SHAKESPEARE: THE INVENTION OF THE LITERARY

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Abstract: The paper borrows its title from one of Harold Bloom's, which is an overstatement ("the invention of the human")—and so is "the invention of the literary"; the point is that of suggestiveness, rather than thoroughness. There are several easily identifiable sections: Shakespeare praise, fictional Shakespeare, titles based on phrases, lines, characters, titles… in Shakespeare, Shakespeare "re-written" (adapted, parodied, re-told, spoofed…). The basic idea is that critic-historian-professors could write/teach a form of literary history—or of literature as such—beginning from Shakespeare and going down along one or another of these paths, or beginning from any of these Shakespeare inspired authors, books, titles… and going back to the Elizabethan bard; either way, one can see the playwright-poet as "the inventor of the literary."

Keywords: Shakespeare, invention, influence, re-writing, fictionalization

"Shakespeare is the happy hunting ground

of all minds that have lost their balance."

James Joyce, Ulysses

We may simply mention, from the very beginning, our awareness of the fact that, given the nature of our topic, this paper might degenerate into a series of superlatives (most of them quotations, or paraphrases, as a matter of fact), that almost no one can avoid while writing about Shakespeare. Any such paper about Shakespeare's literary posterity ("all posterity" that he writes about in Sonnet 55) may prove an impossible (and irresponsible?) task, so we need to confine ourselves to a modest level of suggestiveness and make sure that the vast and complex field of this posterity remains as it is, i.e. unlimited and incomprehensible; and hence the epigraph.

Having or not having lost our balance, we can vaguely circumscribe the "field" by showing that a "Literature Resource Center" database indicates 130,000 writes in various disciplines who published Shakespeare criticism; that one hundred years ago (1911) William Jaggard published (at the "Shakespeare Press" in Stratford-On-Avon) a Shakespeare Bibliography. A Dictionary of Every Known Issue of the Writings of Our National Poet and of Recorded Opinion Thereon in the English Language.(With Historical Introduction, Facsimiles, Portraits, and Other Illustrations); that in 1984 was initiated the publication of Shakespearean Criticism. Excerpts from the Criticism of William Shakespeare's Plays and Poetry, from the First Published Appraisals to Current Evaluations which, in thirty years, reached its volume no. 164 (the latest we have heard of); that there are many other volumes of "appraisals and evaluations," like those edited by Harold Bloom (three volumes) and Russ McDonald; that there is a Shakespeare Quarterly (from 1950 onwards) and a whole series of Shakespeare Studies (from 1986)…

So Shakespeare's personality and work, for four hundred years now, has never been in need of "praise"; which, unsurprisingly, began with himself: "Not marble nor the gilded monuments/Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme…"(Sonnet 55); or "The poet's eye,

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in a fine frenzy rolling,/Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven…" (A Midsummer Night's Dream, V 1); or…, or…

And with his friend (and rival) Ben Jonson, who comes at the head of a long list of quotes about Shakespeare (461 in one "harvester's" count); in his preface to the 1623 folio, Jonson finds that his dead contemporary was "the wonder of our stage," the "Soule of the Age," and that, in fact, "he was not of an age, but for all time…"; next, after John Dryden sees him as "the largest and most comprehensive soul," Dr. Johnson comments: "Existence saw him spurn her bounded reign,/And panting Time toil'd after him in vain;" and hyperboles have never seemed to be enough: "the greatest genius that ever existed"(Horace Walpole), "our myriad-minded Shakespeare,"(S. T. Coleridge), "the greatest of intellects"(Thomas Carlyle), comparable and compared with Phidias, Raphael, Columbus, Luther, Washington or Watt (R. W. Emerson), Odin, Muhamad, Dante (Carlyle), Napoleon, Wagner, and Edison (Mark Twain), Michelangelo and Beethoven (Martin Luther King), Bach, Mozart, Schubert (Anne Stevenson)…

Consequently, Harold Bloom appears fully entitled to write, in 1998, that Shakespeare "invented the human" (the source of our title), i.e. he invented our understanding of ourselves: "by inventing what has become the most accepted mode for representing character and personality/basically Hamlet and Falstaff/, thereby invented the human as we know it"; in his "secular scripture" /the Complete Works/ and through his characters Shakespeare invented "something that hadn't existed before," i.e. personality, inwardness, and what it means to be human; so "Shakespeare invented us as well," or "the human as we continue to know it…;" moreover, "Shakespeare will go on explaining us in part because he invented us…"; before Shakespeare there was characterization and after Shakespeare there is character.

