

### 3 Hamlet and Posthumanist Politics

...they imitated humanity so abominably... (*Hamlet*, III.2.36-37)<sup>1</sup>

The century of 'Marxism' will have been that of the techno-scientific and effective decentering of the earth, of geopolitics, of the anthropos in its ontological identity or its genetic properties, of the ego cogito – and of the very concept of narcissism whose aporias are, let us say in order to go too quickly and save ourselves a lot of references, the explicit theme of deconstruction.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Posthumanism and Politics*

Another spectre has been haunting Europe, and the world at large: the spectre of the posthuman.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore no wonder that posthumanist manifestos have been proliferating. To cite only one of the earliest and most prominent, and only the first three of its many propositions:

1. It is now clear that humans are no longer the most important things in the universe. This is something the humanists have yet to accept.
2. All technological progress of human society is geared towards the transformation of the human species as we currently know it.
3. In the posthuman era many beliefs become redundant — not least the belief in human beings.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to what may seem like a revival of a more or less unreflected futurism, Ivan Callus and I have been arguing for a *critical* posthumanism (CPH) that remembers its humanist origins and returns to its prefigurations.<sup>5</sup> One of the prefigurations of contemporary posthumanism – an example of a 'proto-posthumanist moment' – we argued, can be located in Shakespeare and the early modern period in general.<sup>6</sup> Given the affinity between early and late modernity that has been well established by new historicism and cultural materialism,<sup>7</sup> and given Shakespeare's thoroughly ambiguous position vis-à-vis (Renaissance) humanism, one can

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<sup>1</sup> The edition of *Hamlet* used throughout is the Signet Classic Shakespeare, edited by Edward Hubler (New York: 1963), which is based on the Second Quarto.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 98 (hereafter quoted in the text as *SoM*).

<sup>3</sup> See Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "The Latecoming of the Posthuman, Or, Why 'We' Do the Apocalypse Differently, 'Now'", *Reconstruction* 4.3 (2004), n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Pepperell, "The Posthumanist Manifesto", *Kritikos* 2 (2005), available online: <http://intertheory.org/pepperell.htm> (accessed 8/12/2023).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "Critical Posthumanism, or, the *Inventio* of a Posthumanism Without Technology", *Subject Matters* 3.2/4.1 (2007): 15-29.

<sup>6</sup> See Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, eds. *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> See for example Linda Charnes, *Hamlet's Heirs: Shakespeare and the Politics of a New Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

assume an analogy between early or proto-postmodernism and early or proto-posthumanism.<sup>8</sup>

In short, if Shakespeare, in Harold Bloom's provocative words, is responsible for the "invention of the human"<sup>9</sup> – and Hamlet, the character, in this context, functions as the 'human' *par excellence*, or the essence of the essence, so to speak – Shakespeare by implication will also have to be credited with the invention of the posthuman,<sup>10</sup> i.e. his work, and *Hamlet* in particular, will have to be seen as a proliferation of nonhuman others who serve as foils for the human to understand 'himself' as human (i.e. 'not-woman', 'not-animal', 'not-machine', etc.). All these repressed others have the ability to return as 'ghosts' who, at the moment of crisis, come back to haunt the human. This ontological spectrality is thematised in *Hamlet* and therefore keeps resurfacing in modern readings of the play, since it coincides with the general spectrality and of modernity<sup>11</sup> and the spectral ontology (or 'hauntology') of (Western) metaphysics, in Derrida's words (*SoM*, p. 10 and *passim*).

This proto-postmodern and proto-posthumanist spectrality, epitomised in Hamlet's 'the time is out of joint', stands in analogy to Lyotard's understanding of the 'post' in the 'postmodern'. The specular reflections of the two respective threshold positions – early (or proto-) and late (or post-) modern or humanist – thus calls for a (Lyotardian) reading in "ana".<sup>12</sup> This reading also corresponds to the time of theory for which posthumanism and the posthuman are most certainly *revenants*. A time when the human is becoming 'his' own spectre, seemingly more 'enframed' by technology<sup>13</sup> than ever before – so much so that the human becomes the most 'unthinkable', and therefore, according to Heidegger, the most urgent task of or call for thinking<sup>14</sup> – this time, in fact, is a time that has been here before, as Derrida recalls in *Specters of Marx*:

the end of philosophy, of 'the ends of man', of the 'last man' and so forth were, in the '50s, that is, forty years ago, our daily bread. We had this bread of apocalypse in our mouths naturally, already, just as naturally as that which I nicknamed after the fact, in 1980, the 'apocalyptic tone in philosophy'. (*SoM*, p. 14-15)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See my, "Introduction – Shakespeare Ever After", in: *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, pp. 1-22 (reproduced in this volume as "Shakespeare and After").

