

"Alas, poor YORICK": Quoting Shakespeare in the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Novel

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Abstract

Shakespeare is so widely quoted in the eighteenth-century novel that the practice seems almost innocuous. Closer examination of his quotation by the novel's characters, however, reveals a tension between this polite convention and its potentially dangerous association with the pretense of the stage. This paper will argue that Shakespeare's multiple availability to the eighteenth-century public — via the stage, adaptations, gentlemanly editions, cheaper texts, and anthologies — renders his quotation an ambiguous act, capable of representing simultaneously a stagy self-dramatization and a benign, readerly admiration. Looking at some of the ways in which novelists such as Richardson, Fielding, and Sterne have their characters variously maximize or minimize the theatricality of their quotations, the paper will show how they creatively exploit Shakespeare's complex status at this historical juncture to create subtle shades of characterization.

Shakespeare's dramatic works seem so far removed from the domestic, fan-fluttering adventures of eighteenth-century blockbusters such as *Clarissa* and *Tom Jones* that, on venturing into the novels, one might be struck by how frequently his name and words crop up. Often the most frequently quoted author in such novels amidst many excerpts from classical and modern literature, Shakespeare is certainly quoted by the widest range of characters, from polite ladies and gentlemen praising his beauties to would-be sophisticates namedropping "Othello's whore of Venus" (Coventry 1752, 197) and country bumpkins shuddering merrily at the way "the Ghost of Gimlet" spoke of "*quails upon the frightful porcupine*" (Smollett 1771, 1:107, italics in original).

Literary quotations in the eighteenth-century novel are usually difficult to miss. Frequently introduced by a character or narrator with a praising remark that "the poet says well," they typically take the form of several indented, italicized lines of verse, often followed by an attribution: e.g., "Shakesp." or "Dryden." (Impressively, the narrator of John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* is not distracted from observing this Shakespeare-quoting formality even while detailing a particularly busy morning's work [Cleland 1749, 2:194]). Yet studies of allusion in the novel

seem less concerned with these chunks of quotation than with those hidden allusions that require more detective work.¹ Perhaps because they are so obvious, such chunks are often treated as "embellishments" (Carroll 1973, 70) or ignored altogether.² Often overlooked, however, is the fact that these quotations are largely delivered by *characters*. This paper will contend that the visibility of overt quotations to the eighteenth-century reader and the judgments that characters base on one another's quoting styles make the quotations fully functional pieces with some kind of intended response. They are acts of quotation, and, as such, are rarely innocuous.

My research asks what it means to quote Shakespeare in the mid-eighteenth-century novel and examines the way in which characters are distinguished from one another by the way they handle his words. What made Shakespeare especially useful to novelists as a tool for characterization was, I argue, his ambiguous nature at a historical moment when, as Michael Dobson has demonstrated, his status as national poet was still being negotiated (Dobson 1992). One such ambiguity, and the subject of this paper, was his dual availability on stage and page. While Shakespeare's eighteenth-century life is broadly summarized as a period of decisive transformation — when he was "reinvented," as in Gary Taylor's title (Taylor 1989) or "domesticated," as in Colin Franklin's (Franklin 1991) — he in fact existed simultaneously in multiple modes with complex relative values.

Ostensibly, Shakespeare was domesticated in the eighteenth century into a polite world of libraries and drawing rooms. From 1709, he was elegantly produced in a string of expensive editions by the dominant English publisher, Jacob Tonson. Between 1737 and 1769, the parameters of my research, Shakespeare furnished a further six major editions and also became widely available in cheap, single-play texts; was heavily excerpted for his similes in Edward Bysshe's lowly handbook for writers, *The Art of English Poetry* (first published in 1702 and often reprinted), and in many other miscellanies; and was venerated by William Dodd in a *Beauties of Shakespear* collection of his own (1752, 1757, and 1773).³ But Shakespeare's theatrical life was not replaced or quashed by these books; on the stage were further possible modes, as adaptations that hacked and dragged Shakespeare into a more "refined" age vied with versions that increasingly treated his original words as "sacred" (Marsden 1995, 127).