Some of these statements (in Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human) may strike some as too far-flung, but Bloom is not alone in this; one century before him, the American Robert Ingersoll ("Why Should We Place Christ at the Top and Summit of the Human Race?," Chapter X of his 1894 About the Holy Bible), after placing him alongside Buddha, Socrates, Zoroaster, Lao-Tze, Confucius, Zeno…, rhetorically wonders: "Was he /Christ/ in intelligence, in the force and beauty of expression, in breadth and scope of thought, in wealth of illustration, in aptness of comparison, in knowledge of the human brain and heart, of all passions, hopes and fears, the equal of Shakespeare, the greatest of the human race?"; and we can also include here two great actors (also directors, screenwriters, producers…) who see Shakespeare as an end and a beginning, as the moment of a before and an after: "The nearest thing in incarnation to the eye of God" (Laurence Olivier) and "someone after whom nothing is as it used to be" (Rainer W. Fassbinder).

What he must have done (one can merely guess) was to look at humankind (first, most likely, at himself) and decide that it consisted, quite simply, of life and death, tragedy and comedy, love and hatred, jealousy and revenge, beauty and ugliness, thought and feeling, belief and doubt, ambition and compassion, friendship and aggression, betrayal and loyalty, kindness and wickedness…, and then put all these into language and created worlds (i.e. on stage).

These "created worlds" may have come from his own imagination and/or from a number of historical and literary sources (all carefully documented in other hundreds of books), but the language itself—the English language as he found it a the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—did not seem to be enough for him and his projects; so, not only did he use something like 18,000 words in his plays, sonnets and other poems (16,677 words in a computer count), but he also invented about two thousand new words, which he brought into modern usage; what seems incredible here is that many of these are not odd, quirky or highly unusual words, but quite ordinary ones (well, from a much later perspective), such as

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assassination, courtship, dwindle, generous, gloomy, hurry, lonely, obscene, road (sic), suspicious…; what he did, in fact, was to change grammatical categories (turn nouns into verbs, for instance) or to introduce variations on well-known ones and so on.

There are also phrases he invented, like "break the ice," or "breathe one's last," or "catch a cold"(?!), "fair play," "mind's eye," "naked truth"…; and critics also noticed his great "talent" for insults, like this series from The Comedy of Errors, IV 2—

"He is deformed, crooked, old and sere,

Ill-faced, worse-bodied, shapeless everywhere,

Vicious, ungentle, foolish, blunt, unkind;

Stigmatical in making, worse in mind!"—this is Adriana, wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, about her "husband," and one does not need more of an insult; oh, but he does, answers Shakespeare, and in King Lear (II 2) we hear the Earl of Kent speaking his mind to Oswald, steward to Goneril:

"Osw.: What dost thou know me for?

Kent: A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd, a a way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch; one whom I will beat into clamorous whining, if though deniest the least syllable of thy addition…"—and Kent is not done yet. Still, most foul words, put downs and cussing (which one also finds in As You Like It, Cymbeline, Troilus and Cressida, Richard III…) seem to be used in Henry IV (but we are done quoting here). All these new words, phrases, expressions, and constructions and others prompted scholars to talk about Shakespeare's development of Early Modern English.

