

PRESENTISM AS A RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

Zorica Lola Jelic

Faculty of Contemporary Arts, Belgrade, Serbia, zorica.jelic@fsu.edu.rs

Abstract: Presentism, as a hermeneutical approach, emerged, as many argue, mainly as a reaction to new historicism, which in turn was a reaction to the new criticism and other formalist approaches of the 1960s and 1970s; as such, it must stand in relation to and in constant dialogue with other approaches and theories. As Evelyn Gajowski said, "entering into a conversation with the past means entering into a dialogue not only with Shakespeare and his contemporaries, but also with the tradition of theatrical and critical responses to Shakespeare's texts that has accumulated over the course of four centuries."¹⁰ It is an active approach, since the text will always actively engage with the present moment and a specific place. Simply stated, the present moment influenced by present events will always be an alternate universe of what is in the text. The text will actively engage with the reader's imagination creating a new understanding and envisioning of the play, for example. However, presentism, even though the name suggests so, is not only anchored in the present; it is engaged with the past and with the present moment, and one can argue it is also engaged with the future. Kiernan Ryan¹¹ reminds us that "presentist criticism of Shakespeare will be credible only if it engages in a dialogue with futurity as open and dynamic as the dialogue it must engage in with the past" (183). Similarly, for Ewan Fernie the text is in the past and in the present at the same time. He suggests that the text is in the present, but that the presence provides a phenomenological comprehension of the present, past, and future.¹² Yet, it is not my intention to permanently single out presentism and advocate that it can and should stand on its own without participating and contributing to a wider discourse. The intention of this paper is to give a brief overview of this relatively "new" way of interpreting literature and the theorists who helped define it as such. This approach shows that personal education as well as social, political, and geographical circumstances influence how one interprets literature. Presentism itself has more than one way of viewing literature, since it has many other approaches and theories working within it, so we acknowledge that there are many presentisms. Hence, the theoretical works of Hugh Grady, Terence Hawkes, Ewan Fernie, and Evelyn Gajowski, the leading presentists of our time, are shown. Since they are all Shakespeare scholars their perspectives on presentism are given dominantly in relation to Shakespeare. The aim of this paper is to show the importance of this approach as well as to refute the claims that presentism is only a footnote in the history of literary theory. Furthermore, At this moment, presentism is the most significant and active hermeneutical approach, and this is why we, presentists, understand that they are not a part of some marginalized and ephemeral theoretical occurrence that exists solely in relation to new historicism; on the contrary, they are a part of a powerful approach that is by its nature inclusive and diverse in regards to other hermeneutical theories and approaches, and contributes equally in a broader theoretical discussion regarding the past, present, and future of texts, media, and literary theory.

Keywords: presentism, hermeneutical approach, Shakespeare, Grady, Hawkes, Fernie, Gajowski, adaptations

At the last Shakespeare Association of America conference, I bought Peter Barry's newly revised book (2017)¹³ on literary theory solely because he dedicated a "staggering" 5 pages to presentism. Yet, what a surprise, not all five pages are dedicated to presentism alone. Yes, new historicism and Stephen Greenblatt have a considerable amount of attention in that section; even though, they have their own section in the part where "actual" theory is discussed. Needless to say, presentism is in the section titled "Theory After Theory," in which he explains that theory is no longer news worthy, since all main things have already been said. Be that as it may, Barry concludes the part on presentism by stating, "the contest between historicism and presentism is an argument about

¹⁰ Gajowski, Evelyn, ed. *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p.6.

¹¹ Grady, Hugh and Terence Hawkes, eds. *Presentist Shakespeares*. New York: Routledge, 2007, 171.

¹² *Ibid*, 189.

