

Philology

William Shakespeare's Influence on T. S. Eliot's Early Poetry and Poetic Perception

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The paper examines William Shakespeare's influence on T.S. Eliot's early Modernist poetry. Although Eliot did not recognize the extent of Shakespeare's presence in his work, the paper argues that Shakespeare was one of the most significant and evident sources of inspiration for Eliot, who uses important figures and symbols from Shakespeare's plays in deliberate attempt to enrich his poetry with new and contrasting meanings. By observing the complex intertextual relationship between these two English authors, it becomes evident that Eliot's early poetry is not only an example of the new Modernist aesthetics of the 20th century, but also a continuation and, most importantly, transformation of the literary tradition that preceded it in the form of Shakespeare. Through the examination of Eliot's specific early poems, the paper concludes that the Modernist poet uses Shakespearean associations with parodic and contrasting purposes, therefore, the scope of modern interpretation puts the research process in dialectical and diverse framework. © 2024 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

T.S. Eliot, William Shakespeare, Modernism, English poetry

At the turn of the 20th century, the Western culture witnessed major reevaluation tendency in philosophy, history of culture, and literature. Modernist writers and theorists rejected not only the aesthetic tendencies of their immediate predecessors, but demanded a reevaluation of the history of culture as a whole, from Homer to modernity. Successfully establishing a new tradition means to start denying, however, not fully abandoning the past influences. In this respect, the paper analyzes a peculiarity of Shakespearean influence in the Modernist poetics of T.S. Eliot's early work to

demonstrate that Shakespeare is one of the most instrumental sources without which Eliot's poetic purposes cannot be properly evaluated.

Firstly, significant criticism was written about T.S. Eliot's relation to Shakespeare's work, so a new attempt of a new discussion may call for an explanation: as Eliot himself underrated the presence of Shakespeare in his work, there has not been sustained critical attention devoted to studying his poetry from Shakespearean lens. However, the more obvious excuse for writing on this subject is the inexhaustible critical potential for varied

understandings, and the ambivalence of Eliot's perception itself which gives way to multitude of interpretations.

T.S. Eliot best exercises a double relation to Shakespeare's work. Firstly, he has expressed his critical views in the essays titled "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919) and "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" (1927). Secondly, in his poetic works he is often demonstratively Shakespeare-oriented, using borrowed heterogeneous images to construct his own vision. However, it should be noted that practically nothing is left of Shakespeare per se in Eliot's Shakespearean citations. References taken from the Renaissance works, allusions, modified quotations, names of characters, borrowings of the whole dramatic situations, and other details help Eliot in constructing his own pieces of Modernist poetry. How exactly Eliot incorporates centuries old material into a new, resonant text is best explained by his often quoted 'aphorism' from 1920 essay on Philip Massinger:

„One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; a good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest“ [1].

Later, in 1947 essay on Milton, the poet provides a more matured evaluation and boldly asserts that "anyone who tries to write [...] should know that half of his energy must be exhausted in the effort to escape from the constricting toils of Shakespeare" [2]. Juxtaposing this theoretical framework with his poetry makes the extent of Eliot's Shakespearean 'theft' more explicit. His method of referencing Elizabethan poetry (tearing it off from the remote source, as he calls it above) is a way to compose a new, modern, creative unity.

It is most reasonable to explore this influence and reflection in Eliot's early poetry and specifi-

cally from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915). In his correspondence, Ezra Pound disapproves of a famous Shakespearean episode of the poem: "I dislike the paragraph about Hamlet, but it is an early and cherished bit and T.E. won't give it up" [3].