In so far as "the literary" itself is concerned, except for the numberless critical(-historical) studies in hundreds and hundreds of languages, Shakespeare has been the source of fictional (novelistic, dramatic, poetic) projections or approaches, most of them in English, but not only. Once again we shall have to pick and choose from among re-inventions of his youth, his love life, his family life and his secret life, his friends and enemies, etc.; what one notices here is that a whole Shakespeare course on "literary history" could be written by adding together, classifying, and interpreting all/most of these books that offer as many points of view on one and the same topic—Shakespeare. Such a writer/teacher would have to start from a reading list including, in any order whatsoever: children's and young readers' literature (Gary L. Blackwood's The Shakespeare Stealer Series, Susan Cooper's King of Shadows, Sarah A. Hoyt's novels or Ian Doescher's Jedi Shakespeare stories), then Jude Morgan, Jennifer Lee Carrell, William Sanders and Leonard Tourney's "secret" life stories and thrillers, "Shakespeare in Love" from Emma Severn's 1845 novel of that (sub)title, to Faye Kellerman (The Quality of Mercy), to Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard's 1998 film/screenplay, to Carolyn Meyer's Loving Shakespeare, Pamela Mingle's Kissing Shakespeare or Anthony Burgess' Nothing Like the Sun..., the Anne Hathaway/Shakespeare stories (Robert Nye's Mrs. Shakespeare…, Yvonne Hudson's Mrs. Shakespeare…, or Karen Harper's Mistress Shakespeare), those on daughter Judith (the 1884 Judith Shakespeare by William Black, Grace Tiffany's My Father Had a Daughter…, or Peter W. Hassinger's Shakespeare's Daughter), such rather more gruesome interpretations as Shakespeare Undead by Lori Handelhand, Ngajo Marsh's Killer Dolphin or Philip Gooden's An Honorable Murderess, or

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even Shakespeare's Kitchen by Lore Segal and Stanley Wells' Coffee With Shakespeare; and, as far as the literary context is concerned, The Marlowe Conspiracy by M. G. Scaresbrook, No Bed for Bacon by Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon, and, again, Anthony Burgess' A Dead Man in Deptford…

Another way of "inventing the literary" is suggested by this rather intriguing statement: "Shakespeare wrote the titles of dozens and dozens of books and films /thousands is more like it—see infra/ before their authors did" (13 Titles…); we find it intriguing because it contains the implication that the decision of giving these titles was his rather than that of the various authors. Whatever the case, there are thousands and thousands of dramas, novels, short stories, poems, television series, films, musicals and music albums, EPs and songs, sitcoms, comic books, computer games and videos, radio series, paintings, illustrations… that borrowed their titles from Shakespeare phrases, so that one may harbor the feeling that Shakespeare would not have been surprised to know about them; like his Falstaff, he "is not only witty in /himself/, but the cause that wit is in other men."

"Other men" may mean almost anybody, except for the writer of these pages, because no sooner had we decided to paraphrase Harold Bloom's title than we discovered he wrote a eight-hundred page volume, while we thought of something more like eight or ten pages; and things looked pretty good until we discovered the name of Barbara Paul. Our intention had been—and still is, to some extent—to compartmentalize titles into a number of categories, depending on the relationship between these titles and the texts they originate from; so we thought of titles that are intrinsically connected to (and explained by) the Shakespearean source; titles that draw attention to relevant themes, characters or story lines; titles that, more or less, also happened to be in a Shakespeare text as, otherwise they show no significant dependency on the background "intertext" (and Barbara Paulo already becomes helpful: "Shakespeare has been so thoroughly absorbed into the English language /see supra/, that much of the time we don't even know /we and the 'authors' of those titles?/ we're quoting him"); titles that only prove the scholar/professor's knowledge, intuition or expertise; titles that are simple "labels" borrowed (or not borrowed) from a Shakespeare play or poem and gain no critical-hermeneutic extra-meaning if viewed in that respective neighborhood; titles that add new meanings and significance to the Shakespeare works they are borrowed from; all these categories—and others—will be accompanied below by various types of titles and comments.

Thus, back to Barbara Paul and what she accomplished: for about seven years (between 1997 and 2003) Barbara Paul maintained an internet page titled Titles from Shakespeare, organized alphabetically (by Shakespeare titles), and what the interested reader gets is much more than can be contained in a paper this size.