So when one quoted Shakespeare in the eighteenth century, did one invoke a dramatist, a fine poet, or the sententious filler of anthologies? Was the act of quotation just that, an act, with overtones of pretense and show? Or was it a readerly reflection on the beauty or morality of Shakespeare's words? The answer is all of the above, and we will see how quoting characters deliberately play up or play down Shakespeare's stage provenance according to how they wish

to present themselves. Emphasizing Shakespeare's theatricality could associate one not only with a respectable aristocratic entertainment and the work of great actors and actresses, but also with the less glamorous side of the theater — with strolling players and pathological performers with names like "Mr. Ranter" and with a superficial showiness that existed in tension with the deference of quoting. Dobson observes that Shakespeare and his characters "migrate independently into the novels" in the 1750s and 1760s, ultimately "escaping the stage altogether" (Dobson 1992, 214, 186). This paper will show that, on a linguistic level, in the novels' quotations, a tang of the theater remains, even in those disconnected fragments that look like moral extracts. It will examine the ways in which three heavily-quoting novelists — Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Laurence Sterne — creatively exploit Shakespeare's ambiguity for subtleties of characterization.

Samuel Richardson

Samuel Richardson is often assumed to have had a puritanical distaste for the theater, and in the characterization of his modest heroine, Clarissa, and of her rakish suitor and, ultimately, rapist, Robert Lovelace, he appears to pitch virtue against the theater as moral opposites. Both polite, skillful quoters, the pair are morally distinguished from one another by the way in which they handle Shakespeare. Their very first Shakespeare quotations, both overt and formally presented, are strongly contrasted in their appearance. Lovelace's first letter, declaiming to his friend Belford his passion for the unattainable Clarissa, is riddled with quotations as he flits from role to role, playing the tragic lover. He quickly lights on Shakespeare:

Thou wilt say I rave. And so I do!

Perdition catch my soul, but I do love her. (Richardson 1748, 1:200)

Here, Lovelace hops momentarily into a melodramatic outburst from *Othello* (3.3.91-2).⁴ It is brief and exclamatory, a literary excuse to swear. In the same letter, he seizes on Ferdinand's declaration of love to Miranda in *The Tempest* (3.1.39-48) and corrupts it:

—— *Full many a Lady*

I've ey'd with best regard; and many a time

Th' harmony of their tongues hath into bondage

Brought my too diligent ear. For several virtues

Have I lik'd several women. Never any

With so full soul, but some defect in her

Did quarrel with the noblest grace she ow'd

And put it to the foil. But She! — O She!

So perfect and so peerless is created,

Of ev'ry creature's best.—— (Richardson 1748, 1:202-203, italics in original)

In this gushing quotation, Ferdinand's tender "you, O you" is not only switched into the third person, but also capitalized: "She! O She!" leaps noisily off the page, aggressive and posturing. Lovelace also underlines the phrases "several virtues" and, more menacingly, "several women"; we wonder how many previous conquests succumbed to this kind of performance.⁵ Clarissa's first quotation, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.102-103) is, by contrast, anti-histrionic, criticizing Lovelace's blustering style:

I have not the better opinion of Mr. Lovelace for his extravagant volubility. He is too full of professions: He says too many fine things of me, and to me: True respect, true value, I think, lies not in words: Words cannot express it: The silent awe, the humble, the doubting eye, and even the hesitating voice, better show it by much, than, as Shakespeare says,

—— *The rattling tongue*

Of saucy and audacious eloquence. (Richardson 1748, 3:50)

The careful triplet of "awe," "eye," and "voice" that precedes it, and the choice of one and a half lines, makes this quotation appear to be a careful, considered selection. Clarissa handles Shakespeare as a source of apothegmatic wisdom, the stuff of commonplace books. The simple black-and-white contrast of theater and virtue in these quotations is confirmed when Clarissa scornfully says of one of Lovelace's disreputable female friends who attempts to quote Shakespeare — "with a theatrical air she spoke it" (Richardson 1748, 3:302) — as if she herself is above this kind of performance.