Saying that Eliot knew what effect he was trying to have on the reader by not giving it up would be an understatement about one of the most meticulous writers, but the critical appraisal of more than a century has proven that this paragraph is, indeed, the most indispensable part of the whole poem. The Hamlet unit of the text provides the narrator's juxtaposition of himself against distinct Shakespearean characters. Apart from perceiving the protagonist as a sort of failed, anti-Hamlet, the reader who is aware of the source will automatically allude 'ridiculous' 'attendant lord' to Polonius. Meanwhile, upon seeing himself as less than a prince, Prufrock also identifies as "almost, at times, the Fool". Cleanth Brooks draws an insightful explanation on this idea: „Prufrock...knows that if he corresponds to any character in [Hamlet] it is the sententious, empty, old Polonius, the sycophantic Rosenkrantz, or the silly, foppish Osric. Perhaps – though here is no fool in Hamlet“ [4]. It is true that almost every character from Hamlet falls in the different characterization given in the poem's above quoted paragraph, but it should also be noted that, contrary to what Brooks says, although there is no living fool in Hamlet, the dead one – Yorick – also qualifies for the place. As in the given paragraph from the poem, Eliot capitalizes only the noun 'Fool' and it is emphasized that this role cannot be taken by just any Hamlet character, but only by the fool, Yorick. Elaborating on this reference gives the reader a more in-depth awareness of the revolving themes and the tone of the whole poem. While holding the jester's skull, Hamlet reminisces about Yorick: „Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on roar?“ (Act 5, Scene 1). This corresponds to the leitmotif of

Eliot's poem where the narrator is baffled by meaninglessness of life, a phenomenon that he measures „in coffee spoons“. The theme of imminent death is also underscored with Yorick's association. In Hamlet, the jester is identified with his remaining head, skull, to be more precise. Similarly, throughout the poem, Prufrock obsesses over the idea of people observing his bald, white head and finally seeing it cut off. Furthermore, the poem's famous "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" can be alluded to Hamlet's madness episode from the tragedy. Although futile, Prufrock seems to be cognizant of his role as a Shakespearean jester and the death representation in the poem („And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, And in short, I was afraid“) is a harbinger of narrator's own demise too, turning him into a skull, a cut off head, „almost...the Fool“.

To round the associative link, the criticism also often seems to neglect Shakespearean reading of the poem's epigraph as it is mainly, objectively so, understood within the original Dantean context. Taken from *Inferno* (Canto 27, 61-65), the epigraph details the shadowy flame of desperate Guido da Montefeltro that boldly converses with living Dante about the other world and the need to sustain his reputation among the living; this narrative can be read in parallel to Hamlet's encounter with King Hamlet's shadow, especially when we consider that Prufrock's "overwhelming question" (the answer of which is anxiously sought, but never found in the poem) could be the question of whether the ghost is telling him the truth. Thus, by framing the poem and its epigraph with evocative details from Hamlet (next to its infernal original source), the themes of death, anxiety, and isolation are reinforced more intensely.

Therefore, "Prufrock" is one of the proofs that twentieth-century literature seems to be trying to write new soliloquies for Hamlet. More precisely, in the context of revaluation tendency, twentieth-century literature attempts to revive the old and create the new. Shakespeare acts as a self-dramati-

zing tool for Eliot's early poem. As he asserts in the essay on "Hamlet" (1919), "Such a mind had Goethe, who made of Hamlet a Werther; and such had Coleridge, who made of Hamlet a Coleridge" [5], as for Eliot himself, it is evident that he made of Hamlet a modern, traumatized lyrical hero, but in an attempt to escape from Shakespeare, his references are far more deeply interwoven than those from Dante's work, for instance.