First, one is not surprised to find that, in the past four centuries, Pericles gave only two titles, Henry VI (part I) three and Cymbeline three; then again, quite appropriately—and proportionally one would think—there are 131 titles from As You Like It, 154 from King Lear, 186 from Macbeth, 122 from The Merchant of Venice, 103 from Richard II, 112 from The Tempest…; then there are generous numbers from Julius Caesar (88), A Midsummer Night's Dream (71), Othello (89), Richard III (45), Romeo and Juliet (79), Twelfth Night (87), and from the sonnets (65).

And "all's well" until Barbara Paul comes to Hamlet, where she no longer gives a list of titles from the play (as in all of the other cases), but five lists—one for each act; 266 from Act III alone, with over 150 titles from the "To be or not to be…" soliloquy in III 1; then about 200 from Act I, and 100 from each of the other three, so a total of over seven hundred titles that hundreds of authors borrowed from Hamlet. Now the arithmetic becomes simple: over 2,400 titles that Shakespeare "wrote…/in his plays and sonnets/ before their authors did"; i.e.

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forty pages of such titles, if you write each one on a separate line; and 140 pages of quotations if you also decide to refer each of them to the context from which it was taken (an average of three lines each).

However hard one tries, other categories in which to place these many titles are hard to find (or invent), first of all because they often overlap; even so, we can see one in which the same Shakespearean phrase is taken over and over again, so one no longer knows who borrowed from whom and how much awareness of the primary source each of these writers had. The phrase is, first, "all our yesterdays," that has been used, as such, or in various word combinations, in more than thirty titles; it comes from Macbeth V5, which, for its richness of suggestions, we can quote in full (Macbeth, with all his scheming and criminal behavior, has come to the end of the road, Lady Macbeth is dead and Macduff is marching toward Dunsinane Castle)—

"Macbeth: To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllable of recorded time,

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more: it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing."

William Faulkner came here for his stream-of-consciousness novel The Sound and the Fury, Robert Frost for his poem "Out, out--," Aldous Huxley for his Brief Candle, Alistair MacLean for The Way to Dusty Death, Ted Hughes for Four Tales Told by an Idiot, Kurt Vonnegut for his "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow"…

The metaphor of the world as a stage (see supra) seems to have attracted other writers to As You Like It (II 7); The Seven Ages of Man here gave about twenty-five titles:

"Jaques: All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players…

They have their exists and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages…"—

whileAll the World's a Stage fourteen titles (including John Reed's variation All the World's a Grave).

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Other "repeated titles" include "All That Glisters /changed to "glitters"/ Is Not Gold" from The Merchant of Venice (II 7)—fifty-three titles; accompanied, from the same (IV 1), by "The Quality of Mercy"—twenty-seven titles (one by William Dean Howells; then eighteen titles as "The Evil That Men Do" from Julius Caesar, III 2; and then Hamlet again, with fourteen titles beginning "To Be or Not to Be" (one of them Kurt Vonnegut's science fiction story"2BRO2B," i.e. "To Be Or Naught to Be"), seventeen titles of The Undiscovered Country (also from III 1, together with Outrageous Fortune—eighteen, Perchance to Dream—seventeen, A Sea of Troubles-five), plus And Be a Villain (I 5), Mortal Coil/s (III 1), Infinite Jest (V 1), The Mousetrap (III 2-o-Agatha Christie's short story and play), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (V 2—Tom Stoppard's play)…

Another group is that of titles that may come from two or three Shakespeare sources; thus, Vladimir Nabokov could have taken the title of his post-modernist novel Pale Fire(and of the 999-line poem with which the novel opens) from either Timon of Athens, IV 3—
"Timon: …The moon's an arrant thief

And her pale fire she matches from the sun…,"

or from Hamlet, I 5—

"Ghost: Fare thee well at once!

