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Craftsman Meets Historian: Shakespeare and Material Culture*

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First presented at the 2021 online edition of the "Seminario Permanente di Studi Shakespeariani", this paper takes its cue from Gary Taylor's 2017 essay "Artiginality: Authorship after Postmodernism" and explores the coexistence and integration of the concepts of 'craftsmanship' and 'originality' within the Shakespearean macrotext. Considering the history plays to be the *locus classicus* for such conflation of the artisanal and the original, the paper specifically examines *Henry V*, *Richard III* (which is contrasted with *Macbeth*), and *Pericles*. At the same time, it also traces a movement from craftsmanship to art.

Keywords: Craftmanship, Originality, Material culture, *Henry V*, *Richard III*, *Pericles*

About Shakespeare and craftsmanship, a few titles come immediately to mind: Muriel C. Bradbrook's *Shakespeare the Craftsman* (Bradbrook 1969), and Andrew Gurr's several studies on the material basis of the Elizabethan theatre (see especially Gurr 1996). For once, however, I want to be up-to-date, and refer my readers to the opening essay, by Gary Taylor, of the *Authorship Companion*, the first volume of *The New Oxford Shakespeare* (2017). This essay bears the bizarre title of "Artiginality", which is meant, I think, to combine "artisanship" (a term allied to "craftsmanship"),

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with "originality". "Artisanship" plus "originality" becomes "artiginality" (Taylor 2017). Arguably, by inventing this new term Taylor means to join but also to divide, to separate. To separate by joining, or to join by separation: that is, to direct our attention to a period of history when "craftsmanship" did not carry with it the weight – the value – that we usually associate with "originality", the hall-mark of *art*, the unique product of the human genius. A craftsman could build a house, or a piece of furniture, or indeed a play for the theatre, without being necessarily original – or, in other words, without being praised for the uniqueness of his work. The artisanal and the original did not go hand in hand. And what Shakespeare, and other Elizabethan dramatists, did was to achieve originality out of a trade, a job, a craft which did not immediately pretend to anything possessing, at that time, the significance and prestige of being "original", in the modern sense of the word. Taylor does not say this (as we shall see, he follows another line of reasoning), but I think we can accept his mix of labels as a starting point of our argument.

Further to excite your interest, I will now say that Taylor himself got this idea from an Italian writer and critic, our old friend Umberto Eco, acknowledging his debt. Eco published, together with Vittorio Fagone, an interesting suggestion about the historical development of human or rather Italian crafts, *Il momento artigiano. Aspetti della cultura materiale in Italia* (1976), which I should like to paraphrase very freely, for the implication this title contains, as "the transition from craftsmanship to mature art in Italian material culture", to which it would be wise to add "during the Renaissance", as Eco does in his essay (Eco 1976). In that precious little book, the difference between "major" and "minor" arts – or, if you allow me to insist on the difference between "unoriginal" and "original" crafts – is importantly located at the historical junction we call "Renaissance", and in this context we can of course include the work of the Renaissance playwrights in England.

Let me quote now Taylor on Shakespeare as a *playwrighter* and *stagewrighter*. Those old-fashioned terms, he notes, were in those times coexistent with those of *shipwright* and *cartwright*, etc. – indicating craftmanship of the traditional order. Here is Taylor: "By returning to this earlier orthographic definition of authors as

wrighters, by re-conceptualizing authorship as artisanal labour, we reconnect the production of new texts to a network of other concepts: the wrighter as *artisan* […], or *artificer* […], or *artist* […], whose *art* […] is admired to the extent that it is *artificial*" (Taylor 2017, 22). And Taylor continues:

> This web of *OED* definitions based on early modern usage unravels the modern distinction between artist and artisan, which (as Umberto Eco notes) depends upon the assumption that art is a subcategory of the beautiful that is useless. […] An artisanal definition of the wrighter challenges the Romantic disdain for artifice; it undoes Kant's segregation of wrighters from other craftsmen, such as painters. […] The artisan is not a Kantian free intelligence: the artisan is a cyborg […]. *A shifting assemblage of humans, tools, and raw materials inhabiting a specific environment*, the artisan can survive only by manufacturing artificial objects desired by others. (22-23, emphasis mine)

Taylor adds: "We can escape from the competing sterilities of the old New Criticism and the old New Historicism by attending to the social, historical, and material complexity of artisanal poetics" (23). Whether or not we accept these final strictures against two of the authoritative critical schools of our day, one thing remains: that Taylor has efficiently circumscribed the area of "social, historical, and material complexity" of our agenda today.

