

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DECONSTRUCTION IN SHAKESPEARE CRITICISM

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The impact that the philosophy of Jacques Derrida had on Shakespeare criticism is comparable to the impact a round of fireworks has on the night sky: explosive, dramatic, even awe-inspiring – but ultimately ephemeral. Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ first entered Shakespeare studies in the mid-1970s alongside a wave of theoretically-charged approaches such as Feminism, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, etc., but it didn’t become the object of widespread attention until a decade later, when a flurry of criticism discussing links between Derrida and Shakespeare suddenly appeared. A handful of books presenting deconstruction as a separate mode within Shakespeare studies were published in the late-eighties to early nineties; several critics extolled the unique suitability of Derrida’s philosophy to Shakespeare criticism, and at least one (Howard Felperin) even went as far as to declare himself a “deconstructionist.” But the buzz didn’t last long. In the 1990s, the initial excitement over the possibilities of deconstruction gave way to a mood of greater reservation. Derrida’s ideas (or at any rate his jargon) were still touched on by critics working in other modes such as Cultural Materialism, New Historicism and Feminism, but a distinct ‘Deconstructionist School of Shakespeare Studies’ failed to emerge. This article will review the history of Shakespearean Deconstruction and discuss possible reasons why the movement faded in the years that followed its energetic start.

The foundation of Jacques Derrida’s philosophy was first presented in three books: *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*, all initially published in 1967. According to Derrida (whose work is notoriously resistant to breezy summary), it is impossible for a reader to arrive at an interpretation that establishes an absolutely certain relationship between ‘a text’ and ‘a meaning’ because any use of language unavoidably involves a multiplicity of contradictory signifiers. All texts are subject to ‘deconstruction,’ a process whereby ostensible meaning is undermined by the play of internal counter-forces endemic to language itself. Derrida’s basic method was to foreground deconstruction in texts by comparing a work’s ostensible meaning with various repressed, conflicting significations lurking beneath the surface – a process he called a “double reading.” Although he applied his methods to a few literary texts (including *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*), Derrida’s objectives were fundamentally philosophical, not literary, in nature. The central purpose of his analysis was to observe the course of a text’s deconstruction and thus show the impossibility of arriving at a

conclusive interpretation (thus subverting the ‘logocentric’ suppositions of Western thought). He did not venture to draw conclusions about the implications of deconstruction on a text’s status as a work of art.

The adaptation of Derrida’s ideas to literary criticism began in the 1970s, most notably in the work of Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and Barbara Johnson. In the hands of these critics, the conception of deconstruction began to mutate from “an observable process of auto-contradiction” (something that ‘just happens’) into a full-blown critical mode (something that a critic does to a text). As a result of this expanded conception, terms such as “deconstructionist” and “deconstructive reading” entered the critical lexicon, and titles that followed patterns such as, “Deconstructing -----” or “A Deconstruction of -----” started to crop up. The following (commonly cited) clarification of literary deconstruction’s basic stance comes from the introduction to *The Critical Difference* by Barbara Johnson.

Deconstruction is not synonymous with ‘destruction’, however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word ‘analysis’ itself, which etymologically means ‘to undo’—a virtual synonym for ‘to de-construct’. The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text’s critical difference from itself. (5)

Johnson’s conception of deconstruction – a “careful” analysis of various possible readings – bears obvious debts to the “close reading” developed by the *New Criticism* of the 1930s-40s. However, as M.H. Abrams notes in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, despite similar methodologies, the aims and outcomes of deconstruction and New Criticism are quite distinct, and in some cases, opposite:

New critical explications of texts had undertaken to show that a great literary work, in the tight internal relations of its figurative and paradoxical meanings, constitutes a freestanding, bounded and organic entity of multiplex yet determinate meanings. On the contrary, a radically deconstructive close reading undertakes to show that a literary text lacks a “totalized” boundary that makes it an entity, much less an organic unity; also that the text, by a play of internal counter-forces, disseminates into an indefinite range of self-conflicting significations. (59)

The key difference, then, between deconstruction and New Criticism is that, while New Criticism works toward the discovery of central, unifying themes, deconstruction denies from the very outset that such a thing as a ‘central theme’ could ever be shown to exist; any meaning that a critic could ever propose will inevitably be cancelled out by the never-ending blizzard of contradictory significations within the text itself.

