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# Life with the Bard - Shakespeare and the Shaping of the Early Modern Self

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## **Life with the Bard—Shakespeare and the Shaping of the Early Modern Self**

First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Noriko Sumimoto for her very generous invitation to come over to Japan to study at Meisei's wonderful library and for her invitation to speak before you. I am very honoured. I would like to thank her also for providing simultaneous translation of my talk and apologize for not being able to give this talk in Japanese.

For the past five years I have been working on a book which hopefully one day will tell the story of who Shakespeare's first readers were—those who bought his first printed plays, those who took notes in them, or copied extracts from his plays in their notebooks. The period I'm focusing on starts at the end of the sixteenth century, with the development of a market for plays in print, and ends in the eighteenth century, when the market for playbooks had gained considerable ground and when many different editions of Shakespeare became available.

So, might you ask, why concentrate on readers of Shakespeare, and not on playgoers? Well, first of all because, with the gradual rise of print editions of Shakespeare, the book – in the period I'm concerned with – gradually became the most frequent way in which people became acquainted with Shakespeare.

Thus, early generations of readers and publishers contributed to the rise and fame of Shakespeare as a literary author—in other words, they are partly the reason why we continue to read Shakespeare today, why we go and see his plays and why we are assembled here today so near to one of the world's greatest collection of First Folios and early English books, at the Kodama Memorial Library of Meisei University.

Most of you will have at least one edition of Shakespeare at home, which you enjoy reading and today what I would like to do is tell you more about what it was like to buy a printed play of Shakespeare in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and how these books changed early modern people's lives, or accompanied them in their daily lives.

This should give you more of a sense of perspective on your own connexion to Shakespeare, whether you enjoy seeing his plays, or reading them, or both of course. This is why I've entitled my talk, "Life with the Bard—Shakespeare and the Shaping of the Early Modern Self", because I believe that becoming acquainted with Shakespeare can and did change lives.

So who were Shakespeare's early modern readers? Well, in the very first collected edition of Shakespeare's works—Shakespeare's First Folio, published in 1623 [SLIDE] —we can

find an indication: “From the most able, to him that can but spell: There you are number'd,” wrote John Heminges and Henry Condell—Shakespeare’s fellow actors—in their preface “To the great Variety of Readers”. [SLIDE] This statement may appear excessive and yet reading and writing were taught as separate skills in Shakespeare’s day and one could be able to read without ever having learnt to write.

That being said, literacy levels were obviously much lower than ours. There could be huge regional, social and gender differences. For instance, in London only 22% of the men could not sign their names at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The aristocracy and the clergy were of course generally more privileged. Yet 70% of London tradesmen could read and write compared to 50% in the north of England. 33% of rural weavers were equally skilled.

Furthermore, there were great gender inequalities, for in the same period 90% of women could not sign their names. Readers tended to be male and urban (many lived in London). They were mainly members of the middle class, the aristocracy and the clergy, even if some men whose profession did not require them to be literate could read. The skills of those people varied enormously and their reading was probably more for pragmatic purposes than for their own entertainment.

There was nothing that resembled the mass market for books to which we have been accustomed since the nineteenth century. None the less, the early modern book market was far from negligible and the market for playbooks showed some signs of vigour. Indeed, before the publication of the 1623 folio of Shakespeare’s works, fifty-eight quarto and octavo editions of his plays had appeared in print. If a typical print-run of a book might have been 800 copies, this would give us a figure of nearly 50,000 books in circulation—which was far from modest, as the population of London around 1600 was about 200,000 people.

Religious books dominated the print market and the average market share of playbooks during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods remained just below 4%. Yet reprint rates indicate that printed drama fared well on the book market. From 1579 to 1625 the reprint rate of playbooks was about twice that of printed sermons, or of treatises. On the list of the eleven best selling plays for the period 1576-1625, one finds three Shakespeare plays: *Henry IV, Part I* (7 editions), *Richard III* (5 editions), *Richard II* (5 editions).

Buyers were not necessarily wealthy, even if the editions remained beyond the means of many. Single play editions would cost about six pence without a binding. Shakespeare’s First Folio was expensive in comparison—it cost about fifteen shillings unbound when it first came out. Binding raised its price by at least a pound. To get a more accurate sense of what these

sums represented for their prospective buyers, one should remember that the prices in public playhouses varied from one penny to six pence, the closed amphitheatres being more expensive (from six pence to two shillings).