<sup>9</sup> See Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> See my "'a passion so strange, outrageous, and so variable': The Invention of the Inhuman in *The Merchant of Venice*", in: *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, pp.41-57 (reproduced in this volume as "The Invention of the Posthuman in *The Merchant of Venice*").

<sup>11</sup> See David Punter, *Modernity* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Note on the Meaning of 'Post-'"', in: Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 47-50, and "Rewriting Modernity", in: *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 24-35.

<sup>13</sup> This is Heidegger's notion of the human being 'challenged forth' and 'enframed [*Gestell*]' by modern technology; see Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", in: *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 283-318.

<sup>14</sup> On the task of thinking the (unthinkable) see Martin Heidegger's "What Calls for Thinking?", in: *Basic Writings*, pp. 341-368.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida here criticises Francis Fukuyama's 'late coming' in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), by referring to the landmark collection *Les Fins de l'homme – à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*, eds. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (Paris, Galilée, 1981),

Thus in dealing with the contemporary posthuman, we are facing a ghost of a ghost, which means that it is particularly important to go slow, and, like Horatio, to remember and be vigilant. The emergence of posthumanism after the often proclaimed and desired 'end of theory', indeed, calls for vigilance and a working through of theory's repressed. This is why – in taking the idea of posthumanism seriously, maybe even literally, or 'to the letter' – one will have to first readdress the 'antihumanism' of (poststructuralist) theory.

A return or repetition, then, but also, of course a novelty, a first and radical singularity. Few people will dispute that the label 'global technoscientific capitalism' adequately captures the condition of contemporary societies in the West. What may be somewhat more contentious is that the subjectivity and the dominant ideology of this global and globalising system have dramatically changed over the past decades. While the main target for critical and cultural theory from the late 1970s onwards has been the so-called 'liberal humanist subject', who could be interpellated as a 'free individual' and who from a governmental point of view would mainly function as a self-disciplined 'docile body' – a political analysis based on a radical antihumanism informed by both psychoanalysis and marxism (cf. Althusser, Lacan, Foucault – and grouped under the label 'poststructuralism') – the current phase of modernity calls for a somewhat different and more complex approach. All four aspects of the term global technoscientific capitalism require theory to refocus and change its political approach: the effects of globalisation (acceleration through space-time compression, postcolonialism, neoimperialism), high-tech (postindustrial hyperrationalisation, accelerated commodification, automation and 'cyborgisation'), science (global biopolitics through an alliance between the 'life sciences' and new bio, nano, cogno, neuro, info etc. technologies, all based on digitalisation), capitalism (global neoliberalism, marketisation, bureaucratisation, virtualisation of capital, realtime commercial transactions, the dominance of multinational corporations etc.) – all these developments no longer require or address a 'liberal humanist' subject as such. Increasingly, they do not address a human subject at all, since large areas of decision-making have been 'outsourced' to machines, programmes or data bases, while interaction between humans has become more and more techno-mediatised and digitalised (i.e. archived in digital code which can be instantly accessed, circulated and overwritten). As a result there is an immense disjuncture between individual self-perception (which largely continues to function according to (liberal) humanist values) and an ambient posthumanism, which largely serves the dehumanising agenda of the global system. In order to understand and adequately critique these changes antihumanism alone is no longer a very effective stance. What is needed is a political theory that continues to do justice to the original motivations behind theory's antihumanism (a politics of difference, an ethics of plurality etc.) while embracing the political challenges that the posthumanism of the system poses. This, in short, is at stake in a *critical* posthumanist politics.

The second note concerns the use of *Hamlet* in the context of such a posthumanist politics. Is not literature a hopelessly humanist undertaking and therefore inadequate as a cultural practice from which to derive a reinvigoration of theory as posthumanist critique? Does the global techno-posthuman have any track with the literary or even the 'literal', if not the 'lettered'? In fact, as I would argue, here lies the main reason why poststructuralism especially

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itself based on Derrida's essay in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), with the same title. See also our, "The Latecoming of the Posthuman..." (cf. note 3 above).

