

CANONICAL INTERVENTIONS

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CANONICITY AS REWRITING

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Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch's volume *Knowledge and Commitment* (2000) has one main focus: the relation between a scientific study of literature and a knowledge based intervention in the cultural context of the researcher and his or her object. Or, put as a simple question: How can we in literary studies, in the same move, remain uncompromisingly scientific and actively engage with the key issues of our culture? The crux here is the 'in the same move', that is to say that our scholarly work must qualify our cultural engagement and, conversely, our engagement must induce relevance and perspective into our research. This reciprocal relationship was the common denominator for Douwe Fokkema's lifelong devotion to the study of literature, its theory, its institutional development and its cultural status.

In this context, one literary topic in particular stands out in *Knowledge and Commitment*—the debate on canons and canonical processes. Here literary traditions and the cultivation of literary forms intersect with the critique of social and cultural powers, ideologies, repressive hegemonies, censorship, taste and national and transnational value systems. With Douwe Fokkema's interest in the contrasts between European and Chinese traditions this entire and age-old debate is transported into the context of modern global culture. Canons mark a cross-road between research and commitment in a culture of global change. To honour the memory of Douwe Fokkema I will continue this debate, also building on earlier contributions (Larsen 2004).

Running the danger of lacking in rigidity as required by Douwe Fokkema I will suggest a simple definition of the canon and the canonical process: a member of a canon is every text that gains authority by rewriting other texts, and the canonical

process is the process of rewriting as construction of textual authority. The context of rewriting is defined by the media involved, and the differentiation of canons is determined by the formal and informal fields of discourse framed by various institutions of a given culture.

When the printed book became the dominant medium and replaced oral transmission of canonicity, the central institutions of authority were challenged by new counter-rewritings of texts with a stronger public status and circulation than those distributed orally or by handwritten books. The situation evolves with the further development of printed media (magazines, newspapers, tracts, etc.), and with the digital media any idea of one central institution defining one major canon is buried. Today we have canons specified by the market, the educational system, the state, the church or other religious institutions, literary criticism, research, etc. and no single canon is able to occupy a permanent position as the arche-canon. From building a fixed literary hegemony, more or less mirroring the cultural hegemony in general, **258** canonicity comes to define a field of competing canons. Canon studies and the use of canons in general no longer affirm authority, but frame a critical discussion of authority and thus become a true intersection between research and cultural intervention through literature.

SHAKESPEARE'S TEXTUAL REWRITING

My case in point will be a brief glance at Shakespeare as a canonical author, himself practicing (re)writing in the space between the oral tradition and the printed book, between a late medieval world without authors' rights and a modern world of print culture, continuing into the global processes of digitized rewriting where Shakespeare thrives at a fault. The relevant rewriting process unfolds on three levels: *texts*, *institutions* and *media*. First we shall address the textual level.

Rewriting as the basic mode of literary practice also entails that literary authority ascribed to a text or an author can never be defined by this text or this author alone, as we have been accustomed to after the romantic cultivation of the individual creative genius. Canonical authority is always related to other texts and authors who proceed in the same way, but with less success. This context is mainly defined by the changing literary institutions in a given culture and by the media landscape surrounding the literary texts.

Shakespeare is no exception. When his fame peaked from the mid-20th century on, this happened as the result of a continuous process initiated in late-18th-century Europe by the pre-romantic poets and critics and also disseminated through the British colonial institutions of learning. From that point in time the proliferation of rewritings of Shakespeare in texts, stagings, movies, commercials, merchandise and other materials turned his work into a panoply of remakings across cultures, institutions and media and impossible to trace back to Shakespeare's own texts. This

development precisely confirmed his status as one of the literary untouchables with an effect far beyond literature, spilling over into culture at large, popular and commercialized culture included.