During the same period, an industrious artisan made about six shillings a week, while an agricultural labourer earned only half as much. Food was notoriously expensive and could cost up to six pence a day—the equivalent of an agricultural labourer’s daily earnings. In sum, the price of printed drama (particularly of single editions) was not totally out of reach, although the cost of even a single edition represented quite an investment for those on more modest incomes.

Let me give you now a few examples of early buyers [SLIDES]:

The earliest known reference to someone acquiring a Shakespeare work can be found in the diary of a London civil servant, Richard Stonley. On Tuesday 12 June 1593, Stonley (who was about 73 years old) recorded in his diary that he had paid 6 pence for Shakespeare’s recently published *Venus and Adonis* (“the Venus & Adhonay per Shakspere”, Folger MS V.a.460, f. 9r).

A younger reader—a knight, landowner and book collector by the name of Sir Edward Dering—recorded in his account book that on 5 December 1623 (at the age of 25), he bought two copies of Shakespeare’s First Folio, which were probably bound and thus cost two pounds. He also bought a copy of Ben Jonson’s Works for 9 shillings (it was probably unbound) and had some individual play editions bound in two separate volumes for 2 shillings.

Gradually, in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and despite the relatively high price of printed plays, there came to be more readers of Shakespeare’s plays than spectators. While the stage and the publishing world continued to influence each other, books began to shape an increasingly large number of people’s perception of Shakespeare’s works. This was also a moment when Shakespeare’s printed works began to accompany people in their daily lives, helping them sometimes on their journey through existence.

To illustrate my point, and for reasons of time, I will now concentrate on five short but very significant examples.

Often partial and fragmentary, these moments when Shakespeare and his works begin to form the thread of a narrative about the self can nevertheless give us a glimpse of what it meant for an early modern person *to live with Shakespeare*. Alternatively, these narratives point to ways in which Shakespeare’s works were transformed as they were taken on an increasingly large number of individual trajectories.

In the winter of 1663, John Ward, vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's native town, wrote the following entry in his diary: "Remember to peruse Shakespears plays and bee versd in *them* that I may not bee ignorant in *that* matter:" (Folger MS V.a.292, f. 140r). [2 SLIDES]

This entry is typical of a man constantly seeking self-improvement in many different fields of knowledge, one who made numerous notes about books to read and things to see. Shakespeare was another stone in the edifice of knowledge that Ward was trying to build for himself. In many ways, his diary was used to jog his memory, as is indicated by the phrase "remember to", which keeps recurring in his writings.

Equally obsessive but far less methodical than John Ward, Samuel Pepys—a seventeenth-century naval official records various encounters with Shakespeare. [SLIDE] The entries in his now famous diaries which concern the playwright are linked to his passion for the theatre and for book collecting but some also betray personal anxieties.<sup>1</sup>

Among all the plays which Pepys claims to have seen, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night* are those which he disliked most, while *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* appear to be his favourites. In October 1660, he goes to see a performance of *Othello*, which he enjoys very much. A few years later, in August 1666, as he is travelling to the town of Deptford, he takes a copy of *Othello* to read with him. However, this time his opinion of the play as a book is far less favourable: "it seems a mean thing", he writes.

Pepys had in fact bought several Shakespeare editions in July 1664. In November of that year, he was learning Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy and was trying to recite it without the help of the book. In his entry for 15 August 1665, and in the midst of an outbreak of plague, he mentions his dreams and his fear of death. At this moment, the lines from *Hamlet* he had learned the year before come to mind and allow him to express not only his fears but also his will to defeat death somehow: "what a happy thing it would be if when we are in our graves (as Shakespeare resembles it) we could dream, and dream but such dreams as this, that we should not need to be so fearful of death as we are this plague-time".<sup>2</sup>

Shakespeare is associated with happier times later on in Pepys's diary. In May 1668, he enjoys a performance of Davenant and Dryden's adaptation of *The Tempest* and wants to