¹³ Barry, Peter. *Beginning theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Oxford University Press, (2017).

choice of contexts - we can read *Hamlet* either in the context of the past (as Stephen Greenblatt does in "Hamlet in Purgatory," seeing the play in terms of the religious beliefs and conflicts of the early modern period), or in the context of the present (or, at least, of the more recent past), as Hawkes does" (313). So, it's the past or the recent past; as if presentism is only that. Furthermore, I am sorry to point out that out of all of Greenblatt's work, that particular book is presentist in nature, since he wrote it while grieving for the loss of his father. Yet, the main oversight in that rather fallacious sentence is actually that presentism is seen by other scholars and theorists as some kind of post-theoretical underdog and nemesis of new historicism engaged in a bitter contest. Or is it an oversight? Does it appear like we are constantly apologetically comparing our work and our papers to those of new historicist or historicist scholars? In the collections of essays that I have read, it seems as if many papers begin with some kind of reference to, defense from, or resistance to new historicism. We are constantly juxtaposing our work to that of our historicist colleagues. Perhaps we are unintentionally always putting our work in some kind of inferior position; one which needs to be justified and explained over and over again. As presentists we know that in theoretical discussions we often compare our views to the views of those who also interpret literature according to the Western notion of time. Most of the time it just happens to be new historicism. Unfortunately, other theorists tend to see that as a competition or a retort.

Why is this? Why has presentism been pushed to the side of contemporary literary theory and scholarly discussion? Some prefer to see a certain waning of enthusiasm among presentists due to the new wave of new historicism, which can be seen in an interest of scholars in Elizabethan everyday things. *Nothing could be further from the truth.*

Let me state the obvious, presentism is a hermeneutical approach and as such it must stand in relation to and in constant dialogue with other approaches and theories. As Evelyn Gajowski said, "entering into a conversation with the past means entering into a dialogue not only with Shakespeare and his contemporaries, but also with the tradition of theatrical and critical responses to Shakespeare's texts that has accumulated over the course of four centuries."¹⁴ It is not my intention to permanently single out presentism and advocate that it can and should stand on its own without participating and contributing to a wider discourse. However, because of the afore-mentioned perceptions, for the purpose of this paper, I propose that we temporarily move toward a more constructive and very specific discussion on presentism and what it is instead of what it is not. Presentism as an interpretative approach in reality existed before hermeneutics was officially established. So, let's have a look at some segments of that rich interpretative history that resembles what today we call presentism. *The Hermetica*¹⁵, a text forgotten by most, which only exists in fragments, was devoted to the mythological ancient Egyptian sage Toth, who was actually considered the first interpreter. It is no surprise that the remains of this great text were found in different cultures under different names¹⁶ and became the cornerstone of Western culture and influenced such artists and scientists as Leonardo De Vinci, Michelangelo, Botticelli, Raphael, Giordano Bruno, Sir Isaac Newton, and even William Shakespeare. So, why is *The Hermetica* an important text for us today? The significance of it lies in the numerous

¹⁴ Gajowski, Evelyn. *Presentism, Gender, And Sexuality in Shakespeare.*, Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan p.6, 2009.

¹⁵ Freke, Timothy, and Peter Gandy. *The Hermetica: The Lost Wisdom of the Pharaohs.* London: Judy Piatkus Publishers, (1997).

¹⁶ The origins of *The Hermetica* are not known; although, it is a descendent of ancient Egyptian philosophy. The surviving writings are not in hieroglyphs but in Greek, Latin, and Coptic. History shows that wherever it was studied civilizations flourished. It was studied in the Islamic territories before the Middle Ages, and during this period the first university was open. *The Hermetica* made its way to Europe (Florence) in the fifteenth century and once again it inspired a cultural flowering, which signaled the end of the Dark Ages. Students of this 'New Learning' were sent throughout Europe, while Copernicus and Giordano Bruno, were among the many followers. In England, Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Walter Raleigh, John Donne, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, George Chapman, John Milton, Sir Isaac Newton, and Francis Bacon were highly influenced by this work. Even [...] Elizabeth's personal astrologer, whom she referred to as 'her philosopher,' was the enigmatic Hermeticist John Dee [...]. Unfortunately, James I hired the scholar Casaubon to disprove the validity and authenticity of this work. James I wanted to purge the court of any Elizabethan remnants, and after a vigorous and politicized campaign the work slowly faded into oblivion (xvi-xxvii). Freke, Timothy, and Peter Gandy. *The Hermetica: The Lost Wisdom of the Pharaohs.* London: Judy Piatkus Publishers, (1997).

