

## Shakespeare – Early, Late or Posthumanist: The Case of *Hamlet*<sup>1</sup>

*Stefan Herbrechter – Coventry University*

### Abstract

This essay is part of a larger project aimed at demonstrating the usefulness of a mutual reading of Shakespeare's work and its early modern context, on the one hand, and current trends in theory and late modern culture, which are probably best described as 'posthumanist', on the other hand. It is Shakespeare's ambiguous relationship to early modern humanism that makes his threshold position helpful in critically evaluating our contemporary locatedness 'after' five hundred years of humanism, which currently seem to be coming to an end. The borderlines between 'human' and 'nonhuman' that are currently being erased and redrawn by technocultural change can be seen to have interesting prefigurations in Shakespeare's work and early modern culture. This essay provides a short summary and contextualisation of these new 'presentist' readings of Shakespeare by looking, in particular, at *Hamlet* and new readings in animal studies, ecocriticism, early modern science studies and posthumanist theory.

### Shakespeare and Humanism

Hamlet:            (...) What is a man  
                      If his chief good and market of his time  
                      Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.  
                      Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,  
                      Looking before and after, gave us not  
                      That capability and godlike reason  
                      To fust in us unused. (IV.4.33-39)<sup>2</sup>

From the outset, the question of identity and in particular the identity of the human is at the centre of *Hamlet*. The play shows all the characteristics of a horror story: a gothic setting, an eerie ghost, a dreadful secret, murder and suicide, (political) intrigue, tragic misjudgments, a tortured self-doubting hero on the edge of madness and a general massacre in the end. With great regularity, the existential question of meaning and the question of the place

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<sup>1</sup> See also Stefan Herbrechter, 'Shakespeare Ever After: Posthumanism and Shakespeare', in *Humankind: The Renaissance and Its Anthropologies*, eds Andreas Höfele and Stephan Laqué (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 261-78, and Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, eds, *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> All references are from the Signet Classics edition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which is based on all three versions of the text: first and second quarto and first folio edition.

of the human are being asked ('man's' position within the cosmos, 'his' particularity, 'his' indeterminacy, etc.). So it's not surprising that *Hamlet*, the character and the tragedy, play a central role in the discussion about the relationship between Shakespeare and humanism.

Humanism, ever since the Renaissance and early modern period, is founded on some basic assumptions that are currently being challenged by posthumanist approaches: the cosmic centrality of the human as the pinnacle and end point of 'nature' (anthropocentrism), a species-specific, shared, inner core or essence that all humans have in common (e.g. a mind, language, a consciousness of being and finality, etc.) and which radically differentiates them from all other species and organisms; also under attack is the existence of values such as personality, individuality, identity, emotion, freedom, moral responsibility, dignity and perfectibility no longer seems as intrinsic to every human being.

Shakespeare is regularly understood in this context as *the* example of essential human genius, most forcibly by Harold Bloom.<sup>3</sup> According to Bloom, the great characters of Shakespeare, and Hamlet in particular, are the expression of a fundamental humanity. The fascination with Hamlet as a character lies mainly in his hesitation and his proto-existentialist self-doubt. Particularly relevant, in relation to 'posthumanist' questions, is therefore Hamlet's insistence on the question, 'What is man?', as basically a proto-Kantian approach to philosophical anthropology. A good summary of these issues can be found in Levy's *Hamlet and the Rethinking of Man* (2008), which traces the confrontation between the Aristotelian-cum-Thomist and the classical humanist notion of the rational animal in connection with the role of human reason within the tragedy of *Hamlet*:

At bottom, what happens in *Hamlet* concerns a redefining of what is man, through interrogation and reinterpretation of the faculty of reason through which man *is* man, and not some other animal.<sup>4</sup>

## Posthumanisms

Hamlet:           The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,  
                          That ever I was born to set it right! (I.5.188-189)

Humanism's claim of historical and transcendental universality was already the main target for anti-humanist literary and cultural theory in the second

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human* (London: 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> E. P. Levy, *Hamlet and the Rethinking of Man* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), p. 18

half of the 20th Century (esp. poststructuralism, postmodernism, new historicism and cultural materialism). Theory provoked a historical reinterpretation and a politicisation of the genealogies of early modernism, Shakespeare and his relation to the present (cf. presentism), according to Ryan, in 'Shakespeare and the Future':

Shakespeare's plays anticipate the impending displacement and disappearance of their world, and they solicit the reciprocal recognition that our world, likewise, conceals the evolving past of a prospective present. Their aim is to project us forward in time to a point where we can look back on Shakespeare's age and our own as the prehistory of an epoch whose advent humanity still awaits.<sup>5</sup>