The glow-worm shows the matin to be near,

And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire…"

Similarly, Isaac Assimov's The Gods Themselves could also be reminiscent of Hamlet, II 2 (The First Player, while beginning to prepare the play), and of Troilus and Cressida, III 3, or even of The Winter's Tale, III 2 (Hermione, with "the gods themselves" ignorant of why Camillo had left Leontes' court); still, on the other hand, "the gods themselves" is such a common construction that… (seeinfra). Finally here, Sealed with a Kiss, which appears ten times as a title, is either from Romeo and Juliet, V 3 (Romeo finds Juliet "dead"—"Eyes look your last!/Arms take your last embrace! And lips, O you/The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss/A dateless bargain to engrossing death!--) or from Two Gentlemen of Verona, II 2 ("Julia/to Proteus/: And seal the bargain with a holy kiss.")

We find this next list of titles rather puzzling and difficult to accept; they are title-phrases that have become Shakespeare quotations only in view of our knowledge of the bard (see Barbara Paul above); Full Circle for instance, is the title of 127 volumes of poetry, stories, plays, history books, technology, geography, ecology, education, travel, SF novels… which, presumably, one cannot read unless he/she remembers a line from King Lear, V 3 (the two half-brothers, Edgar and Edmund, in a meeting of recognition: "Edmund: The wheel is come full circle…"); similarly, Sea Change (The Tempest, I 2) represents thirty titles (by W. D. Howells, Hemingway, Jorie Graham…); This England (Richard II, II 1), eleven titles, Sweet Revenge (Othello, V 2)—twenty-eight, Country Matters (Hamlet, III 2)—twelve, In Cold Blood (Timon of Athens, III 5)—six (including Truman Capote's celebrated non-fiction novel), Cold Comfort (King John, V 7)—eighteen, Words of Love (King Lear, I 1), Gentle People (Titus Andronicus, V 3)… At the end of such an exploration one gets the paranoid feeling that you can no longer propose a title of your own for fear it might have already been used somewhere in Shakespeare, and thus be charged with plagiarism; on the other hand, one may simply notice that Shakespeare may have forbidden free, unencumbered and unself-conscious access by writers and speakers in general to certain words, phrases and word combinations, like hamlet, a horse, much ado, what's in a name, a summer's day, midsummer,

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borrower and lender, taming, tomorrow and tomorrow, idiot, last syllable, question, outrageous fortune, sea of troubles…, or such proper names like Romeo, Juliet, Iago, Othello, Miranda, Prospero…, all depending on who uses and who listens to/reads them.

As the nasty word plagiarism may not have existed in Shakespeare's time, people/characters talked about borrowing and lending; Polonius' advice to Laertes, in Hamlet I 3, seems welcome here:

"Neither a borrower nor a lender be:

For a loan oft loses both itself and friend;

And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry…"

Since our present section refers to the great lender that Shakespeare was, and some of his great borrowers ("husbandry" seems to have been used by him in the later meaning of "management"), most prominent of whom was William Faulkner; but there were others, quite significant themselves, both before and after him.

Consequently, another list that we will try to shorten as much as relevantly possible; in King John, III 4, we learn (as from the Macbeth quote about life as a tale) that—

"Lewis, Dauphin of France /depressed because of the fortunes of war/:

Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale

Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man."

Both Dickens and Hawthorne publish volumes of stories titled Twice-Told Tales, in which they read Shakespeare obliquely; in the same period, Robert Browning takes a title with "Childe Rolland…" from Edgar's song in King Lear, III 4, which he then re-lends to Stephen King for his "The Dark Tower Series"; only a little later (than Dickens) comes Thomas Hardy, whose Under the Greenwood Tree is borrowed from As You Like It, II 5--, where Jaques and the other forest dwellers listen to Amiens sing about their idyllic life (Hardy's own theme).

Another great borrower is John Steinbeck, who remembers (together with nine other writers who have the same title) the opening lines in Richard III, I 1 (with the pun in the second line ignored):
"Now is the winter of our discontent

Made glorious summer by this sun of York…" (Richard III was the son of the Duke of York). His novel, The Winter of Our Discontent, is an exposition of the degeneration of American culture. Another novel, The Moon Is Down, imagines a military occupation in northern Europe by an unnamed war enemy; in Macbeth II 1, Fleance answers his father's/Banquo's question—"How goes the night, boy?" with "The moon is down. I have not heard the clock" (while Macbeth is on his way to murder Duncan).

