that seems no more than casual turns out, through the expanding possibilities of the right word or phrase, to have been inevitable.

Mizener may have freed this critical tradition for a verbal criticism modeled on Shakespeare and having its source in him, but just as Coleridge had rescued Shakespeare from the charge of formlessness by redefining form, it was now necessary to redefine precision and artfulness in order to find their sources outside the obvious precision and artfulness of metaphysical wit. The focus must be seen as sharp rather than "soft," even as a word's meanings multiply. In dealing with Sonnet 64 ("When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced"), I treated that same polysemous word *state* (in the key unifying phrase, "interchange of state," line 9), but in a way that emphasized that sharpness:

As if to prove the claim that the human political state is a microcosmic reflection of the universal state under time, the antagonists of the second quatrains, the ocean and the shore, are rendered totally in human terms, as they act in accordance with political motives. . . . All the realms of "state" have been identified and reduced to the extreme consequences of its narrowest meaning, that of human politics. The word "state," despite its range of meanings, from narrow to broad, from politics to the general condition of being (or rather of becoming), is shown to be a single reductive

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entity that can contain and unite them all even within its narrowest confines. For these confines can be extended unlimitedly without losing their more precise limitations.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 25–26. Or see my comments on “state” as it functions in Sonnet 124 (in contrast to Mizener’s) in \textit{A Window to Criticism}, p. 141. It is an earlier statement, but made in the same spirit: “The word ‘state’ permits us to join the narrowest political notions in the poem to the broadest sense of worldly life as the politic enterprise: state as majesty and as political entity, state as rank or status, state as condition of being. . . . In effect, Shakespeare is demonstrating the sweep of the world’s semantic history. He proves the justness of his political metaphor by allowing his language to establish the essential oneness of the several political levels of living. Once again the metaphor is earned totally by moving from similarity to substantive identity: the human condition is the political condition.”}

This view sees the word as sending forth several diverse meanings (and yet not so diverse after all) and yet as collapsing them into itself as their single containing element. It is a view which was first stated systematically for these critics in Sigurd Burckhardt’s essay, “The Poet as Fool and Priest,” an essay which uses a Shakespearean sonnet as the source and the model of its theory. Burckhardt describes this containing and unifying element in the word as its “corporeality.” The mere sensuous existence of the word, this constellation of sounds and meanings, allows it to take on a substance in which these elements are fused. The word can be forced by the poet to contain within itself a world of elements otherwise incompatible with each other. Hence, Burckhardt argues, verbal ambiguity is at the heart of poetic possibility not because a word can have many meanings (as Empson would have it), but because “many meanings can have one word.” “Ambiguity, then, becomes a test case for the poet; insofar as he can vanquish it—not by splitting the word, but by fusing its meanings—he has succeeded in making language into a true medium.”\footnote{“The Poet as Fool and Priest,” \textit{ELH} 23 (1956): 279–98; reprinted in \textit{Shakespearean Meanings} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 22–46. The quotations appear in the book on pp. 32 and 33.} That is to say, it is made a medium like the physical realities of the plastic arts instead of the transparent, referential sign, without substance, which words are until the poet goes to work on them. The pun is the ideal example of how he forces the word to take on “corporeality,” then, in that it is a single identity which, through a phonetic coincidence, overwhelms other discrete entities and, by enfolding them within itself, makes them an inevitable part of one another. The casual etymological accidents that produce a pun are forced by the poet to take on the teleological pattern of necessity—surface takes on substance—but only \textit{in} this word. Other phonetic and metaphorical
elements of words are shown by Burckhardt to take on similarly substantive, corporeal functions, in defiance of the way language is supposed to function normally. No wonder the poem is untranslatable into other words than itself.

For Burckhardt, corporeality obviously serves as another term for incarnation, the making of the word into flesh, in this case the sensory medium becoming physical container of otherwise incompatible worlds, unifying them because the word is a unit and they are in it. The overwhelming of discrete entities by way of verbal aggrandizement is a violation of verbal property and propriety, a subversion of the way language is to work. As such, and as the word made flesh, this principle of verbal teleology is the aesthetic equivalent of “miracle,” though one licensed by what Shakespeare’s strategy of language has revealed to us. In A Window to Criticism I freely call this operation of words “miraculous,” borrowing the notion—ironically—from Ransom, who was hardly intending to refer to Shakespeare when he used “miraculism” to describe the remarkable workings of the metaphysical conceit. He was trying to describe the way in which words as sensory and metaphorical elements overcome the limitations of words as concepts by achieving an identity in the poem that transforms the differential nature of words and concepts. And, as we have seen with other claims of Ransom, what was intended as favorable description of the metaphysicals (even if to the detriment of Shakespeare) was extended by others to Shakespeare, who was then shown to be preeminently deserving of the characterization. When George Steiner (whom one would think of as a critic of a very different sort) sought, in a quadricentennial essay, to account for Shakespeare's special magic, he had to point—in much the same spirit and even a similar language—to Shakespeare’s power to create one “obvious miracle” after another. "More than any other human intellect of which we have adequate record, Shakespeare used language in a condition of total possibility. . . . To Shakespeare, more than to any other poet, the individual word was a nucleus surrounded by a field of complex energies." He goes on to speak of how “a word will shade, by pun or suggestion of sound, into an area of new definitions,” or to speak of words that “derive their power to rouse and control our attention from the fact that Shakespeare has made explicit the buried strength of their etymologies.”