Just as Shakespeare can be located at the beginning of or on the threshold of Western humanism, the present (i.e. the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century) can be understood to be the final stage of this humanist and anthropocentric worldview. It would be wrong of course, to understand humanism as a purely conscious and consistent mindset, since its establishment and triumph has not occurred without major philosophical disagreements, bloody religious wars, political revolutions and colonial power struggles. A major expression of the contradiction that resides within humanism – namely the contradiction between the peaceful ideal of a universal humanity and the 'inhuman' cruelty of human reality – has been the ambivalent attitude towards the idea of 'human rights' as a possible continuation of Eurocentrism and Western imperialism under the conditions of globalisation. The tension within humanism seems to lie largely in the fact that the universal validity of a humanistic ideal is always presupposed, while it can be clearly shown to be merely based on historically and culturally specific norms and values.

It is in opposition to this ambivalence within humanism that a number of posthumanist approaches have been developed and introduced within Shakespeare studies. However, as is the case for humanism, it is better to speak of these approaches in the plural: posthumanisms. Furthermore, it makes more sense, from a temporal point of view, not to envisage posthumanism as being in linear progression from and as supersession of humanism, but rather as an ongoing critique of and within humanism. One can perhaps best describe the meaning of the prefix 'post' in analogy with Lyotard's idea of 'Re-writing Modernity' ['réécrire la modernité'] understood

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<sup>5</sup> Kieran Ryan, 'Shakespeare and the Future', in *Talking Shakespeare: Shakespeare into the Millennium*, eds Deborah Cartmell and Michael Stott (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), p. 199.

as its ‘*perlaboration*’ or *Durcharbeitung*,<sup>6</sup> or indeed as a gradual deconstruction of humanism (i.e. as a kind of self-disintegration and mutation<sup>7</sup>).

Undoubtedly, however, it is the historical material and technological conditions that have favoured the emergence of the current posthumanist dynamics. However, just like Shakespeare’s work posthumanism can both be understood as situated historically as well as a cultural constant with ongoing relevance (i.e. as a form of evolutionary adaptation). Both Shakespeare’s work, with *Hamlet* in particular, and posthumanism deal with the question of the place of the human; both ask if there really is such a thing as true (i.e. essential) human nature. Posthumanist approaches attempt to understand the human from the perspective of ‘its’ repressed others (e.g. non-human animals, machines, monsters, aliens, matter, things, or the ‘inhuman’ in general) and to recontextualize ‘its’ relations with these others. In particular, Donna Haraway’s work on cyborgisation of the human, and N. Katherine Hayles’s work on human digitalisation and computerisation, as well as the ongoing critique of human or humanist forms of speciesism (mostly understood, in analogy to racism, as irrational prejudice against non-humans, in order to legitimate the oppression and exploitation of the latter by humans) for example in Cary Wolfe’s work and work by representatives within the emerging fields of animal studies and ecocriticism.

Additional statements qualifying the humanist world view can be found in the neuro- and cognitive sciences, which call into question the humanist ideas of free will and traditional forms of morality, as well as in biotechnology and the life sciences, which challenge the special status of humans from an evolutionary perspective. Various post-metaphysical approaches within philosophy and technics also contribute by questioning any instrumentalised relationship between humans and technology, systems and environments, language and thought, etc., and thus undermine the anthropocentric values on which humanism is based (cf. Derrida, Stiegler, Sloterdijk, Latour).<sup>8</sup>

## Shakespeare and Posthumanism

...they imitated humanity so abominably... (III.2.36-37)

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *L’Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), p. 33ff.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Neil Badmington, ‘Theorizing Posthumanism’, *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003), pp. 10-27.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: L’état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993); Bruno, Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Peter Sloterdijk, *Du musst dein Leben ändern: Über Anthropotechnik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009); and Bernard Stiegler, *La Technique et le temps*. 3 vols. (Paris: Galilée, 1994-2001).

The special role Shakespeare plays in the current debate between humanists and posthumanists arises mainly from his central position within the canon of English, if not 'world literature'. Advocates of Shakespeare's universal value and humanist centrality, like Bloom, argue that Shakespeare's great characters, and Hamlet in particular, are the expression of essential human personality and modern identity.