Deconstruction started trickling into Shakespeare studies in the late 1970s with

characteristic flair. Gary Waller records sending a “ripple of apprehension around the gatherings, solemn and celebratory alike” when he raised the notion of deconstructing Shakespeare at the Stratford-upon-Avon International Shakespeare Convention in 1978.

Having spoken openly—even though along with others—of “decentering the bard,” I strolled to the parish church to see if the still center of our deliberations, the bard’s bones, had moved. They lay, undisturbed, and I felt not cursed, but liberated. (Waller 21)

Waller’s characterization of himself as a rebel – overturning the staid gospel of an outgoing generation with a mind-blowing new perspective – is a common conceit in deconstructionist rhetoric. It also suggests a further similarity to New Criticism. This observation raises an important point about the cultural mood surrounding deconstruction’s origin: radicalism was in fashion. The very same era gave rise to a full range of challenging, theoretically-charged critical modes: Feminism, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, etc., all aiming to cause “ripples of apprehension” in Shakespeare studies around the same time.

Shakespearean deconstruction began to hit its stride in the mid-eighties. In 1985, Terence Hawkes (whose early work exhibits obvious Derridean influences) declared, in an essay on new critical approaches for *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, that the implications of deconstruction for Shakespeare criticism were “vast” (292). He also supplied a new, watered down definition of ‘deconstruction’ specifically tailored for Shakespeare criticism, which allowed considerably greater flexibility than the definition provided by Barbara Johnson:

Essentially, then, a deconstructive account of a Shakespearian text would seek to undermine the illusion of character and of access to the author’s mind that Bradleian criticism presupposes. It would also refuse and subvert the pattern of oppositions and tensions that structuralism discerns in the text, claiming that these are imposed on it from outside as a means of limiting its potentially endless proliferation of meaning. In seeking to show how all writing covertly resists its own reduction to unitary ‘meaning’ and how no such meaning can be recovered from or be made simply available to the single text confronting the reader, deconstruction would finally play havoc with the modern editor’s efforts to produce a unified text of a Shakespeare play, and would regard all such enterprises as marks of the tyrannical boundaries within which the Western mind operates. (292-93)

Note that, unlike Johnson, who was careful to begin her definition with a disclaimer pointing out that “deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction,” Hawkes seems to view deconstructive analysis as a form of war. In his definition, deconstruction isn’t really a method; it’s an attack –and an extremely aggressive attack at that; his primary reason for applying deconstruction is to “undermine,” “refuse,” “subvert,” and “play havoc with” the ideas and analyses of other critics. This broad, attitudinized conception of deconstruction is evidence of the arrival of a third stage in the idea’s continuing

metamorphosis. It began, with Derrida, as an observable process of self-contradiction in texts, was fashioned into a method of analyzing self-contradictions in texts by DeMan, Johnson and Miller, and, by the mid-eighties, had become a vandalistic *attitude* of radical skepticism, predicated on a notion that definitive interpretation is impossible.

In the same year that *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies* came out, the *New Accents* series published *Alternative Shakespeares*, a collection that included essays on deconstruction and Shakespeare (most notably, Malcolm Evans's "Deconstructing Shakespeare's Comedies") alongside essays from a range of critical approaches including Feminism, Marxism and Psychoanalysis. The volume seems to have been put together with an optimistic idea that the various theoretical camps were all part of an emerging, inter-supportive family. However, as editor, John Drakakis noted ten years later in an essay entitled "Afterward" for *Alternative Shakespeares Vol. 2*, the proposed compatibility was probably the result of wishful thinking.

If a decade ago, the title *Alternative Shakespeares* naively celebrated a burgeoning radical pluralism, we now know too much for this position to be sustained uncritically. It is the case that in the original volume there were important and, as it turns out proleptic, tensions available to the discerning reader. (239)

Nineteen-eighty-five also saw the publication of *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, another collection wherein essays on deconstruction (most notably, Howard Felperin's "Tongue-tied our Queen?: the Deconstruction of Presence in *The Winter's Tale*" and Terence Hawkes' "Telmah") were placed in a position of prominence alongside other critical approaches. Like it or not, Shakespearean deconstruction had clearly arrived.

