

The Great William: Writers Reading Shakespeare, by
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Theodore Leinwand's *The Great William: Writers Reading Shakespeare* comprises seven chapter-length essays, each addressing literary response at the level of the individual reader. It's an often elusive topic; yet Leinwand's case studies are abundantly documented. Together, they invite a new view of reading, not merely as reception, but as itself a mode of appropriation.

Leinwand begins with Coleridge and Keats in the nineteenth century and moves on to Woolf in the early twentieth. He then settles down in the decades after World War Two, with Charles Olson, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg, and Ted Hughes. The wide range of primary material includes Coleridge's lectures (in the records that survive); Keats's letters and marginalia; Woolf's reading notebooks; and the archives of the four postwar poets. Some of this material is well known, but much is not. Few Shakespeareans will have heard much about Berryman's unpublished commentaries on his own dreams (131-39).

While varying greatly in their origins and purposes, Leinwand's documents generally reflect two broad categories of response. One is "cognitive" — thinking about how a text is made and what it means. The other is "phenomenological" or "affective" — evoking sensory or emotional experiences associated with reading. Most of Leinwand's evidence skews toward the cognitive, as writers seek to explain Shakespeare. But phenomenological aspects also appear, and the cognitive can get mixed up with the affective.

The cognitive responses can look like appropriations, yielding versions of Shakespeare that serve a writer's practical needs. For example, pointing to Shakespeare's putative lapses can be liberating. Woolf thus depicts Shakespeare in her reading notes as hurried or distracted — a writer who doesn't always "take the trouble to work it out" when he hits a snag (quoted at 80). Perhaps his busy life in the theater won't let him "alone to think" (quoted at 82). Or maybe it's his temperament: in *Coriolanus* he seems "impatient," using "too few words for the meaning" (quoted at 83). While admiring the speed of Shakespeare's thoughts, Woolf also charges them with overtaking his pen,

overloading his words, and overtasking his readers. This is a less enchanted view of the poet whom we glimpse gauzily through the protagonist's eyes in *Orlando* — sitting alone, in a reverie, until he "very quickly" scribbles out his lines (Woolf 1956, 22).

In humanizing Shakespeare, Woolf was of course reacting to his deification by earlier writers such as Coleridge and Keats. Coleridge made Shakespearean lecturing a quasi-priestly occupation; only a sacred text could deserve such philological, psychological, and metaphysical labors. This vocation must have compensated somewhat for Coleridge's creative inhibitions — but also exacerbated them; officiating in the church of Shakespeare might be professionally enabling but poetically disabling. Keats, too, envisioned a demigod with "the utmost achievement [sic] of human intellect prostrate beneath his indolent and kingly gaze" (quoted at 58); yet he was better than Coleridge at compartmentalizing this unattainable Shakespearean standard. In "On sitting down to read King Lear once again," which Leinwand compares in both its manuscript versions, Keats plans to emerge from the Shakespearean flames as a stronger poet (49-51).

If these Romantic cognitive appropriations gave us the deified modern Shakespeare, Leinwand's close reading of them reveals the complexity of this divinizing process. For example, two notions that echo through modern criticism are Coleridge's "myriad-minded Shakespeare" and Keats's "negative capability." Leinwand traces the first phrase back to 1801, when Coleridge writes "Shakespeare?" alongside the epithet "myriad-minded" in a Greek ecclesiastical text (23-24). It's a fitting origin for a phrase describing Shakespeare's supernal *nous* (Greek for "mind"). By contrast, "negative capability" fails to tell the whole story about the Keatsian Shakespeare, whose imaginative sympathy is not always quite as universal as this idea implies; as Leinwand shows, Keats sometimes allows Shakespeare a preferential love of "Beauty" that feels more sensual and partial (quoted at 50, 62).

By the mid-twentieth century, some poets' cognitive appropriations of Shakespeare are driven by the institutional economies of modernism and the academy: they see him as a source of cultural capital, potentially underwriting their own entry into the literary-canonical marketplace. In this way Olson, the Black Mountain poet and author of *The Maximus Poems*, enlists the later Shakespeare as an unlikely advocate for his own "objectist" or "projective" verse. On Olson's view, Shakespeare found "between H[*amlet*] & L[*ear*] . . . [that] the lyric & psychological [were] both dead" (quoted at 96), and accordingly began treating words as things. Equally self-serving, though in different ways, is Hughes's *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. Leinwand finds some buried nuggets in this largely unread book: for example, Hughes makes the verbal figure *hendiadys* a miniature analogy of English cultural history (182-84). Yet Leinwand stops short of suggesting that we recuperate Hughes as a Shakespeare critic.

Next to Olson's and Hughes's grandiose rethinkings of Shakespeare, both Berryman's and Ginsberg's appear humble. Berryman poured countless hours into a *Lear* edition that he never finished. In his painstaking notes and lists — some reproduced as illustrations — Leinwand sees a "deep identification that compels one to rewrite the master's words," not so much by emending as by "reconfiguring" them (126). Then there are Berryman's wild Shakespearean glosses on his own dreams: his 154 dream analyses mirror the number of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (132). Berryman occasionally asserts himself in his formal Shakespearean essays, which "pass judgment" on Shakespeare's style and even on his values (117-119). But on balance, he is servile — a Caliban to Shakespeare's Prospero. Leinwand calls him "Shakespeare's Berryman" (10).

Just one writer in *The Great William* seems to harbor no anxiety about Shakespeare, show no excessive deference, exhibit no restiveness under his authority. Ginsberg's recorded class lectures at Naropa in 1975 and 1980 depict Shakespeare as "funny" (quoted at 150). Although intellectually stimulated by Shakespeare, Ginsberg is far less reflexively cognitive — more intentionally phenomenological and affective — than Leinwand's other subjects. He praises Shakespeare's "William Carlos Williams-like" verses for their "tangible, corporeal, sensory, tactile . . . visual fact minute particulars" (quoted at 152). Of *The Tempest*, he says that Shakespeare does what "imagist poets have been working for eighty years" to do — "describe a cloud" — and that he delights us with "chiming" and "pretties" (quoted at 158, 159). This, Leinwand writes, is "reading Shakespeare by feel, by ear, and by mouth" (161).

Is Ginsberg uniquely free of the need to appropriate Shakespeare? Happy just to enjoy him? Leinwand does not go so far. Noting that Ginsberg once called Shakespeare "a primary source" (quoted at 142), Leinwand finds his poem "Kaddish" illuminated by Shakespearean parallels. These "Shakespearean shards" suggest that even the joyful Ginsberg used Shakespeare for his own artistic ends (164, 165).

Although Leinwand does not use the term "appropriation," his book implicitly supports the application of this concept to any substantial readerly engagement with Shakespeare. After all, reading as a cognitive activity is selective and shaped by readers' goals; so Andrew Elfenbein explains in his recent book *The Gist of Reading*, drawing on empirical research in psychology (Elfenbein 2018, 45). The traces of reading examined in *The Great William* attest to the variety of these readerly goals, as well as the intensity of the appropriative efforts that they can inspire.

References

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