translations and interpretations that it endured over the centuries. Each new person who took on the task of interpreting this text found meaning in it and prophecies relating to the time it was translated in. Even Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy comment that Hermes wrote the text in such a way that the wisdom was hidden, and that future generations needed to discover it. A few thousand years later, the Bible, which emulated *The Hermetica* in more ways than one, became the most explicated text. Let's not forget Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was perhaps the first to advocate the *theory of reception*, even though it would flourish later in the XX century, who said that interpretation of the text happens within the individual and changes with time and place. His contemporary Luther, who called the text sacred, insisted on the importance of the multiplicity of interpretation rather than blindly believing in one sole meaning. He was, perhaps, the first to, while making the text sacred, in essence make the reader more important than the text. He no longer gave primacy to what was written but to who was reading the text. Johann Georg Haman (XVII century) believed that the reader, the interpreter/critic,¹⁷ and the text are intertwined and that the reader mirrors himself onto the text and *vice versa*, and in doing so there is a discussion that is taking place. Undeniably, one can take this *mirroring* of the present (the reader) on to the past (the text) is all too similar to a presentist approach to viewing and understanding literature that occurred long before hermeneutics. Eventually, hermeneutics was established as a specific method and scholarly discipline on its own by Friedrich Schleiermacher at the beginning of the XIX century. Later in that century Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, openly addressed hermeneutics and said that it could not exist without phenomenology, the conscious experience. For him, experience was intentional and interpretation was subjective and reflected the experience of the interpreter, which is a rather presentist claim. Martin Heidegger was highly influenced by Husserl, but he added a social component and found that interpretation could not be separate from ontology, that every act of interpreting is at the same time an act of understanding, being. Gadamer calls his point of view, with which he observes the world, hermeneutical – a term developed by Heidegger, which stemmed originally from Protestant theology. Gadamer explored the use of hermeneutics in all disciplines and not only in literature. He deemed that the present mirrored the past, and, therefore, the past was in the present,¹⁸ which is a position Ewan Fernie advocates in his variant of presentism. For Gadamer, not only are the present and past fused together, but also the text and the interpreter are fused as well. Yet, he himself is following Haman, and again this view of hermeneutics coincides with the postulates of presentism, although the presentist critics do not develop their views directly from Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

These are just some examples of a presentist way of interpreting literature that existed before the XX century. It was and is a subjective way of approaching texts and engaging in a discussion not only with the text but also, reciprocally, the text engaging with the reader/present moment; and, we can say subjective because we do get involved with each text that we read. So, what else is presentism? It is an active approach, since the text will always actively engage with the present moment and a specific place. Simply stated, the present moment influenced by present events will always be an alternate universe of what is in the text. The text will actively engage with the reader's imagination creating a new understanding and envisioning of the play, for example. However, sometimes the text can resist interpretation and will have to wait for some time to come, as *The Hermetica* suggested or as Heine remarked that Shakespeare's text must await some future moment to be understood. Such instances regularly occurred during the turbulent twentieth century. Such a moment can be the presidency of George W. Bush. Evelyn Gajowski wrote about the remarkable similarity between the Bush's presidency and the rule of Henry V¹⁹. Undeniably, *Coriolanus* is one of those plays that was politicized (abused) by various political regimes or ignored by others. It is quite intriguing how the play was frequently adapted in Germany between the two wars, and it was even included on the required list of reading material in schools. *Coriolanus* was portrayed as a leader who liberated his people but was fooled by false democratic values.²⁰ In Nazi Germany, *Coriolanus* was portrayed more as a Hitler type than Roman general, and so just after World War II the play was banned in American-controlled Germany. The particularity of this play lies in its uniqueness that both totalitarian ideologies of twentieth century, fascism and

¹⁷ Haman introduces the concept of the critic. He writes *A Rhapsody in Cabbalistic Prose* (1759) and openly attacks Kant and argues that he is not just "any listener;" he is rather the prosecutor and challenger of what Kant writes. Грубачић, Слободан. *Александријски светионик: тумачења књижевности од Александријске школе до постмодерне*. Нови Сад: Издавачка књижарница Зорана Стојановића, 166, 2005.