With Slavoj Žižek it is therefore appropriate to underline the risks involved in rewriting. In a paper from a volume celebrating the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth Žižek comments on the modern and often contested stagings of Mozart's operas with iconoclastic changes in setting, timeframe, costumes or acting:

Es gibt keine apriorisches abstraktes Kriterium, das über Erfolg oder Misserfolge dieser Eingriffe entscheiden könnte. Jede einzelne Modifikation birgt ein Risiko und muss nach jeweils eigenen, projektimmanenten Maßstäben beurteilt werden. Nur eines ist sicher: Die einzige Möglichkeit, einem klassischen Werk treu zu bleiben, liegt darin, sich diesem Risiko zu stellen. Wer es vermeidet und sich an den Original-Wortlaut hält, wählt den sichersten Weg, den Geist der Klassik zu verraten. (339)

Žižek's remarks make it clear that rewriting entails a way of risk taking that shows the artist's profound responsibility for the tradition he is exploiting by putting its authority to the test. In this way, every single process of rewriting participates in the entire cultural process of keeping the values, forms and norms of a culture alive. What takes place is in fact a reshuffling of hierarchies, a reconfiguration of artistic values, and a creation of new standards, authorities and norms. This process does not happen all by itself, out of the blue, but through rewriting. The risk is, however, that what is rewritten never gains ground, and the positive prospect is that it is actively reshaped and renews its importance in new forms. Literary authority rests on the contradiction that it has to be asserted by being subject to radical change.

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Shakespeare himself was a ruthless rewriter. Just one example: *The Merchant of Venice* from 1597. As we have no manuscripts from Shakespeare himself establishing the authority of the original text or of the author, we often have to make conjectures about where he scavenged, assuming he actually did so. This was simply his way of working, not only because of the limited time of production in his company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men or the King's Men, but also because that was the way of the trade for everyone in the 16th and early 17th century.

One of the sources for *The Merchant of Venice* is the collection of Italian short stories or *novellas*, *Il Pecorone* (1558). Here we find the plot with the pound of flesh, although it also exists in other sources, but Shakespeare changed it in various ways to fit his own purposes. To that came *gesta romanorum* (translated into English in 1595) where he could find the story of the three enigmatic caskets. But also classical sources like Ovidius' *Metamorphoses* as well as the character studies in Plutarch's *Lives* served him. Similar motifs also belonged to the stock of more anonymous features that traveled in the Renaissance together with the standard repertoire of the genre of comedy, as for example cross dressing and the parody of lawyers. In *The Merchant of Venice* in particular he integrated the ambiguous and complex topic of the Jew, made popular by his competitor Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589), and echoing a troubled relationship with Jews in Elizabethan England. And

in Marlowe Shakespeare also saw the plot with parallel love stories, the conversion of the young Jewish daughter to Christianity and the portrait of the Jew as a miser. Why not benefit from the contemporary semi-racist preoccupation with Jews? He needed an audience.

My only point here is to indicate that Shakespeare was taking part in a huge cultural shift in the criteria for literary authority, unfolding in the period between ca. 1350 and 1650 on the very level of textual structure. As he was a master in being able to work on all levels simultaneously and make a highly personal and potentially new form of literary writing out of it, he himself later ended up as an incarnation of this type of self-asserting literary authority through rewriting.

And he did so by transforming what he borrowed in significant ways. Prose became part of the dramatic diction whether in tragic or comic forms, and he developed the particular English and thus vernacular meter, the blank verse, to perfection and blended the comic with the tragic beyond all conventions of dramatic form in conjunction with a free play with the Virgilian tradition for distinctions between levels of style.

Such literary strategies are part of a major transition in the way European literature redefines literary authority on the textual level with the possibility of changing the genre pattern and blending previously separate literary devices into constantly shifting new structures claiming new criteria for completeness and totality. To change and not to imitate the classical models emerged as new criterion for claiming textual authority. The French debate between *les anciens et les modernes* toward the end of the 17th century around the role of the novel with special focus on Mme de la Fayette's works is another case in point (Jauss 1964). Shakespeare, like Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes or Mme de la Fayette, was one of the first to make this claim visible. What we encounter is the dawn of modern literature as we know it today, only made possible by continuous rewriting.