So, let us pursue this line in the history of material culture. Indeed, everywhere in Shakespeare's production we can trace the coexistence of two tracks of development, the artisanal and the artistic – the artisan or craftsman drawing his material from the "shifting assemblage of humans, tools, and raw materials inhabiting a specific environment" – and, on the other hand, the original, the personal, innovative breakthrough – shirking the conventional and the repetitive – in other words, *art*. As we all know, with Shakespeare this movement from craftsmanship to art begins with the all-pervasive derivation from other people's works. Much of what we call "Shakespeare" is actually the creative work of other writers. To quote Taylor again, Shakespeare "had no difficulty cohabiting with another man's imagination", and he "worked primarily by tinkering with an existing artefact" (22). In this sense, there is no need for repetition, he stands opposite to

Kant's idea of genius – the original by definition, the explorer of new worlds, the originator of whole traditions. All the invention and innovation Shakespeare found it convenient to retain refer instead to the architecture of the play, suppressing all shades of didacticism and edification, and working instead on the mystery of human conduct, and on the complexities of the plot. Indeed, his artistic effort is directed to enriching the meanings of what he finds ready-made, mainly by endowing the play with two or multiple plots, as in *King Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice*, thus giving free latitude to the perspective of metadrama, or self-commentary, self-explanation (for instance, the part of the Fool in *King Lear* is entirely metadramatic). All this unconventional energy goes a long way to develop and multiply the inner meanings of his work, through its linguistic and stylistic organization, and through mixing in surprising ways the low, the middle and the high ingredients of discourse, thus giving his style the appearance of being invented on the spot, play by play: of being quite "original".

What is extremely surprising and gratifying is the way he can accommodate the everyday and commonplace with the exceptional, the piece of brilliant bravura; and the *locus classicus* for this coexistence of different strains is to be found in his histories. This is where the two paths of craftsman and artist meet, first of all in the maturing consciousness of the craftsman-artist himself, and then in the collective appreciation of his audiences. And the climax of this coexistence of competing strains comes, quite appropriately, at the end of his first and most applauded dramatic cycle, the histories, and specifically in *Henry V* (1599).

Nobody could deny its author the name and quality of an exquisite artisan or artificer: the core, as it were the heart, of an admirable collective, communal approach to dramatic discourse – in Taylor's words, an individual author operating inside a "shifting assemblage of humans, tools, and raw materials". Listen to how, at the end of the sixteenth century, the resident dramatist, the head craftsman and manager of that particular assemblage, the theatre called the Globe, finds it expedient to excuse himself and his colleagues for the shortcomings, the inadequacy of the ramshackle show which they are going to produce, and which we can with some reason call "artisanal":

But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraisèd spirits that hath dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object. Can this cock-pit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O pardon: since a crookèd figure may
Attest in little place a million,
And let us, ciphers to this great account,
On your imaginary forces work.
[…]
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts:
Into a thousand parts divide one man,
And make imaginary puissance.
Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them,
Printing their proud hoofs i'th' receiving earth;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
Turning th'accomplishment of many years
Into an hourglass – for the which supply,
Admit me Chorus to this history,
Who Prologue-like your humble patience pray
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.
(*Henry V*, Prologue.8-18, 23-34)[1]

Now, let us ask something about all these tags: "this unworthy scaffold", "this wooden O", "The flat unraisèd spirits", "us, ciphers to this great account", "For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings", etc.: what are they? They are, conceived in imaginative idiom, exactly the "shifting assemblage of humans, tools, and raw materials" a man named William Shakespeare was facing and then using on a certain evening in 1599, the première of his play, and further on, year after year, century after century…

But, at the same time, we could not deny him and his prologue the most ambitious title of *poet*:

[1] All Shakespeare quotations are taken from Shakespeare 2005.

> O for a muse of fire, that would ascend
> The brightest heaven of invention:
> A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
> And monarchs to behold the swelling scene.
> Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
> Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels,
> Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword, and fire
> Crouch for employment.
> (1-8)

These flamboyant images are features of high poetry, the mark of a true artist, of an art that is already modern, self-possessed, thoughtful and sovereign, subverting and enlivening the pedestrian tomes of medieval chroniclers from which it derives, and making of it a new, that is *original*, dramatic idiom.

They are perfect reminders for the audience, of today as of yesterday, of how the two tracks of craftsmanship and art meet to support one another.

In Eco's words, the major art is building up on the shoulders of the minor art, so much so that Shakespeare is credited nowadays with creating the historical drama of his time – that is, texts suitable for acting rather than reading.