These critics, with their several ways of claiming a secular miracle—a metaphorical equivalent of the religious one—in Shakespeare's

handling of his language, are making more explicit the tendency we have noted, in its varying degrees, since Dryden to resort to irrationalist and magical terminology in dealing with Shakespeare's hold on us. They assume normal habits of semantics and logic to operate in our language, and (Ransom to the contrary notwithstanding) see Shakespeare as forcing upon language an illogic that opens for us, and yet controls, an untold pattern of semantic possibilities. Echoing earlier critics, modern critics since Mizener see Shakespeare as projecting a verbal power that makes mystics of us all. Rather than demythologizing this idolatry of the Shakespearean word, they have reified it into a general critical system—a rare and daring enough undertaking in these demythologizing days.

But we must see this resort to miracle in its recent forms as a significantly qualified one. I qualified it earlier by speaking of "the aesthetic equivalent of miracle," by which I meant that it was confined to appearance only—as an illusion. Thus the claim to miracle is accompanied by considerable skepticism about the power of any language—even Shakespeare's—to be more than illusively substantive. His magic arises from his power to impose this illusion upon us while his words are doing their work, but of course such magic confesses its own limitations by accepting the aesthetic context within which it assumes those powers. Shakespeare himself, even while he displays his verbal mastery, uses that mastery to express his doubts about the ultimate power of words. His language everywhere reveals its awareness of the incapacity of words to contain their objects—its awareness of their emptiness. Yet, as Shakespeare maneuvers them, words find their unique power in the web they weave in awareness of this incapacity. They play violently and arrogantly with the normal workings of language, achieving a structure of their own that defies the lack to which they testify. Thus does verbal power derive from self-conscious verbal skepticism.

It is obvious, from my comments on recent word-centered criticism, that the sonnets have played a central role in its development. Whether in Mizener's, in Burckhardt's, or in my own work, these poems permitted a concentration on purely verbal and figurative matters without the additional and complicating variables introduced in his dramatic poetry.15 When Burckhardt moved to the plays in the balance of Shakespearean Meanings, he did so largely by way of the

15 According this central role to the sonnets and to the words in them may seem especially revolutionary when we think of how commonplace it was for eighteenth-century critics to reject Shakespeare's language, finding unique value in him despite what they saw as either precious or clumsy, especially in the sonnets.
theoretical lessons learned in that key early essay which was enmeshed in his analysis of Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds"). Indeed, earlier New-Critical analysis of the plays had already established the practice of reading them more as poems than as dramas for the theater, so that once the words and figures were sufficiently probed, the problems of dramatic as well as poetic meanings were resolved. The procedures were similar to those we have been observing, more in keeping with the permissive attitude of Mizener than the no-nonsense attitude of Ransom. Thus the treatment of Macbeth by Cleanth Brooks, like the treatment of 1 Henry IV by Brooks and Robert Heilman, is essentially that of a lengthy poem powered by Shakespearean verbal and metaphorical wit, with the dramatic elements falling into place within the poetic structure. Indeed, as Brooks is establishing his method at the outset of The Well Wrought Urn, he calls upon his reading of The Phoenix and Turtle to support a commitment to a use of language that, paradoxically, proclaims the destruction of reason in order to affirm the uniqueness of its own order. These are the claims—as this is the primacy of lyric over dramatic, of lyric as absorbing the dramatic—which we have observed in his recent fellow-critics.

So this theory, tailor-made for poetry, was also—as theory so often had been—tailor-made for Shakespeare, though in this case for the Shakespeare of the poems or of the poetry in the plays, if not the plays as poems. The theory is committed to the power of verbal structure that undermines the capacity of words in order to create the possibility of its own equivocal existence. Hence, in the work of most of these writers we find an accompanying critical theme, similar to what we have just seen Brooks claim, about the subversion of reason by the poem—as by love—so that the poem, like love, can create its own more-than-logical order. Such an accompanying theme would seem inevitable, given the nature of the theory. It is the metapoetic theme: that each poem must finally turn out to have been about the possibility of its own verbal creation. In effect, then, each poem is an implicit work of poetics as well as whatever else it explicitly may be. Such a development, we should note, is consistent with the historical claim with which I began: that, rather than being a history of Shakespearean criticism, the last three centuries of English criticism have been a series of literary theories developed in large part in response to

Shakespearean texts which have been seen as licensing certain theoretical directions. So his poems, dramatic and otherwise, have long been permitted to function in the realm of poetics.