in its deconstructive mode continues to be relevant and might even become more so. The 'letter' was never really to be understood merely as *belles lettres*; literature was always more than this eminently humanist occupation, which experienced its institutionalisation thanks to the rise of the novel and the advent of a bourgeois reading public who needed a medium to celebrate their own values. This is, in fact, the good news, namely that the deconstructive notion of 'writing', even if it was never going to be contained by literary practices, applies to contexts and technologies that far outstretch the commonsensical notion of a human body sitting down at a desk with a pen and paper. On the other hand, since inscription processes happen increasingly at a supposedly 'immaterial', namely digital, virtual level, the technicity of the 'trace'<sup>16</sup> of writing threatens to enframe the human more dramatically than even Heidegger could foresee. So while it might be necessary to overcome the humanist notion of literature, it becomes even more important to reclaim literature's link with politics, as one, and maybe until recently the dominant, but by no means the only cultural and creative (fictional) practice closely connected to what might be called a 'radical imaginary'. Indeed, it might be necessary to recall literature's partaking in what could be called the fictional dynamic of the 'as if', of radical openness, of being or taking part in the arch-political discourse of human 'imagination'. And this would be the justification for using *Hamlet* as a starting point to analyse posthumanism and the need for a new politics. Hamlet, the character, has always been taken as the emblematic modern figure concerned with and somehow at odds with his own humanity. Here lie 'our' affinities with Hamlet – human agency forced to act without the benefit of secure knowledge, he is the ultimate *bricoleur*. While Hamlet sees the rise of modernity we might be witnessing its end – not knowing of course whether this end is already the beginning of something else or merely the end of something known; or, in other words, whether we come too early or too late for our 'posthuman' future. What certainly still pertains is that time is (still) 'out of joint' and has not ceased to be out of joint ever since Hamlet's beginning of modernity. Indeed, politics and action have become ever more 'spectral'. The other justification is of course that *Hamlet* is a play and as such has a specific affinity with politics and its 'theatricality' or 'staging' (cf. Samuel Weber).<sup>17</sup> All the world is a stage – in the age of globalisation this famous Shakespearean adage in a sense comes into its own, as politics is being played out on a 'world stage', while 'we', the Hamlets of our time (ever non-contemporaneous with our selves), are finding ourselves in a radically changed set. And we are discovering more every day that 'we' have been decentred not only as individual subjects but also as a collective (esp. as far as the notion of 'humanity' is concerned) and that we now live and act, for better or for worse, in an utterly *deanthropocentred* environment, while the narcissistic delusions of political leaders and organisations and their unquestioned anthropocentrism are proliferating all over the world.

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1967]), p. 9ff. and 84-5. For an extensive discussion see Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> On the connection between deconstruction, politics and staging or theatricality see Samuel Weber's work, and specifically in relation to *Hamlet*: Samuel Weber, "Piece-Work", in: R.L. Rutsky and Bradley J. Macdonald, eds., *Strategies for Theory: From Marx to Madonna* (New York: SUNY, 2003), pp. 3-21. On the notion of theatre and *contretemps* (also further below, note 28) see Jacques Derrida, "Marx, c'est quelqu'un", in: *Marx en jeu*, eds. Marc Guillaume and Jean-Pierre Vincent (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1997), esp. pp. 19-25; as well as the interview with Derrida in the same volume, esp. p. 61.

## *Shakespeare, Hamlet and (Post)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)

From the outset, the question of identity and in particular the identity of the human are 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 misjudgements, 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 of the human is posed ('man's' position within the cosmos, 'his' particularity, 'his' indeterminacy, etc.). It is thus no great surprise that *Hamlet*, both the character and the tragedy, play a central role in the discussion about the relationship between Shakespeare and humanism. Neil Rhodes's words are representative in this respect:

*Hamlet* is not so much the beginning as the end of the beginning [of modern humanism] (...). One reason it enjoys what is perhaps an unparalleled status in Western literature is that it provides a distillation of the key ideas associated with both humanism and modernity. It offers a blueprint of modern conceptions of the self. But as it does so it brings one aspect of humanism into conflict with the other, which is why we can think of it as representing the end of the beginning. *Hamlet* is a humanist work that also offers a critique of humanism.<sup>18</sup>

Humanism, ever since the Renaissance and early modern period, is founded on some basic assumptions that are currently being challenged (again, and more forcefully) by posthumanist approaches: the cosmic centrality of the human as the pinnacle and end point of evolution (anthropocentrism), a species-specific, shared, inner core or essence that all humans have in common (e.g. mind, language, consciousness of being and finality, etc.) and which radically differentiates them from all other organic and nonorganic entities. Also under attack is the existence of concepts such as personality, individuality, identity, emotion, freedom, moral responsibility, dignity and perfectibility 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, in his *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*. 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

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<sup>18</sup> Neil Rhodes, "Hamlet and Humanism", in: Garrett A. Sullivan et al., eds., *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 124. For a good summary of *Hamlet* and modern subjectivity see Andrew Fitzmaurice, "The Corruption of Hamlet", in: David Armitage et al., eds., *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 139-156.