One point we should bear in mind: that the audience was very much a part of our "shifting assemblage of humans", etc., as Bettina Boecker describes in her *Imagining Shakespeare's Original Audience, 1660-2000: Groundlings, Gallants, Grocers* of 2015 (Boecker 2015). A curious witness of what Boecker describes can be found in the journal of a German scientist, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. In 1778 Georg is in London and goes to a performance of *Hamlet*, starring David Garrick, and at the monologue "to be or not to be" jots down such words: "A majority of the audience not only knows it by heart as the Paternoster, but also, I should say, listens to it as the Paternoster, which is inconceivable for anybody who does not know England. On this island Shakespeare's is a sacred name" (Lichtenberg 1801, 291, my translation)…

Deep down inside the Shakespearean macrotext we can find ample evidence of our two archetypes – the artisanal and the artistic – coexisting and integrating. Nor does the playwright abandon the conscious exhibition of his own manipulations, for instance

retracing somewhat ironically the scheme of the morality play, the kind of drama whose roots go back to the most ancient folklore, and which he uses in its yet immature form in *Richard III* (about 1592). In that most distinctive history play, the protagonist goes as far as 'betraying' – as we would say today – his own perverse disposition with most direct, astounding and vulgar vanity: "I am determinèd to prove a villain / […] / As I am subtle false and treacherous" (*Richard III*, I.i.30-37).

But if we really want to see the traditional, the popular and communal entrenching themselves, and quarrying a most revealing resistance to the claims of modern "originality", we have only to run to the first scene of the third act, when Richard, in one of his usual and repeated apart – i.e. when he breaks all the rules of dramatic illusion and make-believe, and speaks to the audience direct, as if he was among them, donning the garb of the ancient "presenter" of performances, and uncovering with mischievous complacency the ruse with which he intends to deceive characters and audience together: saying that he is "sending to the Tower" the two royal boys he should protect but who bar his way to the throne – meaning, of course, to have them killed. Well, at that time he comments, in an aside that is for us an implicit warning: "Thus like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word" (III.i.82-83).

Ah! – we say – here is the old Vice again, the inheritance from the most ancient shows of the Middle Ages, the embodiment of the most wicked, egocentric and blasphemous amorality, keen on deceit and outrageous utterance, full of mischief, duplicity and tell-tale histrionics – making this character the target and at the same time the favorite of the early audiences, which would goad and provoke it to his disruptive function.

And it is the play of *Richard III* that we should take as the term of comparison with what Shakespeare would have written and produced in the new century, after the great achievement of *Hamlet*, when the nation's history was no longer his main preoccupation.

And now, the ideal text for comparison will be *Macbeth* (1606). The genre the two plays share is the same: on the textual level they are both histories, or better chronicle plays, derived from the medieval and Renaissance records visited and exploited by a

number of writers for the stage in the last decade of the sixteenth century: all witnesses of the Herculean labors involved in the reduction of those heavy volumes into a viable dramatic form. The two plays share the same source, the *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577, 1587), collected by Raphael Holinshed and others; and they both share the title of "tragedy", obvious for *Macbeth* but less so for *Richard*, which may have needed, in the eyes of the author and his company, more prestige than the simple title of "history" allowed. Even the histories of the two leading roles are similar in showing the thirst for power making of them two obsessive machines of treachery, suspicion and destruction, sparing no one in their progress, murder by murder. So far so good, but here is where their likeness ends. The epochs they represent are different, and so are their length in terms of performance – the first being the most extended of Shakespeare's plays, and the second the shortest (Bloom 1998, 71; Melchiori 1994, 499). Very different are also the material conditions of their productions, *Richard III* representing for the author, after his uncertain beginnings with the trilogy of *Henry VI*, his first serious option to a full career as a dramatist, and a momentous breakthrough on the market of book-selling, bearing his name, and reaching more reprints of any other play, even more than *Hamlet*. At the time of *Richard III*, the author and his company of eight members acted under the patronage of the Lord Chamberlain, in front of the rowdy audiences of the Globe, while *Macbeth* was produced at court under the direct patronage of the Stuart king, by a company of twelve, and also as a treat to the King of Denmark on a royal visit. The story of the play would flatter the vanity of King James, implying his claim of being the ripest fruit on the family tree of Banquo, and a lot of other allusions to his personality and writings, including the *Daemonologie* of 1597, and to the infamous Gunpowder Plot that was meant to blow up Parliament together with its monarch. The new setting required control, sophistication and solemnity, so far kept very much at bay.