However, very much against Bloom, the predominant theoretical orientation of the last decades (at least since the 1960s, as mentioned above), has been radically anti-humanist, particularly in the Anglo-American context. Figures associated with post-structuralism and postmodernism (Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Kristeva, Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard – i.e. the main protagonists of so-called 'French theory'), as well as the representatives of the New Historicism (Greenblatt) and Cultural Materialism (Dollimore, Sinfield, Drakakis, Belsey, Hawkes) have attacked 'liberal humanism' in order to expose its pseudo-universalism as an ideology. As a result, Shakespeare has been repositioned through a historical recontextualisation and politicisation, and the renewed relevance of his work has been founded on a basic analogy between early and late modernity, or, one could say, between early and late (anti-)humanism.

What distinguishes current posthumanist forms of reading Shakespeare from earlier anti-humanist readings by poststructuralists and New Historicists, however, is that current posthumanist approaches seem to be taking the merely implied critique of anthropocentrism in the earlier anti-humanist stances more seriously, even literally, and as a result, they actively promote a post-anthropocentric worldview. This means that the new key questions for Shakespeare studies are: how can one interpret a world in which the human subject is no longer the main focus, but is being increasingly 'de-centred' by technology, on the one hand, and questions concerning the 'environment', on the other hand? In what way can Shakespeare possibly remain relevant under these conditions? To what extent might he even become more relevant, or in other words, how might he be repositioned as a mirror image between a proto- or pre- and a posthumanist age?

### **Hamlet as Posthumanist?**

Hamlet: To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them. (III.1.56-60)

Hamlet in particular plays an important part in critically evaluating the ongoing process of 'post-humanisation' since early modernity. The spectrum of reactions to this posthumanising process range from apocalyptic fears of dehumanisation to spiritual fantasises eagerly embracing scenarios of transhuman bliss. In this context, Shakespeare and Hamlet might become allies for a critical posthumanism that keeps its distance to both of these extremes and which instead looks for points of connection with and prefigurations of a critique of humanism and anthropocentrism.

One such approach would start, for example, from Derrida's well-known recourse to Hamlet as a main character within the deconstruction of metaphysical notions of truth, existence and presence, in *Specters of Marx*.<sup>9</sup> In a parallel reading of Hamlet and Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, Derrida shows how the ontological difference of the ghost (i.e. the ghost of Hamlet and of communism) challenges any ontology based on the ideal of presence and instead exposes ontology as 'hauntology' (from French '*hanter*', to haunt). Hamlet stands here allegorically for the human doubting his own possibility to experience himself ontologically ('to be or not to be ...') and the resulting impossibility to justify humanist reflexes, especially faith placed in rational explanation ('Marcellus: Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio.' [I.1.42]) and the possibility to reveal any transcendental forms of truth.

Similarly, Jacques Lacan's famous reading of Hamlet moves beyond a traditional individual-psychological approach in reading the central character.<sup>10</sup> Psychological and psychoanalytic interpretations of Hamlet in the wake of Freud and Jones usually limit themselves to an analysis of the Oedipal conflict between Hamlet and Claudius and tend to explain Hamlet's hesitation by referring to his guilty conscience, as a result of his own desire to kill his father and possess his mother. Lacan instead sees *Hamlet* as the tragedy of human desire *par excellence*. Hamlet, as a typical representative of the modern human, has lost access to his own desire. Hamlet's hesitation is explained by Lacan as a result of the loss of the object of desire, through which basically any control over time also disappears. This, in return, leads to the 'spectralisation' and mystification of the phallus and thus of authority. Both Derrida's and Lacan's readings of Hamlet with their critique of humanist metaphysics prepare the terrain for contemporary postanthropocentric and posthumanist approaches.

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*' [1959], in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 11-52.

## Posthumanist Readings of Hamlet

Hamlet: What piece of work is a man! How noble in reason,  
how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how  
express and admirable, in action how like an angel,  
in apprehension how like a god - the beauty of the  
world, the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what  
is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me;  
no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you  
seem to say so. (II.2.312-319)

Taking the idea of a postanthropocentric reading of the present situation seriously, based on a posthumanist reassessment of human history, different options arise resulting in different posthumanisms or posthumanist readings. What these have in common, however, is their intention to re-examine texts with a view to asking how these texts address the question, either implicitly or explicitly, of what it means to be human?

To read in a posthuman way is to read against one's self, against one's own deep-seated self-understanding as a member or even a representative of a certain 'species'.<sup>11</sup>

However, to think 'beyond' or 'outside' anthropocentric and humanist assumptions does not necessarily have to be understood in this context as a form of 'keeping apace with technology'. There is also a much 'slower' posthumanism, a posthumanism 'without' technology, which reinterprets the meaning and the importance of the human within 'its' environment from the point of view of humanism's diverse displaced 'inhuman' others. This is, in fact, a move that has proven particularly fruitful for Shakespeare and Early Modern Studies.