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 a basically proto-Kantian approach to philosophical anthropology. A good summary of the philosophical issues this raises can be found in Eric P. Levy's *Hamlet and the Rethinking of Man*, which traces the confrontation between the Aristotelian-cum-Thomist and the classical humanist notions of the rational animal (*animal rationale*) with regard to the role played by human reason – which Levy (amongst many others) sees at work in 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>19</sup>

Hamlet could thus be said to occupy a key position within the humanist version of 'hominisation' and 'anthropocentrism'. In a time when precisely this anthropocentrism is being questioned *Hamlet* once again takes on a new political (posthumanist) dimension and Hamlet's 'The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right! (I.5.188-189), rings even more desperate from a *species* point of view, once human exceptionalism is being seriously and systematically questioned.

Humanism's claim of historical and transcendental universality was already the main target for the antihumanist literary and cultural theory of the second half of the 20th Century (i.e. poststructuralism, postmodernism, new historicism and cultural materialism) as mentioned above.<sup>20</sup> As a result, 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 Kiernan Ryan:

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>21</sup>

Just as Shakespeare can be located at the beginning of or on the threshold of Western humanism, the present (i.e. 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 oppression. A major expression of the contradiction that resides within humanism – namely the contradiction between the peaceful ideal of a

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<sup>19</sup> Eric P. Levy, *Hamlet and the Rethinking of Man* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> See for example the first volume of *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London: Routledge, 1985), and Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

<sup>21</sup> Kiernan Ryan, "Shakespeare and the Future", in: Deborah Cartmell and Michael Scott, eds., *Talking Shakespeare: Shakespeare into the Millennium* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), p. 199. On the notion of presentism see Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, eds., *Presentist Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2007).

universal humanity and the inhuman cruelty of human reality – is 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, historically, to be merely based on 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 (and elsewhere of course). However, as is the case for humanism, it is better to speak of these approaches in the plural, i.e. posthumanisms. Furthermore, it makes more sense, from a temporal point of view, not merely 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 ‘Rewriting Modernity’, namely understood as a process of perlaboration or *Durcharbeitung*.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, Lyotard’s notion of modernity in ‘ana-’, or the rewriting of modernity understood as deconstructive perlaboration, projected onto a *critical* posthumanism, can be understood as the *deconstruction* of humanism, to borrow Neil Badmington’s phrase.<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, however, the emergence of the current posthumanist dynamics is a result of the historical material and technological conditions ‘now’, but just like Shakespeare’s work, posthumanism can both be understood as situated historically (i.e. singular) 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. nonhuman animals, machines, monsters, aliens, or the ‘inhuman’ in general) and recontextualise ‘its’ relations with them. 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 nonhumans, which serves to legitimate the oppression and exploitation of the latter by humans) as opened up by Derrida’s late texts and developed further in Cary Wolfe’s work, amongst that of many others, working in the emerging fields of animal studies, ecocriticism and critical science studies (following Bruno Latour and actor-network-theory), as well as, new feminist materialism and, more recently, object-oriented-ontology and speculative realism.<sup>24</sup>

In science, statements qualifying the humanist world view have been commonplace for a while, especially in the neuro- and cognitive sciences, which have been calling into question the humanist ideas of free will and traditional forms of morality, as well as in biotechnology and the life sciences, which are challenging the special status of humans from an evolutionary perspective. Various post-metaphysical approaches within philosophy and technics also contribute by questioning the idea of any instrumentalised relationship between humans and technology (cf. Bernard Stiegler’s work on technics and Peter Sloterdijk’s notion of

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<sup>22</sup> Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity”, *The Inhuman*, see note 12 above.

<sup>23</sup> Neil Badmington, “Theorizing Posthumanism”, *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003): 10-27.

<sup>24</sup> See the work of Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Levy Bryant and Timothy Morton; see also Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012).

‘anthropotechnics’), between humans, systems and environments (cf. Bruce Clarke’s work on ‘neocybernetics’), and between humans, language and cognition (cf. for example the more recent work by Mark Hansen). All these undermine the anthropocentric values on which humanism is based.