In 1988, editors G. Douglas Atkins and David M. Bergeron came out with *Shakespeare and Deconstruction*, the first (and only) collection of essays solely dedicated to the application of deconstruction in Shakespeare criticism. The editors' preface and introduction provide a revealing picture of the tensions surrounding the application of deconstruction to Shakespeare studies at the time. In the first sentences of the preface, David M. Bergeron cheerily announces that Shakespearean deconstruction is (or, had become) a self-certifying success:

Attempting to link a current literary critical theory with the greatest English writer seemed a goal worthy in and of itself. The essays that emerged from this idea validated such a project. (vii)

But Bergeron's proclaimed victory may have been premature. As his co-editor, G. Douglas Atkins's introductory essay reveals, the book shows very little agreement, among the critics whose work allegedly "validated" the "project" of linking deconstruction and Shakespeare, as to how – or even *if* – the "link" could or should be established:

The focus here, unlike in previous collections is precisely Shakespeare and deconstruction, its implications for and contributions to the study of the greatest writer in the language.

Yet even with this particular focus, there is no single deconstructive “party line” represented. . . . Some of our contributors, including Annabel Patterson, write against deconstruction even as they acknowledge its use and potential and employ its strategies. Few, if any of them would, I suspect, welcome the label ‘deconstructionist’. Indeed, they not only differ from each other in their interpretation and use of deconstruction, but on occasion they seem to differ even from themselves. (2)

Straining to argue for the merits of deconstruction without actually calling himself a ‘deconstructionist,’ Atkins opts for the label, “promoter of deconstruction” (10) a few pages later on. This rhetorical evasiveness (asserting that the idea of Shakespearean deconstruction is validated by the production of essays on Shakespearean deconstruction; attempting to maintain the illusion of a coherent approach despite a reluctance to commit to fixed specifics, etc.) is characteristic of literary deconstruction in general. *Shakespeare and Deconstruction* has quite a bit to say about what deconstruction can (supposedly) do, but it habitually avoids any strict definition of what deconstruction *actually is*. Atkins and Bergeron seem to have proceeded on the presumption that deconstruction had a place within Shakespeare studies (on page two, Atkins declares that no one is capable of escaping from deconstruction’s “capacious net”) without bothering to articulate a specified notion of what that place might be.

The haziness surrounding definitions in Atkins and Bergeron’s book raises a key point that must be understood in order to come to grips with the slippery complexity endemic in Shakespearean deconstruction: different critics interpreted and applied Derrida’s ideas in (sometimes radically) different ways. As Atkins notes, “there [was] a remarkably rich variety of work being done under the rubric of deconstruction, which is not, and never has been comfortable with lines and boundaries” (3). This ‘anything goes’ attitude gave rise to a capacious tent for budding deconstructionists to gather under. By resisting “lines and boundaries,” deconstruction almost seemed to invite erratic interpretation and application. One of the more striking examples of the extent to which the boundaries were pushed is James Howe’s *A Buddhist’s Shakespeare: Affirming Self-Deconstructions*, which draws a parallel between deconstruction and the Buddhist idea of *shunyata* (the fullness of emptiness), and proceeds to argue that, through deconstructive/dharmic analysis, the Buddhist-like affirmative positions implicit in Shakespeare’s plays can be brought to the surface.

In part through the metadramatic qualities of his plays, Shakespeare frequently performs the Dharmic/Derridean function of dissolution. He often subverts not only the apparent meaning of his texts, but also their authority as texts, thereby disrupting their “normal” relations with their audience (or reader), and changing his role as author by making it visible. (21)

But Howe was by no means the only critic to generate innovative new strategies for connecting Shakespeare and Derrida. Some critics borrowed a few of Derrida’s ideas or

methods, but rejected (or avoided) his overall conclusions; others used Derrida's conclusions as a foundation for an entirely different method of analysis. Still others mixed Derrida with other critics to create hybrid approaches of their own. A perfect example of such cocktails is H.W. Fawcner's *Deconstructing Macbeth: The Hyper-ontological View*, which, according to the dust jacket, utilizes "certain continental notions of mastery (Hegel), desire (Kojève), servitude (Nietzsche), expenditure (Bataille), and supplementarity (Derrida)." Yet another interesting strategy for linking Shakespeare and Derrida is the claim made in different ways by a variety of critics that elements such as reflexivity, irony, puns, multiple meanings and figurative language demonstrate that Shakespeare was something of a deconstructionist himself. Consider the introduction to Howard Felperin's "The Dark Lady Identified, or What Deconstruction Can Do For Shakespeare's Sonnets":

Despite the vast body of positivist scholarship . . . the *Sonnets* might well seem to have been cunningly constructed, Shakespeare's prophetic soul dreaming of things to come, with the idea of deconstruction in mind. (Felperin 69)

The sheer variety of strategies for linking Shakespeare and Derrida is indicative of the popular allure that the very word, 'deconstruction' commanded. It is instructive to remember that the same word was also being used to describe movements in music, the fine arts, architecture, theater, poetry, etc., all emerging around the same time. This flurry of activity raises an important point: for some critics, 'deconstruction' seems to have been little more than a euphemism for 'critical analysis' (or, to put it more cynically: for some critics, deconstruction was simply a fashionable excuse for affected incoherency). One imagines that Jacques Derrida must have experienced a deep sense of satisfaction as he witnessed the mushroom cloud of divergent interpretations that emerged from his ideas.