First, animal studies re-examine the borderline between human and animal, as it was being redrawn within early modernity, from a late modern postanthropocentric and posthumanist perspective. In this context, work by Erica Fudge and Bruce Boehrer on Shakespeare's zoology plays a major part. It becomes clear that what we have in Shakespeare is an ideological permeability between the category boundaries of the human and the animal that is at least as important as current challenges arising out of (bio)technological developments.

Current processes of rewriting the history of technology are also interested in the analogies between early and late modernity, and in the

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<sup>11</sup> Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, 'What is a posthumanist reading?' *Angelaki* 13.1 (2008), p. 95.

analogies between pre-modern cultural technologies and postmodern technoculture. Here, in particular, Jonathan Sawday's, Adam Max Cohen's, Jessica Wolfe's and Henry S. Turner's work needs to be mentioned. Sawday uses provocative expressions like 'renaissance cyborg' and 'renaissance computer' to show how early modern notions of physicality, machines and automata already problematise the Cartesian-humanist worldview in its inception. Hamlet's letter to Ophelia (II.2.123-124), signed 'Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him, Hamlet,' for example, already represents 'pre-Cartesian' proof of the human idea of self-instrumentalisation as a machine and thus already locates the beginning of an ontological crisis of human autonomy within the era of the first machines.

The problematisation of human autonomy is also at the centre of emerging ecocritical approaches in literary and cultural theory. These approaches question the traditional humanist anthropocentrism and, instead, focus more on natural and systemic-technological networking of humans and environments and on the importance of non-human actors (cf. Latour). Gabriel Egan for example, shows that 'our understanding of Shakespeare and our understanding of Green politics have overlapping concerns and can be mutually sustaining'.<sup>12</sup> What is at stake here is to interpret Shakespeare ecologically, as well as to critically evaluate Shakespeare's pre- or early-modern ecology and to illuminate its relevance, especially with regard to the relationship between nature and culture, and between nature and technology.

On the one hand, the digitalisation of Shakespeare's text corpus demands an engagement with the role of cultural change in the information age (the phrases 'digital humanities' or 'humanities computing' are signs of this), and on the other hand, the question of Shakespeare's pre- or early modern understanding of information arises.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the so-called 'cognitive turn' and the resulting new insights into human (and nonhuman) thinking has a bearing on approaches within Shakespeare Studies. Breakthroughs in current scientific understanding of cognitive processes call, of course, for new approaches to reading literature (cf. cognitive poetics, cognitive criticism):

Some of the most significant advances in science over the past thirty years have been in cognitive science and cognitive theory, helping us to understand both biologically

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<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Egan, *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Alan Galey, 'Networks of Deep Impression: Shakespeare and the History of Information', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61.3 (2010), pp. 289-312.



and culturally how we as human beings think and do what we do – both in Shakespeare’s time as well as in our own.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the emergence of new networked media and the convergence with and remediation of mass media through information technology and new code-based digital and interactive media, represent a huge potential for the future of Shakespeare Studies, in particular in terms of corpus access and new forms of knowledge production. What may be specifically posthumanist about this, is the departure from traditional textual philology to a more dynamic and pluralistic aesthetics of variants, interactivity and generativity – which could of course be understood as an immense philological and pedagogical opportunity:

The text itself alters as we look at it from different points, just as the mass and dimensions of subatomic particles vary as they are examined from different points. The holding of multiple texts in the computer, in multiple forms, may dramatize this variance and better permit us to search for a one among the many; or not, as we prefer.<sup>15</sup>

The digitalisation of Shakespeare in general and of *Hamlet* in particular, acts in this context in two directions at the same time: Shakespeare promises to remain a privileged ‘object’ in the transition or translation towards digital culture. At the same time, Shakespeare also remains an autonomous ‘subject’, in the sense of a proper name that perpetually anticipates ‘current motives and motivations’ (see Galey 2010).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Arthur F. Kinney, *Shakespeare’s Webs: Networks of Meaning in Renaissance Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. viii.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Paul M. W. Robinson, ‘Is There a Text in These Variants?’, in *The Literary Text in the Digital Age*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 99; see also Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), and Graham Holderness, *Textual Shakespeare: Writing and the Word* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Galey, ‘Networks of Deep Impression’ (2010).

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**Biographical Note:**

Stefan Herbrechter is Reader in Cultural Theory at Coventry University, UK. He is the general editor (with Ivan Callus) of the Rodopi monograph series Critical Posthumanisms, and author and editor of a number of books, collections, journal issues and articles on critical and cultural theory, English and comparative literature, and cultural and media studies. For more details please visit <http://stefanherbrechter.com>.