However, one should not forget that the special significance of Shakespeare for the current debate between humanism and posthumanism also arises of course from his central position within the canon of English, if not world literature (while the term ‘world literature’, similar to the already mentioned human rights, is heavily contested because of its humanist, colonialist and (neo)imperialist background). Advocates of Shakespeare’s universal value and humanist centrality, like Bloom, argue that Shakespeare’s great characters like Hamlet, 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), has been radically antihumanist, particularly in the Anglo-American context. Figures associated with poststructuralism 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, Montrose) and Cultural Materialism (Dollimore, Sinfield, Drakakis, Belsey, Hawkes) have attacked ‘liberal humanism’ in order to expose its pseudo-universalism as an ideology, as outlined above. 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 humanism.<sup>25</sup>

What distinguishes current posthumanist forms of reading Shakespeare from earlier antihumanist readings by poststructuralists and New Historicists, however, is that current posthumanist approaches are taking the merely implied critique of anthropocentrism in the earlier antihumanist stances seriously, even literally, and as a result, they actively promote a postanthropocentric 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, and in which it is being increasingly ‘de-centred’ by technology, the ‘environment’ and global challenges like climate change? 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- and a posthumanist age?

### *Hamlet as Posthumanist? Or, Deconstruction is a Posthumanism*

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)

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<sup>25</sup> See Jonathan Dollimore’s “Introduction to the Third Edition”, in: *Radical Tragedy* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004), pp. xiv-xl.



*Hamlet* plays an important part in critically evaluating the ongoing process of 'posthumanisation' since early modernity. The spectrum of reactions to this posthumanising process range from apocalyptic fears of utter dehumanisation to spiritual fantasies involving scenarios of transhuman (disembodied) bliss. In this context, Shakespeare and *Hamlet* become allies for CPH, which keeps its distance from both of these extremes and which instead looks for points of connection with and anticipations of a critique of contemporary humanism and anthropocentrism.

Such an approach, I would argue, can also be found in Derrida's recourse to *Hamlet* as a strategic text that displays the deconstruction of metaphysical notions of truth, existence and presence at work, in *Specters of Marx*. 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 that of communism) challenges an ontology based on the ideal of presence and instead exposes that notion of ontology as based on what he calls a '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 which results in the impossibility of justifying any humanist (esp. Cartesian) reflexes from such an experience, especially the humanist faith placed in rational explanation ("Marcellus: Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio". [I.1.42]) and in the possibility of revealing any transcendental forms of truth.<sup>26</sup>

What interests Derrida in *Hamlet* is Hamlet's peculiar metaphysical condition provoked by having been interpellated by the ghost of Hamlet senior – which leads Derrida to take Hamlet as emblematic for the 'hauntedness' of ontology (hauntology) whose notions of truth and essence based on the idea of presence are *necessarily* haunted by apparitions. Hamlet is thus a very important figure in deconstruction's politically and ethically motivated critique of metaphysics. The fact that Derrida also inscribed his reading of Hamlet and 'his' ghost within the history of marxism was never going to please those who had been calling for a straightforward positioning of deconstruction *vis-à-vis* a (marxist) politics for a while. In a sense, Derrida's move in relation to marxism mirrors the exchange between him and Lacan and the relationship between deconstruction and psychoanalysis. In both cases – marxism (and arguably politics in general) and psychoanalysis (and arguably reading or analysis, maybe even thinking, in general) – deconstruction is parasitically inhabiting their respective discourses. What I would argue is that the same process has been at work in the relationship between deconstruction and posthumanism as well. With regard to all three discourses, this is also a question of their archives and their technological 'supports'.

Hamlet's 'the time is out of joint' has been seen as 'modern man's' archetypical 'human condition' in 'his' own belatedness to history and metaphysics. And consequently, Derrida begins by asking: "How can one be late to the end of history?" (*SoM*, p. 15). This question returns 'today', with even more urgency, namely as the question of 'how can one be late to the end of humanity'? If "haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (*SoM*, p. 37),

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<sup>26</sup> Other texts where Derrida elaborates on his use of Hamlet are the already cited *Marx en jeu* (see note 17), as well as "Marx & Sons", in: Michael Sprinker, ed., *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 213-269, and "The Time Is Out of Joint", in: Anselm Haverkamp, ed., *Deconstruction is/in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 14-38.

the political question arising out of the 'end' of humanity is: what in this "triumphant phase of mourning work" (*SoM*, p. 52) that posthumanism might be a sign of, is being mourned – and what (humanism) is being 'inherited' by such a posthumanism? And, what is the trauma that is being 'displaced' in the process? In political terms, *Hamlet* is Derrida's illustration of the impossible necessity of a synchronised presence as a basis for political action. Hamlet hesitates to act because the time is out of joint and he has been given the impossible but inevitable task to set it right. Impossible, because the idea of a "contemporaneity of the present with itself" has either always already passed or is endlessly deferred, in short, the presence in which to 'act' merely ex-sists in *differance*. Necessary, because of the injunction Hamlet has received from Hamlet's ghost, demanding justice, and of the absence of choice as far as inheritance is concerned. Iterability *and* singularity of the event (of the political) thus create this impossible necessity or the 'immediacy' of action – a foundational opposition which calls for deconstruction. The important thing to note in this context is that while this reading of *Hamlet* is radically opposed to a certain idea of humanism, it does not in any way diminish the importance of human agency and decision.