¹⁸ Klemm, David E. *Hermeneutical Inquiry: Volume 1, The Interpretation of Texts*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, (1986).

¹⁹ Gajowski, Evelyn. *Presentism, Gender, And Sexuality in Shakespeare.*, Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan pp. 63-87, 2009.

²⁰ Костић, Веселин. *Шекспирова драматургија*. II. Београд [Belgrade]: Стубови културе, 274, 2010.

communism, were able to adapt it²¹. This is just one example of the remarkable subversive nature of texts, but not every text is subversive every time.

However, presentism, even though the name suggests so, is not only anchored in the present; it is engaged with the past and with the present moment, and one can argue it is also engaged with the future. Kiernan Ryan²² reminds us that even Shakespeare intended his lines for some future generation for "eyes not yet created" and "tongues to be;" furthermore, he states that "presentist criticism of Shakespeare will be credible only if it engages in a dialogue with futurity as open and dynamic as the dialogue it must engage in with the past" (183). Similarly, for Fernie the text is in the past and in the present at the same time. He suggests that the text is in the present, but that the presence provides a phenomenological comprehension of the present, past, and future.²³ This draws the discussion to what Hawkes wrote extensively about - the *meaning* of the text. Fernie believes that the meaning of it cannot be easily explained, since it is very much rooted in the present and the now, but it also incorporates history into itself, so he acknowledges the concept of historical time. Hence, "to be in the audience of a performance of *Hamlet* is automatically to entertain, all at once, a sense of the past from which it originates, the present in which it is now being played, and the future to which it is already on its way."²⁴ Fernie includes the future because, for him, any reception in the present can foreshadow a possible reception in the future. He explains that implications are "stored" in the text and they wait to be "unpacked" by critics, actors, and directors at some point in the future.²⁵ Along those lines, Hugh Grady wrote, "The past continually changes its shape and meaning for us as we move further into the future, gain new experiences and new perspectives, and research, re-think, re-evaluate the past."²⁶ (143) On the other hand, Lynda Charnes wonders, "Why do we fetishize our ability to imagine ourselves into Shakespeare's past, but feel so little responsibility for imagining ourselves into Shakespeare's future?"²⁷ In addition, she says, "the kind of futures we believe in tell us who we have been in the past, and which, and whose, version of the past we choose to privilege in believing ourselves into our futures."²⁸ She couldn't be more right, since there is not one version of the past and there is no "right" history. However, what is more important is the focus on the discussion about the future. I would expand on her ideas and state that it is not so much as what kind of future we believe in as it is the kind of future that will become. For a moment, let's envision our world 400 years from now. Let's imagine a utopia of some sort; a society in which crime is eradicated and people have forgotten the meaning of it just like in the film *Demolition Man*. How will those people in that peaceful world interpret what happened to Lavinia? Will they be able to comprehend the complexities of Iago's character? For, let's not forget that it is not only the different time that we are supposed to comprehend it is also a different culture. Anthony Tatlow wrote that "Every engagement with a Shakespearean text is necessarily intercultural. The past really is another culture, it's remoteness disguised by language."²⁹ Therefore, it is sound to ask will a future four hundred years from now be able to understand the nuances of our cultural specifics; and, what is even more important can we now or can people in some distant future understand Shakespeare's age and texts? The fact of the matter is that, as Charnes reminds us, we can only have a certain version of the future in mind, and those future generations will only have a version of the past to refer to. The only constant is the present moment which determines anybody's vision of their past and their future. Yet, let's pause for a moment and look at another possibility as Kay Stanton reminds us, the "Study of Shakespeare's works, then, can assist us both in personal self-actualization in our present and in working toward more productive and just social and political structures for humanity's future."³⁰ Hence, we can only hope that the text will speak to us and teach us of how we can be better as individuals and as a society. Unfortunately, at this moment humanity seems to be blind and deaf to the lessons that history has left for us. Nonetheless, we should focus on the future of presentism; that is on the adaptations and appropriations in the media of film and documentaries.