But Shakespeare was hardly known on the European continent and of course completely unknown outside Europe. His universal fame had to wait for new principles of literary creativity and new literary values to come to the fore, which occurred in the late 18th century when Romanticism established itself as a new trend. And it also had to wait for British colonization working as a globally Europeanizing cultural movement, carrying with it Shakespeare to the colonial education system as a model of language, aesthetics, humanity and civilization.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMING

Shakespeare's innovative textual structures laid the ground for his later status as a literary authority. But the textual foundation is not sufficient to substantiate literary authority: authority relies on a collective recognition that some are performing it better than others. In other words: Canonicity is an institutional fact. Literary

authority is based on a textual practice, that is to say the concrete mastery of rewriting, but this does not always lead to a general status as a recognized authority in a culture or, as in the case of Shakespeare, on a global scale.

This complex process of institutional recognition is driven by various factors such as:

- 1) changing concepts of literature formulated by critics, in theories, in research etc.
- 2) changing public institutions such as the educational system, libraries, the church, the law, the state, etc.
- 3) economy—the market, publishers, subventions, *maecenae* and other supporters and protectors.

Like all playwrights in his time, Shakespeare depended on both a paying audience and a *Maecenas* who offered protection from censorship, ordered plays and performances, and kept the company financially afloat. Shakespeare's company was first the Lord Chamberlain's Men, until 1603. Later, it was the King's Men under the royal patronage of James I. But I will leave the economic aspect for a moment and turn to the two other factors.

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Just to simplify the conceptual aspect: Shakespeare is pending between two guiding concepts of literature that have shaped the idea of literature in Europe. One is based on the fundamental principle that imitation of canonized authors, mainly from Latin literature, was the essence of literature. Another idea held that creation without imitation but based on the individual and original creativity of the genius constituted literature's basic nature. Both missed the point. The first admits rewriting as the fundamental principle, but rules out the continuous change of authoritative texts as equally fundamental as rewriting itself. The second postulates the creation of the new as the core of literature without giving rewriting its proper place in accordance with the historical facts of the trade.

For the better part of cultural history up till Romanticism the imitation idea was prominent in Europe, and also in most written literatures we know around the world: China, Japan, oral and formulaic literature. On the whole, imitation was based on a rhetorical and stylistic notion of literature. However, the notion of emulation, complementary to that of imitation, allowed for a certain competition with the authoritative texts and authors. A good author imitated the canonized authors and tried to be better, often in order to please his benefactor. Rewriting was a stabilizing practice, innovative texts could not obtain the role of authority, except maybe in a local setting, like Dante or Shakespeare. Copying was a noble practice that could be learned and Dionysius of Halicarnassus provided suitable models.

With Romanticism the opposite idea of spontaneous creativity gained ground. Although the value of imitation still was and is recognized, it was now for the most part denigratingly labeled as unoriginal and derivative copying. The absolutely new was a noble act that could not be learned, but was an inborn talent in a true genius. But now the basic imitative and rewriting practices, necessary for the life of literature, had to be redefined so that they could be included in the creative artistic paradigm.

One such redefined practice is translation. The German romanticist Novalis discussed it in his notebooks and letters around 1797 (Novalis, *Schriften 1* 237; *Schriften 4* 439). He stressed that an accomplished translation is even more truly creative than poetry itself because it is more difficult to completely absorb and at the same time transcend a major work than to make one anew. John Keats wrote an ode to George Chapman's translation of Homer from around 1600 which simply is Homer to him, not a translation (Keats 72; 255). So, rewriting still comes out on top when literary authority is established.

262 The center of authority moves from the texts in the classical rhetorical tradition of imitation, and the works of art in general, to the author, and the artist in general, as a creative genius. When Shakespeare became an icon it was precisely as a romantic genius *avant la lettre* with a collection of texts attached to him as expression of his genius. He was no longer a skilled playwright whose texts had to compete with those of the other playwrights in London during his lifetime. His company took no interest in promoting his texts by branding their author, although the *First Folio* with a portrait marks a beginning in that direction. We know practically nothing of his life, an enigmatic fact that later even added to his status as a genius beyond any archival documentation.