I would argue that it is at the moment when the political agency of the human is shown to be 'spectral' that Derrida's politics of spectrality, the political dimension of hauntology, comes into its own so to speak. To illustrate this, Derrida inscribes his reading of Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' provoked by Hamlet's haunted desire for justice within the history of technics. In a section called "Virtual Reality in Politics", Derrida explains the significance of the spectre in terms of the (contemporary) techno-spectralisation of the "event" (which elsewhere he also refers to as a combination of "actuvirtuality" and "artefactuality"):<sup>27</sup>

If I have been insisting so much since the beginning on the logic of the ghost, it is because it points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity or actuality* (either present, empirical, living – or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence). This logic of effectivity or actuality seems to be of a limited pertinence (...). [The limit] seems to be demonstrated today better than ever by the fantastic, ghostly, 'synthetic', 'prosthetic', virtual happenings in the scientific domain and thus the domain of the techno-media and thus the public or political domain. It is also made more manifest by what inscribes the speed of a virtuality irreducible to the opposition of the act and the potential in the space of the event, in the event-ness of the event. (*SoM*, p. 63)

The disappearance of human agency from global politics is a result of the techno-economic acceleration driven by techno-science and the virtualisation processes of techno-media, which threaten the very illusion of a possibility of political action based on a conscious (human) decision. In this context, Derrida's spectral politics uses Hamlet, the ditherer, the 'prince of deconstruction', to illustrate that the non-contemporaneity of itself of ontological presence is not, in fact, the problem but instead constitutes the very condition for change and action – hence his emphasis on the idea of Hamlet's *contretemps*.<sup>28</sup> Derrida's key notions here are

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<sup>27</sup> Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality: An interview with Jacques Derrida", *Radical Philosophy* 68 (1994): 28-41.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida's reference to the *contretemps* in relation to Hamlet's 'out of joint time' is explained in *Marx en jeu*. He refers to the "*anachronie*" and "*dyschronie*" of the ghost (in Marx and *Hamlet*) in relation to the theatrical stage, representation and the transformation of public space (or the 'public sphere') by

'actuality', 'inheritance' and 'mourning'. He refers to *Specters of Marx* as a treatise on the question of a "political mourning"<sup>29</sup> and as an analysis of the "current (geopolitical, geo-economic, tele-techno-media, etc.) phase". A politics that resists the process of ongoing dehumanisation will inevitably need to address this decisional *contretemps* within the contemporary calls for a global political stage (the question of 'obscenity' and 'theatricality' referred to above), inheritance (the question of the archive at the time of its digitalisation and virtualisation) and mourning (i.e. justice in the age of globalisation).

### *Posthumanist Readings of Hamlet – The Spectre of Human Politics*

Hamlet: What a 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)

To read in such a strategically 'misanthropic' way<sup>30</sup> as Hamlet seems to suggest here also means: "to read in a posthuman way (...) 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>31</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 nonhuman others. This is, in fact, a move that has proven particularly fruitful for Shakespeare and early modern studies.<sup>32</sup>

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the media, as "teletechnological virtualisation which invades our world, in a determining fashion for politics, through television and other electronic information media" (p. 26; my translation). Neoliberal economic practices use this "change in gear [*changement de vitesse*]" that new virtualising media-technologies allow, for "speculation" and for creating practices of competition and exploitation on a global scale. Political action and resistance to the dehumanising potential of these developments may indeed be helped by a strategic and alternative use of the *achronie* of the *contretemps*: "The art of the counter-time is also a political art, an art of the theatre, the art of giving the word à *contretemps* to those who, *par les temps qui courent*, do not have the right to speak" (*Marx en jeu*, p. 28).

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *Marx en jeu*, p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> On the notion of 'misanthropy' in connection with the 'unhuman' see Daniel Cottom, *Unhuman Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), esp. pp. 148-160.

<sup>31</sup> See Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, "What Is a Posthumanist Reading?" *Angelaki* 13.1 (2008): 95-110.