To Richardson's frustration, though, things were not quite so clear cut. Many early readers found Lovelace dashing likeable and thought Clarissa too precious or "over-nice" in refusing him (Richardson 1751, 4:106n). And in a novel comprised of letters with competing opinions, there was room for ambiguity about whether Clarissa had been innocently lured out of her home, or had, as in the eyes of her family, willfully eloped with Lovelace to avoid their toad-like choice of a husband, Mr. Solmes. Far from being the opposite of the ever-performing Lovelace, Clarissa frequently proves herself capable of acting, such as when she has to play the part of his wife in London to preserve her reputation. So Clarissa's scorn of the "theatrical air" might actually be seen as defensive, playing down her acting abilities.

In the third edition of *Clarissa* (1751), in response to reader criticism, Richardson painstakingly altered small details to blacken Lovelace's character and illuminate Clarissa's. Among other things,

he inserted the untrue statement by Clarissa's friend Anna that the heroine "seldom" quoted (Richardson 1751, 8:218, noted by Price 2000, 28). This statement occurs in an inserted passage in which Clarissa explains that learning is only appropriate for women after they have mastered the domestic sphere — a passage intended, that is, to minimize Clarissa's appearance as an over-educated, overreaching girl who deserves her fate. Significantly, in comparing the editions, I noticed that Richardson also adjusted Clarissa's first quotation from "as Shakespeare says" to "as our beloved Shakespeare says" (Richardson 1751, 3:24). By adding the words "our beloved," he removes the quotation from not only the realm of learning but also the theater, aligning it with a proper, benign admiration of the English for their national poet, independent of his plays. He has Clarissa lose herself in the plural "our" to render the quotation a shared piece of national wisdom, not a grand performance of her own knowledge. Happily, ambiguity lingers: Richardson did not want Clarissa to be "wholly blameless,"⁶ and by employing Shakespeare's simultaneous staginess and respectability, he made Clarissa a nuanced character rather than a moral type.

Henry Fielding

Henry Fielding's novels find rich humor in the connection between quoting and over-learning, and when the well-read Mrs. Western in *Tom Jones* (1749) launches into yet another "as the great Milton says", her brother is moved to threats of violence, shouting "D— Milton . . . if he had the Impudence to say so to my Face, I'd lend him a Douse, thof he was never so great a Man" (Fielding 1974, 1:321). Unlike Richardson's letter-filled novels, most of Fielding's quotations come from the narrator rather than the characters. However, this narrator assumes a variety of polite voices to mock the banal habit of quoting from the stage. Later in *Tom Jones*, he introduces one quotation with the grand preamble — "so, the immortal Shakespear:" — gives a formal, italicized excerpt from *Macbeth*; and then undercuts it by dismissing the "hackney'd Quotation" (2:324) in favor of a more obscure poet. He thus reveals that the preamble is a tired, polite stock phrase that has nothing to do with Shakespeare's dramatic skill.

On the few occasions that Fielding allows his characters themselves to quote Shakespeare, he mocks their affectation. In his first novel, *Joseph Andrews* (1742), the virtuous Joseph and his unworldly travelling companion, Parson Adams, stumble into a skirmish with a surly innkeeper. In the fray, Adams has a pan of hog's blood emptied over his head by the innkeeper's wife. Hearing cries of "murder," a gentleman traveller, just returned from Italy, sails in and tells the blood-dripping Adams that "he looked like the Ghost of Othello", and "bid him *not shake his gory Locks at him, for he could not say he did it*" (Fielding 1967, 121, italics in original). Of course, the traveller is hopelessly mixed up, confusing Othello with Macbeth's speech to the ghost of the murdered

Banquo (*Macbeth* 3.4.49-50); the traveller is possibly also thinking of the stock phrase "the Ghost of Hamlet." He has evidently gone abroad in search of culture before mastering the basics of his own. The italic emphasis on the quoted words nonetheless denotes an elevated voice, a mini-performance. The traveller's stagy affectation is comically undercut by Adams's bemused reply; not knowing the plays, he innocently answers, "Sir, I am far from accusing you." The episode attaches to the traveller the pretense and showiness that is pejoratively associated with the stage.