²¹ *Ibid*, 259.

²² Grady, Hugh and Terence Hawkes, eds. *Presentist Shakespeares*. New York: Routledge, 179, 2007.

²³ *Ibid*, 189.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 181.

²⁵ Fernie, Ewan. "Shakespeare and the Prospect of Presentism." *Shakespeare Survey*, vol. 58, p.190, 2005.

²⁶ Grady, Hugh and Terence Hawkes, eds. *Presentist Shakespeares*. New York: Routledge, (2007).

²⁷ *Ibid*. 66

²⁸ *Ibid*. 75

²⁹ Tatlow, Antony. *Shakespeare, Brecht, and the Intercultural Sign*. Durham, Duke University Press, p. 5, 2001.

³⁰ Stanton, Kay. *Shakespeare's Whores*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 9, 2014.

At the recent BSA in Belfast, I presented a paper on the dangers that film appropriations have on Millennials. As Terence Hawkes so genuinely phrased it, Shakespeare has become a global business - Bardbiz. He has become a global phenomenon. He is equally profitable in Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries. In non-anglophone cultures, Shakespeare has proven to be universally adaptable because these cultures either want to be closer to a Western way of life or thinking, or because his texts invite discussions about gender inequality, racial tensions, and social stratification. However, the medium that proved to be most successful when it comes to transforming and assimilating from within social and cultural borders and boundaries of non-Anglophone countries is film. As Katherine Rowe writes, “No longer an epiphenomenon, adaptation is now understood as an essential condition of transmission for Shakespeare texts.” There has been an explosion of adaptations of Shakespeare’s texts in India, Japan, China, Burma, and South Africa in the past century. It is interesting how in most cases the original text and the adaptation complement each other and touch on issues that are regionally specific. Sarah Hatchuel, Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, and Victoria Bladen have written about non-Anglophone cultures and global Shakespeare.³¹ As an example, they show how adaptations of *Macbeth* have reflected on the supernatural, issues of power, and gender roles in South Africa. Their point was that what had once been considered a marginalized and non-Anglophone cinematographic outpost had a lot to contribute to the global conversation on Shakespeare. Additionally, these specifically local adaptations have become not only acceptable, but they have also proven to be valuable for the international discourse on Shakespeare. In recent decades, it has become common practice to relocate and change the cultural, geographical, and social background of the play in order to reach out to the audience, which in most cases is not familiar with the original text, and bring the original story closer to the viewers. These regional and local adaptations are presentist in nature, since they are products of a cultural moment. *Coriolanus* would most certainly not be presented the same way in the communist China, as it will be in the United States. By the same token, the racial problem in *Othello* will be interpreted and staged diversely in different cultures. As mentioned previously, the magic in *Macbeth* is viewed and adapted differently in South Africa, Jamaica, or India than it is in Western societies. However, where there are adaptations there are also appropriations, and the challenge that presentism faces now and in the future is that of how these appropriations are changing Shakespeare. The fact of the matter is that most scholars would like to keep the discussion on film adaptations within the academia - the impact they have on students and professors. However, I would prefer to discuss the reception of these adaptations and appropriations among Millennials outside of academia across all cultures; that is, among those young people who will most likely never be exposed to the text; but will solely rely on what they get from films that the movie industry is viciously pandering to them. While I was focusing on the rise in the numbers of appropriations in comparison to adaptations, and the dangers of them since most of them do not follow the source text, Doug Lanier reminded (at the same BSA conference) that perhaps it would be wise at this moment to re-invite the question of fidelity in adaptations and what kind of fidelity is acceptable and what kind is not (textual fidelity, character fidelity). Furthermore, there is the effect of modern media that needs to be addressed in these discussions. What is it that films offer and the text does not and vice versa? Last but not least we must ask why are films almost always presentist in nature? One possible explanation is that only as such can they reach out to these new generations. This is why Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* is so successful; simply stated - young people can understand the story easily when it is related to gang violence and drugs - societal problems they understand.