The use of Shakespearean references intensifies with the progression of Eliot's poetic career as in the collection *Poems 1920* the reader encounters multifaceted epigraphs and allusions from various plays. For instance, Eliot borrows from *Measure for Measure* to create a framing epigraph for "Gerontion"; "Ode" takes the epigraph from *Coriolanus* and "Burbank with a Baedker: Bleistein with a Cigar" has lengthiest Shakespearean quotations and functional allusions. The latter poem begins with an epigraph, which, compared to other epigraphs in Eliot's poetry, is the longest and the most informative. It contains excerpts from six different literary sources, written directly about Venice, or in one way or another, are related to this city. "Goats and monkeys", mentioned in the epigraph, is the first Shakespearean association of the poem. Enraged by these words, Othello turns to Lodovico after being told that he should return to Venice. Obviously, the motif of arriving (returning) to Venice is emphasized here, and since the 'arriving' figure in this case is Othello, he is associatively identified with the American tourist Burbank, who also arrives in Venice in Eliot's poem. More tangible Shakespearean association is evident when Burbank "crossed a little bridge" – Eliot is alluding to Rialto bridge, the area where usury, or moneylending, was practiced by Jews in medieval Venice, and this serves as a direct reference to the Merchant of Venice. Meanwhile, there is another significant associative motif in the poem – Shylock's Jewishness, which is displayed in the title in the form of using a Jewish last name – Bleistein, who is ironically "underneath the lot / Money in

furs” and unlike Shylock, is not a mere money-lender, but an internationally renowned businessman. Furthermore, the poem’s emphasis on a Jewish eye (“A lustress protrusive eye / Stares from the protozoic slime”) evokes the episode in which Shylock justifies himself “Hath not a Jew eyes?” (Act 3, Scene 3). The reader encounters other references from Othello, The Phoenix and the Turtle, Anthony and Cleopatra, but it is Merchant of Venice that Eliot employs in order to create a disguised Shakespearean counterpart, set in modern-day Venice. As for the poetic purpose, apart from creating a sense of cultural richness and complexity, Shakespearean frame of this poem appears a satirical attitude to the cultural, social, sexual and financial decadence of modernity [6].

In “The Waste Land” (1922), juxtaposition serves as a system of finding meaning and connectivity in the world. It is in this sense that Eliot uses a sort of collage technique as a means of finding unifying logic within the paradoxical context of the twentieth century and Shakespeare plays an integral part in his disintegrated poetics. The most prominent and widely discussed references are taken from Hamlet – the line “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” echoes the churchyard episode of Act 5, Scene 1 from the tragedy; the closing line of “A Game of Chess” episode (“good night ladies...”) is borrowed directly from Ophelia’s speech in Act 4, Scene 5; the symbol of the Fisher King which alludes to the legend of wounded, impotent Arthurian king can be connected to impotent King Claudius, another symbol of decay and corruption; however, considering all the references to Renaissance poetry that are found in “The Waste Land”, the work most frequently referred to is *The Tempest* as its allusions are equally abound in all five episodes of the poem. The most striking references which introduce this source are in the tarot reading scene, where Madame Sosostris describes “the drowned Phoenician sailor”. The poet directly quotes from Ariel’s song (“those are the pearls that were his

eyes”) and considering the context of the mentioned episode from Shakespeare’s play, death-in-life motif turns into illusory death or death followed by rebirth. In this respect, Eliot employs Shakespeare’s play as a metaphor to depict the conditions of “The Waste Land” and simultaneously as *The Tempest* is a work which celebrates a sense of wonder, many of its qualities are juxtaposed with the hopelessness and banality of modern age. Ironically, all the fragmented frames from this play have a different poetic purpose too: they hint at possible positive change. In the collage where referenced Prospero corresponds with various other characters of the poem (The Fisher King, most resonantly), vengeance can be redeemed by forgiveness. As power of reconciliation and new beginning underlie its main Shakespearean source, “The Waste Land” becomes not that apocalyptic as it might seem at the first encounter. Eliot creates, or infers, a chance for survival and redemption, which would not be possible without using *The Tempest* as a scattered, but unifying principle of the poem, perfectly corresponding with the last line – “Shantih shantih shantih” (“The peace which comes from understanding”, as translated by Eliot). Peace in the poem truly comes after understanding the significant intertextual layers that the poet uses where Shakespeare plays one of the most integral roles.