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<sup>1</sup> Megan Matchinske notes that "what is striking about Pepys's diaries is how curiously ahistorical they are. His entries map a pattern of iteration that downplays singular events to concentrate instead on running sequences" ("Serial Identity: History, Gender, and Form in the Diary Writing of Lady Anne Clifford", in *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England*, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Mynors Bright and John Warrington, eds., *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 3 vols. (London: Dent, 1953), vol. 1, pp. 102, 118, 173, 190, 214, 236, 339 ; vol. 2, pp. 27, 67, 152, 309-10 ; vol. 3, pp. 223, 226.

know the lyrics and the tune of Ferdinand's song ("Go thy way") taken up by Ariel in Act III, scene 3 of the play and composed by John Banister. Four days later, he manages to get the lyrics of the song which he had not been able to copy during the performance.

Shakespeare is part of Pepys's broader social activities, of his everyday terrain of theatre going and book collecting. Yet Shakespeare's works are more than a passing presence in his life. As much as they are part and parcel of the diverse flow of Pepys's fads and mundane desires, for brief moments Shakespeare's lines also allow him to translate some of his deepest anxieties into words. In this way, Pepys's determination to memorize passages and transcribe the song can be interpreted as efforts to fix and internalize elements of the on-going flux of time—a project which is of course at the heart of diary keeping.

A variant of these processes is when Shakespeare and his works allow individuals to construct parts of a life story. The narrative of how they first came into contact with Shakespeare is used to describe the self's emotional, artistic and intellectual development. Shakespeare's words are not internalized to add meaning to life this time, it is a pre-existent memory of Shakespeare which is accessed and reinvented to allow the self to tell its story. Moreover, even philological interests in the origin and meaning of some of Shakespeare's words become opportunities for individuals to construct their own origins textually.

In the commonplace book of the poet Henry James Pye, which was compiled around 1770-1800, one finds a number of notes on Shakespeare [Folger MS M.b.16].<sup>3</sup> [SLIDE] While these are often of a critical or philological nature and would later be used to write Pye's *Sketches on Various Subjects: Moral, Literary, and Political* (1796), there are personal biographical elements which do not appear in the printed work.

At one point in his commonplace book Pye embarks on a biography of his childhood years in the style, he writes, of Montaigne's essays: "an Account of my own Studies a la Mutain [Montaigne]" (f. 145r). [SLIDE] The reading of Shakespeare figures prominently in his account: "I had read Shakespear before I read Pope's Homer" (ibid). Even his philological comments on a number of difficult passages in Shakespeare are interspersed with memories of his childhood and of how he first understood words.

For instance, to clarify the meaning of the word "gilt" in *Twelfth Night* and *Coriolanus*, Pye recalls the moment of his first aural encounter with the word [SLIDE]:

The word gilt occurs as a substantive by Shakespeare &

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<sup>3</sup> Pye's commonplace book was a copy of the prepared blank-book—with engraved title and printed introduction and skeleton index—published by John Bell: *Bell's common-place book, form'd generally upon the principles recommended and practised by Mr. Locke* (London: for John Bell, 1770).

is synonymous with gilding & this the commentators all tell you is obsolete,  
 it may be so, but when I was a boy I never heard leaf gold called  
 by any other name than gilt & I remember particularly the first time I  
 heard the expression ‘Silver gilt’ [...] (f. 32v).

“I always from a boy” and “when I was a boy” (f. 31r; f. 32v) are expressions which tie his adult understanding of Shakespeare to his first childhood encounter with words, or with the playwright’s printed works. Pye also explores his family origins and carefully traces his literary lineage back to one of his ancestors who happened to be a friend of one of Shakespeare’s fellow playwrights: “Sir Robert Pye the elder [1585–1662] was a friend of Ben Johnson [sic] as appears by the following lines” (f. 136r).

As we have seen, Pye’s so-called commonplace book has many of the features of a diary. In fact, the barriers between these manuscript genres are often loose and it is difficult, or indeed unproductive, to limit life-writing to specific genres, as the traces left by selfhood in the early modern period are manifold. In this way, letter writing is an activity where the self constantly reinvents its relation to others. While letters may highlight the circulation of news, knowledge or ideas through social networks, some may also reveal how Shakespeare came to be interwoven in the fabric of social relations.