Here is Richard expressing surprise at his own success in the face of his bad temper:

> What, I that killed her husband and his father,
> To take her in her heart's extremest hate,

With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
The bleeding witness of my hatred by,
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,
And I no friends to back my suit withal
But the plain devil and dissembling looks –
And yet to win her, all the world to nothing? Ha!
(*Richard III*, I.ii.218-25)

In that story the male protagonist remains the dominating figure, while the feminine counterpart cannot but submit… But this rapport is reversed in *Macbeth*: in the frantic scene of the slaying of the king, the killer falters, does not conclude his action, baulks at laying the blame on the sleeping soldiers, and for a telling moment leaves to finish the plot he mounted with his wife, the nameless woman who has atrociously repudiated her own nature, and who now complains:

I have given suck, and I know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.
(*Macbeth*, I.vii.54-59)

And her fantastic cruelty is not due to a frenzied motion of anger. It is part of an ice-cold program which she herself appears to have contrived in a previous scene:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,

> And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell.
> (I.v.39-50)

Now, what about originality? This is great, fearful verbal *art*, original and ready to become, in the hands (and voice) of a good actress, great mimetic art, at a vast distance from the declamatory fixity of the Richard-Lady Anne confrontation of a few years before. In the turn of a dozen years, the tools in the hands of the playwright have improved immensely, and his invention was fired.

Not that he doesn't remember his roots: the medieval drama remains very much in his mind and in the mind of his company and audience. Somewhat redolent of the Middle Ages, we have seen, was the Vice in *Richard III*, and in *Macbeth* we have a similar presence, that of the Porter of Macbeth's castle at Inverness, now upgraded to become the porter of Hell:

> (*Knocking within*). Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate he should have old turning the key. (*Knock within*). Knock, knock, knock. Who's there, i'th' name of Belzebub? (II.iii.1-4)

Here is a splinter from another kind of communal show, the mystery play which would use the mischievous, picturesque character of a minor devil as a diversion, the spokesman of the gaucherie and wit of the underlings, not as acrimonious as the Vice, but as relevant to the key of the play. This one, in particular, set the critical discussion, from Samuel T. Coleridge (very much adverse to it) down to Kenneth Muir (very much in favor of the black infernal tinge it gives to the scene of the regicide) – all that explains, in synthesis, Macbeth's own words at the end:

> I pall in resolution, and begin
> To doubt th'equivocation of the fiend,
> That lies like truth.
> (V.v.40-42)

The difference between *Richard III* and *Macbeth* sums up the progress of our two trails of communal craftsmanship and personal art, two developments that would remain permanent in their author's production. And this production will be defined more and

more by the sophistication of compositional techniques, by the improving of the narrative force and of the practice of modulating and interlacing episodes, but above all by providing the style with exceptional and previously never tried resources, with new-fangled, daring metaphors, with lexical inventions ready to be incorporated in everyday usage, with language improvements capable of holding an audience chained to "the two hours' traffic of our stage" (*Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue.12) and to remain stamped in collective memory more than those of any other author.

And yet, Shakespeare would never utterly forsake the haphazard and naive manner of his beginnings, especially after his company was affluent enough in 1608 to buy a second theatre, the Blackfriars, on the opposite bank of the Thames – opposite the Globe – where they probably put on the first of an extraordinary series of texts which could well be dated back in some past decades: texts parading their "old age" with pride, and mixing material derived from archaic genres like the stories of magic, sorcery and fairy tales, the pastoral and the adventurous, the encounter with utopias, in short all the panoply of primeval fantasy: a series that would conclude with the jewel of *The Tempest* (1610-11).

What interests us now, however, is the first of these texts, appropriately given the label of *romances*: it is *Pericles, Prince of Tyre […], as it was lately presented by the worthy and ancient poet John Gower* (1608). For unknown reasons, for that mature effort Shakespeare had a co-author named George Wilkins, a publican of somewhat shady reputation. The text, printed in 1609, was so corrupt that it was excluded from the collected works of 1623. The story is a typical rehash, what we would call a *centone*, going through incest, sound love, the tyrant oppressing virtue, envy pestering beauty, the circumnavigation of the Mediterranean, the abduction of the heroine, the final recognition, practically most of the fictional features of the literature of the past – and a good prelude to a deplorable failure. But there is some surprise in store, for *Pericles* was an extraordinary success, continued even in the seventeenth century, beyond the Puritan suppression of the theatres. In its first season, it became the pivot of the diplomatic mission of Giorgio Giustinian, the ambassador of the Republic of Venice, aiming at averting the war between the Republic and the Papacy. He invited

to an evening at the Globe, to a show of *Pericles*, the French ambassador and the secretary of the Florentine embassy. It cost him the astronomical sum of twenty crowns – a worthwhile payment, for his mission was completely successful[2].