But the traveller's banal histrionics also suggest that the stage is the true source, the natural habitat, of Shakespeare's power to move. Fielding, formerly a successful dramatist and manager himself, celebrates David Garrick's naturalistic acting skill in *Tom Jones* (1749). In a famous passage in the novel, Tom takes the naive Partridge to see *Hamlet* performed. Although Partridge declares "I know it is but a Play" (Fielding 1974, 2:853-4), he is petrified the instant that Garrick, as Hamlet, sees the ghost:

Nay, you may call me a Coward if you will; but if that little Man there upon the Stage is not frightned, I never saw any Man frightned in my Life. Ay, ay; *go along with you!* Ay, to be sure! Who's Fool then? Will you? Lud have mercy upon such Fool-Hardiness! Whatever happens, it is good enough for you. — *Follow you?* I'd follow the Devil as soon. Nay, perhaps it is the Devil — for they say he can put on what Likeness he pleases. — Oh! here he is again — *No farther!* No, you have gone far enough already; farther than I'd have gone for all the King's Dominions. (2:854, italics in original)

Partridge becomes emotionally caught up in the action of the play, responding to Shakespeare's lines with the words "you" and "I" as if he were on stage himself. The audience around Partridge laughs at his naiveté. But the joke is on them. In the passage quoted above, the phrases that Fielding italicizes are, in fact, fragments from the play. In his terror, Partridge quotes *Hamlet* in a fresh, unaffected way, "the same Passions which succeeded each other in *Hamlet*, succeeding likewise in him" (2:854). Laughable as he is, this heartfelt response apparently does greater credit to Garrick and Shakespeare than to the tittering audience, immune to the play after a thousand such polite evenings. They know exactly what to expect from "the Scene" and from "the whole Speech of the Ghost" (2:854) and look at one another, not the stage, for amusement — but no doubt glibly quote "the immortal Shakespeare" in their polite conversations. Fielding sets up contrasts between the extremes of the ever-quoting Mrs. Western and her quotation-hating brother; Partridge's terror and the jaded audience's immunity; the gentleman traveller's stagy spouting and Parson Adams's complete ignorance of Shakespeare. The stage, for Fielding, contains both affectation and truth (figured in the difference between a "farcical actor" and a "judicious and just actor," who represents

the "truest and finest Strokes of Nature" [Fielding 1972, 162]), and he trains his reader to distinguish his characters' performances in these terms.

Laurence Sterne

Finally, we turn to Laurence Sterne, the Anglican vicar and novelist who had a keen interest in the theater, who cultivated a friendship with Garrick, and who vaguely considered turning his first novel, *Tristram Shandy*, into a play.⁷ Nevertheless, Sterne's novels show what one risks when one tries to drag Shakespeare into the house. By 1760, when Sterne writes, the fragments of Shakespeare that dart through his novels ought to symbolize the completion of the playwright's escape from the stage. At first glance, they do: The fragments become, variously: historical records, a gravestone inscription, physical descriptions, curses, exclamations, and even a new character. (In Sterne's first novel, Parson Yorick wanders his parish; in his second, *A Sentimental Journey* [1768], he roams France, Shakespeare serving as his passport.) Yet for all this denial of Shakespeare's stage provenance, Sterne's theatrical side cannot be contained. In a novel about borrowing and authorities, Shakespeare's fragments might appear to be the size and shape of moral excerpts, but actually remain dramatic sound bites.

For example, *Tristram* first introduces Shakespeare as a mere record-keeper of Parson Yorick's family history, dealing in "authenticated facts" (Sterne 1978, 1:26). But despite this bookish treatment, Sterne knows that the reader's instant association on hearing the name "Yorick" will be with the graveside scene in *Hamlet* — perhaps even with the image of Hamlet holding Yorick's skull. The reader's vivid association seems to be held responsible for the way the story gallops to Yorick's death and gravestone in a matter of pages:

He lies buried in a corner of his church-yard, in the parish of ———, under a plain marble slab, which his friend *Eugenius*, by leave of his executors, laid upon his grave, with no more than these three words of inscription serving both for his epitaph and elegy.