Unexpectedly (one could think), Agatha Christie is one of the most insistent and avid borrowers; By the Pricking of My Thumbs, her own novel, and Ray Bradbury's Something Wicked This Way Comes, both repeat the Second Witch's words in Macbeth IV 1:

"By the pricking of my thumbs,

Something wicked this way comes…"

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Then her Hercule Poirot narrative title There Is a Tide is from Julius Caesar, IV 3, together with her other title:

"Cassius /to Brutus/: There is a tide in the affairs of men,

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune…"

Next, Sad Cypress, from a Song in Twelfth Night, II 4:

"Clown: Come away, come away, death.

And in sad cypress let me be laid…"—

while her Absent in the Spring is from the first line of Sonnet 98.

Almost as avid a borrower is Aldous Huxley, whose Brave New World comes from Miranda's speech (The Tempest, V 1) when she sees new people arrive (her "brave" had a different meaning then) on her island, and this dystopian novel contains hundreds of other quotations from no less than fourteen of Shakespeare's plays (including The Tempest); then his Brief Candles (Macbeth, V 5) has already been mentioned above, while Time Must Have a Stop is from Henry IV, Part I, V 3. And one could go on (together with Barbara Paul) giving sources of volumes/pieces by Ford Madox Ford, Dorothy Parker, Isaac Assimov again, Sylvia Plath, Ambrose Bierce, Frederick Forsyth, Thornton Wilder, W. S. Maugham, Dorothy Sayers, Noel Coward, Joyce Carol Oates, even T. S. Eliot, John Updike and John Barth, or even Stanislaw Lem, Marcel Proust and Francoise Sagan…

Our final section, on re-writes, adaptations, spin-offs, parodies, imitations, etc—which certainly are all part of Shakespeare's invention of the literary--, if written with any scholarly thoughtfulness and resolve, would take several volumes. "Writers Who Borrowed from Shakespeare" in one or another of the types of writings above is a subject that, in fact, cannot be convincingly covered; unconvincingly, we can show here that it started in the century of his death (John Fletcher's "Tamer Tamed" play, Thomas Ottway's re-setting of Romeo and Juliet, Nahum Tate's adaptation of King Lear, Davenenat and Dryden's Tempest…), it continued with the likes of Blake, Keats, Dickens, Zola, Ibsen, Wharton, Lorca, Brecht, Updike, Ustinoff, Tyler, Stoppard, and included such titles as The Serpent of Venice, Shylock's Daughter, The Bible, Rewritten as Macbeth, Romeo's Ex, The Shakespeare Mashup or "Star Wars" by William Shakespeare. Then there have been collective, ampler projects, such as Charles and Mary Lamb's 1807 Tales from Shakespeare (twenty plays retold for young—or lazy—readers), "Shakespeare Adaptations for Kids," other Shakespeare Stories in 1991 (by Leon Garfield, William Shakespeare, and Michael Foreman—twelve plays in narrative form), the same number of plays re-written by Sarah Palin, a "Cambridge School Shakespeare" ("extensively re-written" and expanded plays, produced in "an attractive design") and our favorite—a project including such computer programmers as Robert Wilensky, J. Anderson, and Ben Arogundale (and certainly others), and based upon the "infinite monkey theorem," "the law of truly large numbers," and "the infinite improbability drive": "We've heard that a million monkeys at a million keyboards could produce the complete works of Shakespeare" (Wilensky, 1996); others also heard, evaluations and simulations followed, and nobody knows…; what we know, in the end, is, first, that our husbandry (see supra) of such a vast and complex material was both too daring and unprincipled, and, second, that if a million monkeys could be made to sit down in front of a laptop each and write millions of papers like this one, Shakespeare would still be there—in

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Elizabethan England, and everywhere in the world--, immune and supreme, probably for another million years.

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