At this point Shakespeare finally becomes a transnational authority and his texts with him, effectively replacing many of the antique authors and their works. This happened first in Germany with Johann Gottfried Herder's comments on Shakespeare from the beginning of the 1770s, and finally he was translated into the continental languages. Here the rewriting of literary criticism and theory established an authoritative corpus of texts emanating from a genius who was as unknown as the mythical persons from the Middle Ages in many of his plays. This enigmatic fusion of text and author only increased the fascination he held for the Romantic and at the same time confirmed his status as an innovative poet.

Only much later, first with Georg Brandes and after that with Andrew C. Bradley around 1900, research into Shakespeare started to go beyond the sheer adoration of the bard and the psychological description of his individual characters as if they were real persons. But the 19th century Shakespeare of translation and transcontinental transmission was not quite the same as the Renaissance playwright. Split characters such as Hamlet or those in some of the comedies were foregrounded and the historical plays, which were essential for Shakespeare's position in his own time, became less popular. And his blatant obscenities were toned down by devout translators, editors and directors (Kiernan 2006). In contrast to the Renaissance, geniuses could be noble, or show *Weltschmerz*, but they could not be vulgar. It took about 100 years to canonize Shakespeare and his texts as authoritative, but then on the cultural conditions of the 19th century, and he has only occupied this position for 100 years.

Since the mid-19th century one institution in particular, namely the educational one, through the teaching of national languages and literatures has been instrumental for the promotion of a national literary canon of texts and authors to compete

with an international canon of so-called world literature. The idea that an official and uncontested canon established by one dominant central institutional power will have any significant effect on the production and use of literature is an idea outdated long ago, although attempts are still being made around the world to promote an explicit canon through a centralized educational system or other institutions. Such initiatives are as powerless as the catholic *index* from the mid-16th century, and the institutions asserting their authority on the subject are equally ignorant of that fact.

From the point of view of the texts, institutions are but competing canonical agents, that generate canonical differentiations according to particular institutionalized contexts—educational system, generations, social groups, sex, market, research, etc.—each of them with authoritative and now and then overlapping (sets of) texts. In the end this situation supports the creative rewriting as an open process and eventually contributes to the reshaping or even dismantling of institutionalized authority, or at least gives way to a negotiation of authority through rewriting across the institutional boundaries.

REWRITING IN A MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Literature, literary authority and canon formation are also interacting with the entire media landscape. The most important changes in this landscape, that fundamentally reoriented the possibility and the dimensions of rewriting are, first, the emergence of writing as the main medium for authoritative texts with Athens in the 6th century BCE as an important early moment—but also with Egypt and Mesopotamia as well as China, Japan and East Asia as important centers. Authoritative texts were not only defined by their repetitive and universal use, but by being fixed in a durable medium with a certain public outreach.

Second, we have printing and the printed book, in China but more efficiently in Europe in the mid-15th century, with printing techniques based on loose type for limited phonetic alphabets such as the Latin, Cyrillic or Greek ones. A similar printing technique was invented concomitantly in Korea, based on a newly phonetic alphabet, but this has less impact worldwide. The modern book made rewriting possible as a purely individual process—reading the books, rewriting them and publishing was now within reach of private individuals. Censorship became difficult, and the individual author and his or her rights became a more and more pressing issue.

Third, the development of digital communication technologies made rewriting possible as a collective, interactive process—which then influences the conditions of individual authority of the text—and as an intermedia process across linguistic, visual and audio media. Literary rewriting without taking into account the role of music and visual media has nothing to do with how literary rewriting works today, also when it comes to Shakespeare. Bound to a rampant development of the multimedia landscape, the foundation and form of literary authority change with an

increasing pace and become to a large degree local, although not in a geographical sense like local in Denmark or in Catalonia, but local in terms of transnational digital communities like local on YouTube or Facebook. Today the apparent crux is that literary authority to a large extent is conditioned by non-verbal media and communicative technologies, both challenging basic definitions of literary texts and, as in Shakespeare's days, authors' rights and copyrights.