Ten times in a day has *Yorick's* ghost the consolation to hear his monumental inscription read over with such a variety of plaintive tones, as denote a general pity and esteem for him; ———a foot-way crossing the church-yard close by the side of his grave, —not a passenger goes by without stopping to cast a look upon it, —and sighing as he walks on,

(1:35-36)

The already famous tag "Alas, poor Yorick" is frozen on the page in a box that represents its monumentality. But no passer-by can help but release its theatricality from this box, moved involuntarily not just to read the words, but to declaim them with a sigh as they happen past.⁸ Though captured in stone, the phrase remains a fragment of a performance.

Tristram enlists theatrical words such as "stage," "curtains," and "entrances" to control the narrative and marshal his audience, dropping the curtains on one "scene" to shift to another. But the story of his life keeps unraveling; he remains unborn after two volumes, and the theater turns out to have a rupturing, not a cohesive, effect. Shakespeare is the only dramatist quoted in this allusion-filled novel, and because his pieces remain resolutely theatrical, they are comically incongruous with their new setting. When Tristram's bookish father, Walter Shandy, exclaims "Angels and Ministers of grace defend us!" (Sterne 1978, 176), the eighteenth-century reader could not help but recall Garrick's reaction to the sight of the ghost in one of the most talked-about scenes in recent theater history. The intense physical scene conjured up is comically at odds with what prompts Walter's cry: studying an obstetrics manual. Similarly, when the man-midwife Dr. Slop makes his metaphorical "entrance upon the stage" to deliver Tristram, the physical presence of this stage is emphasized. Standing in the doorway, covered in mud, for a full "minute and a half," he is compared to "Hamlet's ghost." The ghost's rage at being untimely killed, "unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled / No reck'ning made, but sent to my account / With all my imperfections on my head" (*Hamlet* 1.5.77-79), is converted into a bodily description of Slop: "*unwiped, unappointed, unanealed*, with all his stains and blotches on him" (Sterne 1978, 123-24, italics in original). This imaginary stage thus intrudes tangibly on the parlor where Walter and Uncle Toby are talking quietly by the fireside.

The disruption takes place in the imagination of the reader, who is asked to switch rapidly back and forth between the mental spaces of the parlor and the stage, the theater and the book; and between ideas and action, the imaginative metaphor and the physical performance. By dealing only in the most familiar dramatic tags of Shakespeare, rather than readerly extracts, Sterne exaggerates that clash of genres and ideas that recent critics, without mentioning Shakespeare, have seen as Sterne's way of showing the fragmentariness of human ideas in the face of a more complete idea of his God.⁹

To conclude, it seems that Sterne's sudden switches between theater and reading, action and ideas, embody most vividly the multiplicity of Shakespeare's image as national poet that all three novelists exploit. Shakespeare and the novel have a certain resonance in that the eighteenth century saw them both as alternately respectable and as leading people astray, promoting virtue

and damaging it, even while the novels were flying off the presses and Shakespeare's image was enshrined in Westminster Abbey.¹⁰ But this sense of alternation brings this paper to a final suggestion. As the novels illustrate, all kinds of people feel capable of quoting Shakespeare with a sense of ownership ("my Shakespeare," "your Shakespeare," "our Shakespeare," and "our favourite Shakespeare" can be found just in Richardson). The judgmental worlds of the novels insist, however, that, to own him, one has to be aware not only of his theatricality, but also of one's own.

The novels have given us many examples of self-dramatizing acts of quoting Shakespeare. Self-dramatization was not confined to the act of quoting drama: Clarissa and Pamela demonstrate piety in their letters by using biblical quotations, for example. But the insistence of some characters on minimizing the theatricality of Shakespeare's words suggests a heightened consciousness of performance. For all its new privileging of interiority and the subjective mind of the individual character, the novel has to express its insights to an audience. Novels, especially epistolary ones, are concerned with the conveying of interiority — while *Tristram Shandy* takes the gesture to parodic extremes.¹¹ Social historians often represent the eighteenth century as reflecting a shift from the exteriority of public discourse to an inward-looking sentimentality (e.g., Porter 2001, 276-94). However, to convey one's internal workings, one is required to see the self as other, and to accept the expression of one's character as the performance of a role. This is especially true if one wishes to present a polite character to the world, since politeness was a behavioral, not an inherent, attribute (Klein 1994, 4-5). Even the modest, quiet, and deferent, such as Clarissa, are forced to portray themselves as such, to act out their own reticence and to accept the new truth of the familiar tag that "All the world's a stage." Shakespeare, simultaneously available in the eighteenth century as consolation for the heart and superficial bombast, as both "our beloved" national poet and the mirror of highly individual feelings, as the source of genuine emotion and also of acting and pretending, is a perfect embodiment of the increasingly fine line between public and private notions of character. Indeed, this is the century in which the creator of Hamlet and Othello became the much-quoted "immortal Shakespear" and a character in his own right.