One of the most prominent features uniting the various practitioners of Shakespearean deconstruction is a stylistic tendency toward "willful obscurity" (Ryan 510). Imitation of Derrida's merciless prose led to an aesthetic that de-prioritized traditional compositional values such as clarity, brevity, comprehensibility and precision in preference of styles that were variously arid, awkward, cryptic, unnecessarily dense or aloof. Try to make sense of the following passage from H.W. Fawcner's *Deconstructing Macbeth: The Hyper-ontological View*:

If the introduction of the Weird Sisters and their field of special suggestion is one prominent feature in act 1, the tension between vanishing and presence is another. It is this tension that I shall now discuss. I define "vanishing" as presencing that presences without presence and without presences. (59)

Fawcner may sound like a guest at the Mad Hatter's tea party here, but at least he has an honest point to make (I think). Other critics seem to have taken perverse pleasure in sending the reader on wild goose chases. Consider the following puzzle from the final

sentences of “Telmah,” by Terence Hawkes:

As the trumpets sound, the moment belongs to Fortinbras, that speculative instrument, in the tonal, or musical, or intonational quality of whose utterance these extremes meet. It is not inappropriate finally—it is not even surprising—that within his name we should just discern, if we ponder it, the name of the greatest black American jazz trumpeter. (331)

The “greatest black American jazz trumpeter” referred to is, of course, Louis Armstrong. The “not even surprising” connection between Fortinbras and Armstrong the reader is encouraged to “ponder” is an observation that, ‘arm strong’ is ‘*fort bras*’ in French. This connection is (supposedly) significant because, for Hawkes (the great white British Shakespeare critic), Fortinbras and jazz are both representative of the “different notion of interpretation” (330) being promoted – deconstruction.

Not surprisingly, deconstruction’s reception within the various schools of Shakespeare criticism was mixed. Certain critics working within emerging post-structuralist modes, such as Feminism, New Historicism, and Cultural Materialism picked up on Derrida’s method of ‘de-centering’ texts to reveal (predictable) repressed meanings hidden in the margins. For example, Kathleen McLuskie’s “Feminist Deconstruction: The Example of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*” used deconstruction to reveal elements such as “the ideological assumptions behind the notion of taming and the commercial underpinnings of patriarchy” (33). Other critics welcomed Derrida with one hand and strangled him with the other. In “Shakespeare and the Exorcists,” for example, Stephen Greenblatt says that deconstruction is a useful tool for undermining the supposed boundaries between literary and non-literary texts, but he also criticizes deconstructionist readings for being apolitical, rudderless and predictable: “Deconstruction is occasionally attacked as if it were a satanic doctrine, but I sometimes think that it is not satanic enough” (164). Greenblatt’s basic critique of deconstruction – that it is a useful tool for revealing marginalized significations, but lacks a sense of purpose or coherence as a mode in and of itself – was echoed by several critics, especially Feminists and Cultural Materialists, who found deconstruction’s apolitical tendencies to be glaringly problematic. As Atkins notes, a wide variety of poststructuralist Shakespeare critics regarded deconstruction as “merely self-indulgent and trapped in a self-reflexiveness unable to proceed from its rigorous scrutiny of linguistic structure to a necessary critique of culture society and politics” (1). Other critics even went as far as to label deconstruction ‘the enemy.’ Consider, for example, Carol Neely’s “Constructing the Subject: Feminist Practice and the New Renaissance Discourses,” which argues that approaches such as deconstruction “oppress women, repress sexuality and subordinate gender issues” (5).

It should be noted that criticism of literary deconstruction was not limited to Shakespeare studies alone. Indeed, several fairly devastating critiques were published before the vast majority of deconstructive analysis of Shakespeare ever even appeared.