Another media that needs to be addressed is the documentary. I would specifically like to draw attention to prison Shakespeare documentaries, which are becoming more and more popular. These documentaries are presentist in nature and give us a glance at the raw reception of Shakespeare's plays among people who are encountering them for the first time in their lives. They are relating to these plays in a unique way and at a personal and deep level. Their role is twofold: they are the same time participants/actors and viewers, so their catharsis is double, which is an interesting topic on its own. Some of the most popular ones are: *Shakespeare Behind Bars Series*, *Mickey B*, *Globe to Globe International Shakespeare*, *Donmar's All Female Shakespeare Trilogy*, *Shakespeare in Prison at San Quentin's*, and so on. Barry Edelstein, the Artistic Director at the Old Globe in San Diego, spoke of how imperative it is in today's society to work with "incarcerated populations, marginalized populations, disenfranchised

³¹ Hatchuel, Sarah, Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, and Victoria Bladen. (Eds.) *Shakespeare on Screen: "Macbeth."* Mont-Saint-Aignan, France: Publications des Universites de Rouen and du Harve, (2014).

populations"³² since these groups have a lot to contribute to theater and art. I would also add that if Shakespeare has taught us anything it is that that we cannot avoid the little people and the marginalized groups. Furthermore, Edelstein adds that Shakespeare and theater make them "feel more human a few minutes a week, makes them feel like they're being seen, like they matter. Theater does that: it confers humanity, it transforms, it affirms." Steve Rowland³³ on the other hand, "believes that theater, dance, writing, and visual arts build cognitive and social skills in men and women in maximum and medium security prisons." His program includes different plays, in different languages and shows how Shakespeare's plays can make a difference and can change lives; and they truly do. Dameion Brown³⁴ is in prison for severely abusing his three children (one of which is permanently disabled from the beatings). There, he found acting and he joined a Marin Shakespeare Company production. Now, after 23 years, he also teaches acting to at-risk teenagers. They say his *Othello* is quite remarkable. In addition to bringing Shakespeare closer to social outcasts, these performances bring up other topics; topics that young adults can relate to like: police brutality, domestic violence, racial prejudice, all of which are in the news daily. Brown believes that play-acting violence can prevent the real kind. The reality is that these programs, which are growing by the day, can help reform people; can bring them in touch with humanity. Rob Pensalfini³⁵ wrote about the benefit that inmates have just by performing Shakespeare, while Lanier³⁶ focused on the therapeutic and reparative power of prison Shakespeare. He urges us to re-think the utility of humanities and to engage with the reparative Shakespeare documentary, which also has a political efficacy. Although I whole-heartedly support such programs, the presentist in me has certain questions to ask like: Who is choosing Shakespeare for them? What is the role of prison Shakespeare in the present culture en general? Is it in some twisted sense a wise business move? Was Hawkes right about Shakespeare in the educational system (and now in the correctional system)? These are some questions that would need further research and explanations, since there are more and more of these programs, and documentaries; such as YouTube clips, mashups, and the numerous novels/adaptations of Shakespeare's plays such as the Hogarth series novels.

So, how is presentism doing these days? I would boldly answer: never better! If we only look at the calls for papers in the past year whether for conferences, journals, or collections of essays, we can see that there is not a field of study that did not join the discussion on the impact of current political, cultural, economic, intellectual, and ecological circumstances on texts from the past and vice versa (and this is worldwide). At this moment, presentism is the most significant and active hermeneutical approach, and this is why we, presentists, understand that we are not a part of some marginalized and ephemeral theoretical occurrence that exists solely in relation to new historicism; on the contrary, we are a part of a powerful approach that is by its nature inclusive and diverse in regards to other hermeneutical theories and approaches, and contributes equally in a broader theoretical discussion regarding the past, present, and future of texts, media, and literary theory.

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³⁵Pensalfini, Rob. "The Claims of Prison Shakespeare." In *Prison Shakespeare*, pp. 130-187. Palgrave Macmillan, London, (2016).

³⁶Paper presented at the British Shakespeare Association conference, Belfast, 14-17 June, 2018.

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