Indeed it will be justified to conclude that through Shakespearean intertextuality, Eliot’s poetry reserves for itself unending potential for new interpretations and more in-depth analysis of significant Modernist techniques. In the scope and nature of this article and brief exploration of Eliot’s prominent early poems, it has made evident that Shakespearean references are more deeply interwoven than other sources. Significance and purposefulness of Shakespeare’s adaptation is made obvious: Eliot employs Shakespeare’s citations for parody, which is his major mode. It also becomes evident that the gloomy and skeptical, often sarcastic muse of the poet is far from harmonizing

with the Renaissance qualities of Shakespeare's world.

Shakespeare criticism continues to be a valuable field of study that deepens our appreciation of one of the greatest writers in the English language and provides original insights into the human experience that are relevant to our lives today. In modern times, Georgian academic ground has become especially fertile in this direction, evidenced by the monumental work by Prof. Elguja Khintibidze (fundamental study on the traces of Georgian epic "The Man in the Panther Skin" in Shakespeare's literary legacy and Shakespearean sources). To quote Eliot, indeed, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" [7].

Therefore, juxtaposing the work of the greatest English Renaissance poet with Modernism and T.S. Eliot provides insight into the development of English literature and a reflection of culture's changing values. One gets the impression (especially when reading his early poetry) that Eliot's poems are not written by a "muse", but by an infinitely sophisticated mind, which wears the mask of a muse from time to time in his poetry and presents itself as inspiration. In this respect, Shakespeare is one of the most instrumental masks, demonstrating how crucial he was to Eliot's imagination and poetic purposes.

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ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახ. თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, ჰუმანიტარულ მეცნიერებათა ფაკულტეტი, დასავლეთ ევროპული ენებისა და ლიტერატურის ინსტიტუტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ე. ხინთიბიძის მიერ)

ნაშრომის მიზანია მე-20 საუკუნის ერთ-ერთი ყველაზე ცნობილი პოეტისა და თეორეტიკოსის ტ.ს. ელიოტის ადრეული შემოქმედების რენესანსული ჰუმანიზმის გადაფასების კონტექსტში მოქცევა, რომელშიც უილიამ შექსპირი უმთავრეს გავლენასა და წყაროს წარმოადგენს. შექსპირისეული ასოციაციებისა და ალუზიების გამოყენება ელიოტის პოეზიის ერთ-ერთი ძირითადი მახასიათებელია და შედარების საფუძველზე გაანალიზებულია ის რთული ურთიერთ-

დამოკიდებულება, რაც მდიდარ ინტერტექსტუალურ კავშირს ქმნის ორ, საუკუნეებითა და სხვადასხვა ლიტერატურული ტრადიციით დაშორებულ მწერალს შორის. შექსპირის პიესებიდან აღებული მნიშვნელოვანი სახე-სიმბოლოების ადრეულ პოემებში გამოიყენება ელიოტის მიზანმიმართულ მცდელობას წარმოადგენს, რათა მისი პოეზია ახალი და კონტრასტული მნიშვნელობებით გამდიდრდეს. ელიოტისა და შექსპირის რთული ინტერტექსტუალური ურთიერთობის შესწავლით ჩანს, თუ როგორაა ელიოტის ადრეული პოეზია არა მხოლოდ მე-20 საუკუნის ახალი ესთეტიკის ნიმუში, არამედ გაგრძელება და ტრანსფორმაცია იმ ლიტერატურული ტრადიციისა, რომელიც მას წინ უძღოდა შექსპირის სახით. ელიოტის ადრეული ლექსების განხილვით აშკარა ხდება, რომ პოეტი შექსპირისეულ ასოციაციებს პაროდიული და კონტრასტული დანიშნულებით იყენებს, ასეთი ინტერპრეტაცია კი კვლევის პროცესს თანამედროვე, დიალექტიკურ და მრავალფეროვან ჩარჩოში სვამს.

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