The metapoetic theme has permitted recent critics to adapt the principles of word-centered analysis to other centers of critical interest that are less reductive and more respectful of the other-than-verbal elements in the plays. I see no more promising example of such expansion of critical focus than in the work of the Renaissance comparatist, Rosalie Colie, who in the years preceding her death had turned increasingly to Shakespeare and had permitted her methods to be increasingly influenced by what she found in him and in those who have treated him in ways I have been describing here. She modified the study of his language with the study of the genres and *topoi* of the Renaissance and the earlier periods that influenced their evolution.

What made this study excitingly productive—and unique—was the way she showed the literary work to be the product of the mixing and mastering of these genres and *topoi*, showed it in the act of producing itself as a transformation of its informing elements, becoming at once a repository and a consummation of the literary past that nourished it. The problem of understanding the work becomes a reflection of the problem of the work finding itself in its elements, making itself out of those elements. Here is the metapoetic theme once more, though it is now functioning to trace the poet’s remaking of the commonplace elements of genre and *topos* and not just his remaking of the commonplace words which have occupied our other critics.

We should note also the criticism of James Calderwood as one which moves beyond purely verbal elements to dramatic ones, turning metapoetry into metadrama in order to preserve Shakespeare’s theatrical along with his poetic brilliance. Calderwood puts the word

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17 In her encyclopedic work on Renaissance paradox, *Paradoxa Epidemica* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), she found in Shakespeare’s work the moving force for several of her chapters (esp. chaps. 7, 12, and 15), and her concern with paradox naturally led her to mix verbal matters with ideational ones. Besides several other later essays on Shakespeare, the final work she saw through to completion was the lengthy study *Shakespeare’s Living Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974). In addition there was the series of lectures, assembled for publication posthumously—*The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara Lewalski (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973)—in which she culminates her argument by using as model her special favorite, *King Lear*, to which she refers as “an ultimate.”

as spoken onstage into a dynamic relation to the action onstage, seeing
the two as both partners and antagonists through which the Shake­
spearean drama works to solve the problem of its reality. We may feel
the presence of Burckhardt’s method at the starting point of Calder­
wood’s work, but he has advanced the method by incorporating non­
 verbal elements as he makes the metapoem into drama. With recent
work like Colie’s and Calderwood’s, we have the right to look for
continuing developments in this line of criticism as, making use of its
word-centered heritage, it yet escapes the limitations from which a
devotion to the lyrics can suffer when applied to drama.10

Still, whatever we may say in defense of the continuing energies
being displayed by this kind of criticism or in defense of its broadening
directions, we must admit it to be partial and unbalanced—like all
criticism. But any criticism so dominated by the experiencing of
Shakespeare—and by the need to rationalize that incomparable
experience—is perhaps fated to be especially unbalanced. We have
noted that Burckhardt’s “The Poet as Fool and Priest” found its way
into a volume on Shakespeare’s plays, and that my own recent con­
tribution to modern poetics is joined to, and grows out of, my study of
Shakespeare’s sonnets. There seems to be a hidden assumption in such
critical works that a theory of poetry must begin by being adequate to
Shakespeare, if it is to be adequate at all. I have been suggesting some
such assumption as haunting the long, unbalanced succession of the
best English critics since Dryden, with George Steiner’s tribute to
Shakespeare’s verbal power perhaps the epigraph to this historical
consensus.

This is to make Shakespeare the test of a literary theory, to define
and measure poetry by its most splendid and incomparable examples
—as was sometimes regretted, alas, when the measuring instruments
were applied to lesser poets. But so be it. I began this essay, after all,
by calling it a study of bardolatry in its most recent form. So how can
Shakespeare not be treated as the model poet? And it should do more
good than harm: in an anti-verbal day Shakespearean criticism of this
sort can give the embattled humanist new courage. I said earlier that
idolatry must be either demythologized or reified into a critical sys­
tem, and that the new bardolaters had done the latter. When we hear
all around us of the need to “decenter” discourse, the need to de­
center the word’s sense of the world, it is heartening to be instructed in

10 This promise of further development is justified by other recent work in this line.
See, just as a single example, Marjorie B. Garber, Dream in Shakespeare: From
 Metaphor to Metamorphosis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). The sub­
title alone would delight most of the critics I have been treating.
finding Shakespeare's capacious verbal center as the center of order. Perhaps recent demythologizing critics have suffered from not having Shakespeare to influence their theory. When we hear such critics speak of the absence and the emptiness of language, surely the claim that the word can be made utterly present—a claim supported by a poet whose works everywhere invite reverence for the potentiality locked in language—must constitute one of the few healthy signs for the future of criticism.