Notes

1. For example, the forthcoming Cambridge edition of *Clarissa* will help to defend Richardson from the label of "untutored genius" by unearthing in the novel many hitherto undetected allusions that suggest the breadth and depth of his reading and learning.
2. Many overt Shakespeare quotations are overlooked in Robert Gale Noyes's *The Thespian Mirror* (1953), often cited as a near-comprehensive collection of mentions of Shakespeare in

novels published between 1740 and 1780. More recently, overt quotations in general have been variously (and cursorily) treated as disposable literary additions designed to elevate the novel form; as hints at a wider set of more subtle allusions to a work; as signs of a parallel plot structure; as shorthand to suggest a character's affinity with the original speaker; or as a measure of the author's own reading. Such approaches regard overt quotations as functions of the author, and not of the quoting character.

3. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755), which postdates most of the novels in this paper, would soon provide another bookish aspect of Shakespeare. The (approximately) 116,000 literary quotations it contained served "not only as illustrative examples of the words he was defining, but also as a collection of moral or useful *exempla*." Around one-third of its poetical quotations came from Shakespeare (Woudhuysen 1989, 7-8).
4. Textual references to Shakespeare are to Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, eds., *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (1998).
5. This paper follows Richardson's first edition of *Clarissa* (unless otherwise stated), rather than Angus Ross's 1985 Penguin edition, since the latter removes the italics Richardson used for quotations, and thus loses the hint of spoken, performative emphasis that this typography might have conveyed to early readers. Ironically, Lovelace is writing, not speaking, this quotation, and so is very likely painstakingly transcribing this virtuoso performance — an irony that, I argue, Richardson intended by taking many quotations from prominent places in Bysshe's handbook, *The Art of English Poetry* (1762).
6. In the margin of her edition of *Clarissa*, next to Anna's statement that "I had been inquiring privately, how to procure you a conveyance from Harlowe-Place, and yet not appear in it" (2:274), Richardson's long-standing correspondent, Lady Bradshaigh, wrote, "This conveyance should have been procur'd & no appointment made with Lovelace, then wou'd she have been blameless." Richardson replied in the margin, "I did not want her to be wholly blameless" (Barchas 1998, 55).
7. Sterne wrote to Garrick, "I sometimes think of a Cervantic Comedy upon these & the Materials of ye 3d & 4th Vols which will be still more dramattick,—tho I as often distrust its Successe, unless at the Universities" (Letter 46: "To David Garrick from the Author of *Tristram Shandy*, York, January 27, 1760," in Sterne 1935, 87).
8. Centering the words "Alas poor YORICK" on the page provides a strong visual echo of one contemporary source for Sterne's novel, *The Life and Memoirs of Mr. Ephraim Tristram Bates*, which concludes with the words "Alas, poor Bates" (Anonymous 1756, 236). These words are not written on Bates's gravestone, but instead cried passionately (chest-beating and all) by

people who have come to look for his final monument. In *Tristram Shandy*, by contrast, they are merely parroted by passers-by, with emphasis on their involuntary delivery.

9. See, for example, Donald R. Wehrs, "Sterne, Cervantes, Montaigne: Fideistic Skepticism and the Rhetoric of Desire" (1988).
10. Shakespeare's statue — in which he is depicted leaning on a pile of books — was unveiled in Poets' Corner on 29 January, 1741 and was funded by public subscription (via a committee led by Alexander Pope and others).
11. The epistolary novel is particularly engaged with self-dramatization. As Tom Keymer notes, *Clarissa* "writes her story," and the novel is concerned less with "minute-by-minute impulses of thought and feeling" than with "the business of writing itself" (Keymer 1992, 6).

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