On this note I will return to Shakespeare and take a look at the front page of the authoritative *First Folio* from 1623 which carries a subtitle that has an enigmatic ring to a modern ear: *Published according to the True Originall Copies*. How can 'a true original copy' claim any authority? Its basic meaning is related to the media specific conditions for rewriting as a key to the emergence of authority in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

264 Authors' rights and copyrights did not exist at the time, simply because the individual author had no legal or institutional status. Any author could grab whatever he wanted from others and use it for any purpose he or she liked. We are very early in the age of printed books which is the media specific condition for such rights. They only emerged in England in their modern form during the second half of the 17th century in various customary forms eventually to be codified by Queen Anne's copyright law of 1709. Plays by Shakespeare were published during his own lifetime well before the posthumous *First Folio*, but his absence from the publication is a consequence of how manuscripts were written, owned and published. Shakespeare's work belonged to the company, and the permission to print, sell and perform them was given to the company.

First a draft version, the foul paper, was made, written by Shakespeare or other members of the crew, maybe even rewritten a couple of times. Then a scribe or a prompter made a copy, the fair, the clean or the prompt copy. This was submitted to the censor and returned with his decision to the company which then, and not Shakespeare, owned the play as the clean copy. Without authors' rights and copyrights, this clean copy could be sold, reused, used for rewriting by others at their heart's content and, when sold, it could also be printed by others. Or it could be stolen or copied and changed and then published anonymously or under another name. Being published according to the true original copies means printed according to the real clean copy.

With a reference to the then media conditions for publishing, the *First Folio* claims authority for its contents: We are the only ones who have access to the clean copy with the censor's notification. Nobody would of course be able to check if this was true; and even if being verified or just accepted, printing from a handwritten manuscript was still not a well controlled process inevitably adding new insecurities and mis-readings to what appeared on the page.

However, those who have assembled the book are probably two former actors, John Heminges and Henry Condell, from Shakespeare's company, and the editor Edward Blount together with the almost blind printer William Jaggard and his son William.

This is a group composed according to the media specific requirements for publication, not to the texts as such. And they succeeded in giving the book, its author, and the thirty-six plays in them, the necessary authority: 900 pages in about 600 copies. The book went through several printings in the 17th century, which made it a major printing enterprise and an economic success, and which has also made it into the basic textual authority for all later critical Shakespeare editions.

THE EMERGENCE OF AUTHORITY

On all three levels—text, institution and media—authority emerges from a very complex and at times contradictory situation: The text placed between imitation and originality, the institution working with a wish to petrify texts which eventually destroys the authority it wants to maintain, and the media that make any claimed authority stand out against the background of general media specific conditions. All three levels are involved and interwoven when canonicity is established. Canonicity comes about when a work and an author, in a context that defines the contradictions mentioned as being broadly valid for an extensive part of culture, are able to turn these contradictions into a textual form that is broadly acknowledged.

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When the context changes and the contradictions are weakened and replaced—partly pushed by literary rewriting itself—the canonical status must then be put at risk in a new rewriting process conditioned by changing conceptions of literature, transformations of the institutions that promote it, and new directions of the entire media landscape literature is part of. Canonical status will then be regained by being reshaped—or being lost as happened to those Nobel laureates that have mercifully been shrouded by oblivion. Shakespeare came to embrace this entire process on all levels and his texts became authoritative because they have proven to work in the continuous rewriting process under changing institutional and media specific conditions over the centuries. In literature rewriting is first and foremost risk taking—so Shakespeare will perhaps not be around forever, but at least for some time still. If we want to keep him with us we may have to organize a critically cultural intervention, based on a critical commitment and a scholarly argument.

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