<sup>32</sup> For an overview of how animal studies have been re-examining the borderline between human and animal, redrawn at the beginning of or in early modernity, and questioned from a late modern postanthropocentric and posthumanist perspective, see for example Erica Fudge's and Bruce Boehrer's work. From a critical science point of view, current processes of rewriting the history of technology are also interested in the analogies between early and late modernity, and in the analogies between pre-modern cultural technologies and postmodern technoculture. In this context, 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

In the context of such a posthumanist reading of *Hamlet*, following on from Derrida, the connection between politics and life is bound to become a main focus. In his final interview Derrida plays with the notion of “*apprendre à vivre, enfin*”<sup>33</sup> – the impossible necessity of ‘learning how to live’. This line of thought, namely that it is ultimately impossible (for any human) to learn how to live, is in fact first articulated in *Specters of Marx*, where in the “Exordium” Derrida calls forth the spectre of “someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally*. Finally but why? *To learn to live*: a strange watchword. Who would learn? From whom? To teach to live, but to whom? Will we ever know? Will we ever know to live and first of all what ‘learn to live’ means? And why ‘finally’?” (*SoM*, p. xvii).<sup>34</sup> In the context of *posthumanist* politics these questions receive an additional ring of urgency, as soon as they are understood to be addressing the ‘human’ at the time of ‘its’ disappearance, and to be asking what this impossible experience of such a ‘finality’ might mean. Life ‘as such’ cannot ‘teach’ about its finality and its ultimate meaning, only death can. But death cannot be experienced except in the form of an absolute alterity – the death of the other. Which means that the meaning of life has to remain ‘spectral’, or that only spectres can teach, so to speak, as Derrida explains: “If it – learning to live – remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death alone. What happens between two, and between all the ‘two’s’ one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some

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worldview from 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 some ‘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 has also been at the centre of emerging ecocritical approaches in literary and cultural theory. These approaches question the traditional humanist anthropocentrism and, instead, focus more on the natural and systemic-technological networking of humans and environments and on the importance of non-human actors (cf. Latour’s actor-network-theory). Gabriel Egan, for example, shows that “our understanding of Shakespeare and our understanding of Green politics have overlapping concerns and can be mutually sustaining” (Egan, *Green Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 1). What is at stake here is an ecological interpretation of Shakespeare, as well as a critical evaluation of Shakespeare’s pre- or early-modern ecology and its relevance, especially with regard to the relationship between nature and culture, and between nature and technology. Similarly, the so-called ‘cognitive turn’ and the resulting new insights into human (and nonhuman) thinking has a bearing on approaches within Shakespeare studies. 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 institutionalisation of ‘digital humanities’ or ‘humanities computing’ is a sign of this), and on the other hand, with the question of Shakespeare’s pre- or early modern understanding of information. Additionally, breakthroughs in the current scientific understanding of cognitive processes call, of course, for new approaches to reading literature in general (cf. cognitive poetics, cognitive criticism). Furthermore, the emergence of new networked media and their 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.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *Apprendre à vivre enfin – Entretien avec Jean Birnbaum* (Paris: Galilée, 2005). Derrida also elaborates on his and Hélène Cixous’ respective notions of life in *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). For a commentary see my “Theory... for Life”, in: Ivan Callus et al., eds, *Style in Theory: Between Literature and Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 303-322.

<sup>34</sup> See also Peter Sloterdijk’s *You Must Change Your Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost (...). So it would be necessary to learn spirits” (*SoM*, p. xviii). To be *with* spectres is therefore Derrida’s definition of politics (“a *politics* of memory” (p. xix)), or “no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born” (p. xix).

Hamlet’s hovering between life and death, or his ‘survival’, today, takes on a new global significance when a post-nuclear,<sup>35</sup> post-apocalyptic ‘humanity’ is increasingly caught in representations of its own survival, trying to ‘learn to live, finally’, all the while being under the impression of having outlived itself. It is not much of a surprise that, under these circumstances, the re-conceptualisations of life *pro-life*-rate, one could say. From biopolitics, ‘bare life’, to necropolitics<sup>36</sup> – life has become the ultimate techno-scientific capitalist object and commodity.<sup>37</sup> While the resulting ‘virtualisation’ of life accelerates, the Derridean politics of the *contretemps* (“Is not disjuncture the very possibility of the other?”, *SoM*, p. 22) seeks to decelerate and unhinge. Deconstruction, one could therefore say *is* a posthumanism, in the sense that it destabilises the link between human (singularity) and humanity (species). In this context, *Specters of Marx* itself arrived about twenty years before its time. At its time of ‘apparition’, namely in the context of Francis Fukuyama’s re-announcement of Kojève’s (Hegelian) ‘posthistorical man’ – and with Derrida, at that time, reminding his readers of deconstruction’s first encounter with the problematics of the ‘ends of man’<sup>38</sup> – *Specters of Marx*, already in 1994 (and even, retrospectively, in 1972), spelled out the ‘logic of the end of history’ as the logic of the ‘end of humanity’. Derrida thus seems to anticipate the entire dynamic of the posthuman and posthumanist politics, when he says:

There where man, a certain determined concept of man, is finished, there the pure humanity of man, of the other man and of man as other begins or has finally the chance of heralding itself – of promising itself. In an apparently inhuman or else a-human fashion. (*SoM*, p. 74)

Derrida is eager to critically inscribe this comment at once into Fukuyama’s triumphant neoliberal appropriation of Kojève – “[e]ven if these propositions still call for critical or

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<sup>35</sup> Which does not mean in any way the end of traditional threats of nuclear warfare, terrorism or catastrophes, of course. See Derrida’s “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)”, *Diacritics* 14.2 (1984): 20-31.

<sup>36</sup> See Giorgio Agamben’s return to Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower and biopolitics in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), and Roberto Esposito’s *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). On necropolitics see Achille Mbembe’s influential “Necropolitics”, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11-40. For a good summary of the debate on the biopolitical see Timothy Campbell, *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) and my review appended to *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*.

<sup>37</sup> See Kaushik Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital: The Constitution of Post-Genomic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Nicholas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> See note 15 above.

deconstructive questions, they are not reducible to the vulgate of the capitalist paradise as the end of history” (*SoM*, p. 74) – while reminding Fukuyama, neomarxists and new historicists alike that another politics, history, future etc. is possible only as a radical opening and disjuncture:

Permit me to recall very briefly that a certain deconstructive procedure (...) consisted from the outset in putting into question the onto-theo- but also archeo-teleological concept of history – in Hegel, Marx, or even in the epochal thinking of Heidegger. Not in order to show that this onto-theo-archeo-teleology locks up, neutralizes, and finally cancels historicity. It was then a matter of thinking another historicity – not a new history or still less a ‘new historicism’, but another opening of event-ness as historicity that permitted one not to renounce, but on the contrary to open up access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise as promise: as *promise* and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design. Not only must one not renounce the emancipatory desire, it is necessary to insist on it more than ever, it seems, and insist on it, moreover, as the very indestructibility of the ‘it is necessary’. This is the condition of a re-politicization, perhaps of another concept of the political. (*SoM*, pp. 74-75)

Hamlet, thus, seems to encapsulate the inbetween-ness of these two possibilities: how to read and what to do ‘after’ the end, in the *contretemps* which is the ‘end of humanity’, understood as chance for another, deconstructive, radically posthumanist (but not necessarily) posthuman politics. So, just when Derrida might be hijacked by some versions of posthumanist (or even transhumanist) politics, eager to re-ontologise or re-teleologise the ‘project of humanity’ under the new name of the ‘posthuman’, he, anticipatingly, in *Specters of Marx*, cautions against such a move and demands an ‘other politics’, one that could be called *radically* posthumanist (i.e. addressing the inequalities *within* humanity, between humans) *as well as* postanthropocentric (i.e. rethinking the relationship between humans and nonhumans), *at the same time*:

For it must be cried out, at the time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity (...). [L]et us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth. (And provisionally, but with regret, we must leave aside here the nevertheless indissociable question of what is becoming of so-called ‘animal’ life, the life and existence of ‘animals’ in this history. This question has always been a serious one, but it will become massively unavoidable.) (*SoM*, p. 85)

This question of an *other* politics between humans and nonhumans – to which Derrida himself devoted much more explicit attention in his late work on (human) sovereignty and (animal) life<sup>39</sup> – constitutes the most important and urgent task for a posthumanist politics, namely:

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<sup>39</sup> See in particular, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), and *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009 and 2011).

what future is there for humans and their nonhuman others in a global geopolitical and geo-ecological system, that some refer to as the 'Anthropocene', and which increasingly sees itself *after* life?

In this context, Hamlet's answer to Claudius as to where (the murdered) Polonius might be, today might be seen as an untimely echo of a postanthropocentric-posthumanist political-ecological statement on 'how to live, finally':

Not where he eats, but where 'a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots (...). A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm. (IV.3.19-28)