The period between 1977 and 1984 saw the publication of quite a few “sharp evaluations” (Vickers 166) by critics including M.H Abrams, Gerald Graff, Denis Donoghue, Christopher Butler and John Searle (Vickers 166). In these critiques, literary deconstruction was taken to task for being repetitive, predictable and thus, generally useless. Consider the following thought from Abrams’ *Doing Things With Texts*:

The deconstructive method works because it can’t help working; it is a can’t-fail enterprise; there is no complex passage of verse or prose which could possibly serve as a counter-instance to test its validity or limits. (249)

A similar line of criticism is raised by Wendell V. Harris in *Interpretive Acts*:

If one surveys either an extended text or several texts by the same author, it is almost always possible, by lifting out sentences from here and there, to show that an author has used the same word in incompatible senses. (145)

All of these objections (and many more) were well-established and readily available by the mid-eighties, and the balance of opinion seems to have shifted in favor of literary deconstruction’s critics (Vickers 167). But for some reason, critics applying deconstruction in Shakespeare studies failed to take the objections into account.

The definitive critique of Shakespearean deconstruction came in 1992 with the publication of Brian Vickers’s *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels*, which aimed to sever every head on the post-structuralist hydra – Deconstruction, New Historicism, Psychocriticism, Feminism and Marxism – in a single swoop. Building on previous critiques, the first two parts of Vickers’s chapter on deconstruction begins with a scathing assessment of Derrida (an “*enfant terrible* . . . cocking a snook at his predecessors” [171]), Paul DeMan, and J. Hillis Miller, to arrive at the following conclusion:

What use is deconstruction as a model for literary criticism? My answer, and the answer of other independent observers (we are not dealing here with assertions and counter-assertions of rival groupies, each bent on advancing their own school) has to be: not much Deconstruction might be a useful propaedeutic exercise in philosophy classes . . . but as a model for literary criticism it is seriously defective. (179)

Literary deconstruction thus defused, Vickers proceeds, in the third and fourth parts of the chapter, to pick off the main promoters and practitioners of Shakespearean deconstruction – Terence Hawkes, Howard Felperin, Gary Waller, David M. Bergeron, G. Douglas Atkins, etc. – one by one. It’s impossible to gauge the full impact of his critique (it certainly wasn’t the only one), but his influence must surely be regarded as a central contributing factor in Shakespearean deconstruction’s decline. In the mid-nineties, the attitude toward deconstruction in Shakespeare assumed a tone of far greater reservation; the “vast” opportunities promised by Hawkes, Felperin, and Atkins were, for the most part, quietly forgotten . . . but not forgotten altogether.

Like a corpse springing out of rigor mortis, Shakespearean deconstruction

displayed sudden signs of vitality in 2003 with the publication of *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide*, which (as part of an editorial effort to represent the full spectrum of critical approaches in Shakespeare studies) included a chapter on deconstruction and a sample deconstructive reading of *Romeo and Juliet* by Kiernan Ryan. The chapter is almost distortive in its attempt to present deconstruction as an active, coherent critical mode. Sweeping all the contradictions, disagreements, obfuscations and eccentricities under the carpet, Ryan proceeds to construct a textbook-ready myth of a “Deconstructionist School of Shakespeare Studies” that never really existed (or, at any rate, had certainly ceased to exist by 2003). Tellingly, however, the “Further Reading” list that follows Ryan’s essay does not reference any work that was less than thirteen years old by 2003 (Ryan 517). Nor does it include any mention of Brian Vickers or any of the other many critics of literary deconstruction.

The coffin was abruptly slammed shut again in 2004, with the arrival of editor Russ McDonald’s *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945-2000*. In the preface to the anthology, McDonald explains why he found deconstruction to be unworthy of its own chapter.

Also notable is the absence of deconstruction as a rubric. Although some of its vocabulary and principles have perforce made their way into other modes of critical reading, deconstruction *per se* made little impact on Shakespeare studies, few Shakespearians identified themselves as “deconstructionists,” and thus a separate section seems unearned.
(xii-xiii)

This may well prove to be the signature on Shakespearean deconstruction’s death certificate. But who can be sure? As the history of deconstruction in Shakespeare studies demonstrates, literary criticism is an intensely human affair; its course is inescapably influenced by the same chaotic forces – vanity, greed, love, hate, envy, pride, honor, ambition, etc. – that invigorate the plots of Shakespeare’s plays. Anything is possible. If the right combination of personality and circumstance were to occur, Shakespearean deconstruction might very well climb out of the grave yet again, hungry for logocentric suppositions to subvert and defeat.

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