Pericles is relevant to our concern above all for its nostalgic quality: Ben Jonson called it "a mouldy tale". And nostalgia is the key to the Prologue, spoken by the character of the fictional author, John Gower, in the following terms:

> To sing a song that old was sung
> From ashes ancient Gower is come,
> Assuming man's infirmities
> To glad your ear and please your eyes.
> It hath been sung at festivals,
> On ember-eves and holy-ales,
> And lords and ladies in their lives
> Have read it for restoratives.
> […]
> If you, born in these latter times
> When wit's more ripe, accept my rhymes,
> And that to hear an old man sing
> May to your wishes pleasure bring,
> I life would wish, and that I might
> Waste it for you like taper-light.
> (*Pericles*, Prologue.1-8, 11-16)

Let us probe more critically into these lines: why this insistence on the archaic, this looking back to "ember-eves and holy-ales", to "lords and ladies" evocative of the Middle Ages? All the play looks back to similar materials, and our answer cannot but refer to the loosening of the knot that kept together the high and the low, the aristocratic and the popular, the stage and the pit of the showground, to that unique experience that the popular theatres were at that moment of history. The old circularity of culture, which was the Globe's quintessence, was disintegrating at that very moment. Shows were under the pressure of a new selectivity, which in society meant the rise of the aristocratic elite, in literary

[2] See Gurr 1996, 83. For this author, *Pericles* is "the biggest innovation Shakespeare ever made".

theory meant the growth of the neoclassical rationality and regularity, and in the theatrical sphere meant the separation of the communal arenas and the private playhouses, with productions more and more far apart for tastes, idioms, and kinds of entertainment. The heterogeneous public audiences of the beginnings were splintering up, while the antidote proposed by the King's Men was the persistently selective, renewed claim to a universal theatre, the manifestation of totality, whose main task would be that of including the past as well as the present, fantasy together with history and magic and moral maturity, and above all wonder, the high regard and admiration for authors and companies, against the detachment, the alienation effect the newcomers such as Ben Jonson and John Webster were pursuing. Shakespeare's romances were meant to answer the attack of regularity and symmetry to which the new audiences were becoming acquainted, and which would prevail later, in the work of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This was what the King's Men required of their theatre-goers: the energetic participation in the imaginative achievement, and (with it) to the activity of memory: memory of a cohesive, unifying kind of culture, imbued with the old formulas of magic and ritual. This is what Prospero recommends to Miranda and the audience at the beginning of *The Tempest*:

> Canst thou remember[?]
>
> What seest thou else
> In the dark backward and abyss of time?
> (*The Tempest*, I.i.38, 49-50)

In the dynamic system of the theatre, an epoch-making transformation was taking place, conceiving and promoting the single theatrical script no longer as a collective text, anonymous and polymorphic, "artisanal" in every sense – plays of this kind, the products of collaboration published anonymously, were countless by that time – but as the expression of a single individual, in his or her turn capable of becoming from a simple piece of a collective body to an absolute creator of new knowledge: so far a process in

its beginning, but looking to the idea of the "artist" that would take shape in the aesthetics of the following century.

And here, a final caution: *Pericles* and its progeny are useful now to advise us against taking those texts as what we might call an exclusively "literary" phenomenon, endowed with all the functions, including the doctrinal and the didactic, covered by literature in our day. For those authors and actors and audiences, the theatre was an activity unrelated with – not to say "alternative to" – "literature" as we conceive it. And it is their muscular quarrying deep down to the depths of tradition that now protects us against thinking that their art of mimesis could be justified by what we can read today in their fragile quartos. Indeed, we should do well to remember that the playwrights of the Shakespeare cast – the Bard with all the rest of them, except perhaps Jonson – did not take much notice of their printed texts, publication being a mere side concern, primacy going instead for them to the factuality and many-sidedness of the stage-shows, the true centre of their artistic interest. There isn't any other reason for the relative scarcity of surviving items from that massive production, and for the famous Shakespearean Folio of 1623 having more than one third of so far unpublished material, including *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest*…

In conclusion, we may say that among the modern directors the more successful in reviving that important cultural moment have been the twentieth-century avant-garde: Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, and today perhaps Declan Donnellan – an avant-garde which, in Artaud's words, has re-vitalized the conception of mimetic art as a practice of "magic and ritual", and the theatre as "an independent and autonomous art, which, in order to resurrect or simply live on, cannot dispense with what differentiates it from the text, the naked word, the literature, and from all the other means of a stabilized sort of writing" (Artaud 1968, xiv, my translation). These words, I think, would have been ratified by our fabulous sixteenth-century entertainers.

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