In a letter dated 15 December 1775 and sent from his camp on Winter Hill (on the outskirts of Boston) to a “Miss Robinson”, British-born revolutionary general Charles Lee (1731-1782) wrote: [SLIDE]

Have you, my D[ea]r Friend, read Shakespear over and  
 over again? can you repeat any of his striking passages?  
 are you not in raptures with him? I beg you will at least  
 read a scene of him every day, and get at least a dozen lines  
 by heart — for heaven’s sake, who has favour’d you so much,  
 do not throw away too much of your time in gossiping with every  
 Drone and Lounger who is so kind when his dinner or supper  
 is not ready to make a sauntering house of your room —.4

The letter continues in the same semi-patronizing tone recommending to Lee’s would-be *fiancée* the appropriate use of Shakespeare and other authors on social occasions. [SLIDE] In the space of the letter, Lee is arguably imagining a way of building a more exclusive relationship with his correspondent. The letter is a reflection of Lee’s genuine passion for

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4 Folger MS Y.c.1374 (2). Winter Hill is in Cambridge, Massachusetts and thus on the outskirts of Boston.

Shakespeare and literature.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it is also constructed around an opposition between the world of the self—where Shakespeare and literature may be memorized and internalized—and the social world, which Lee sees as intruding upon Miss Robinson’s privacy (where he no doubt wanted pride of place).

“What one says of oneself is always poetry”, wrote Ernest Renan in his memoirs.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is not entirely surprising that poets and poetry should figure so prominently in biographical writings. Shakespeare’s works helped Charles Lee spin his web of seduction. Indeed, to be “in raptures” with Shakespeare, as Lee writes to Miss Robinson, is to be potentially enamoured with the self who makes that statement, that is, Lee himself.

While Lee thought highly of moments spent reading Shakespeare, for less confident individuals, the pleasure taken in this activity was difficult to translate into words. Indeed, some early modern readers were trying to understand what meaning the activity of reading might have in the otherwise continuous flow of accidents, events and interruptions that everyday life inevitably brings.

Mary Tickell, *née* Linley (1758–1787) was the wife of the playwright and satirist Richard Tickell. She also corresponded frequently with her sister, Elizabeth Ann Sheridan (*née* Linley), who was married to the playwright and politician Richard Sheridan.<sup>7</sup> [SLIDE: The Linley Sisters] Mary’s letters to her sister in fact form a journal of everyday events and were written on a daily basis. A number of these are preserved today by the Folger Shakespeare Library, in Washington, DC, and although Mary did not always date them, the Folger letters appear to span the period between 1785 and 1787.

These letters are precious because they combine two perspectives. On the one hand, they actually describe the moments when Shakespeare was read. These are of course fleeting moments but they give us some idea of how the reading of Shakespeare could fit into some

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<sup>5</sup> Lee in fact often quoted Shakespeare in his letters. Writing from Williamsburg on April 10, 1776 to Robert Morris, a member of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, he confessed: “I know not where to turn, where to fix myself [...] in short I can only act by surmise, and I may surmise wrong - I may be in the North, when as Richard the third says, I should serve my Sovereign in the West” (Folger MS Y.c.1374 [1]). Lee was a well-educated man; he had been enrolled at an early age in an academy in Switzerland. He was proficient in Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, and German. See: Paul David Nelson, “Lee, Charles”; <http://www.anb.org/articles/01/01-00506.html>; *American National Biography Online* Feb. 2000. Accessed 20 March 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Renan, preface to *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, cited in Skura, *Tudor Autobiography: Listening for Inwardness*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> On the two sisters, see the following *ODNB* articles: W. F. Rae, ‘Tickell, Richard (1751–1793)’, rev. Rebecca Mills, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn., May 2010 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27431>, accessed 10 May 2011]. Suzanne Aspden, ‘Linley [Sheridan], Elizabeth Ann (1754–1792)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn., May 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25364>, accessed 10 May 2011].

individuals' lives. On the other hand, they show their author reflecting on the activity of letter writing and of life-writing.

How indeed does one report on one's reading and how does that activity fit into the fabric of life itself? These are two questions which Mary Tickell's letters ask. Life-writing is by essence a self-reflexive genre and it is thus logical that the writer should consider the textual means employed to construct her life narrative—a narrative which is precisely employed as a means of self-discovery.

Revealingly, the first instance of a reading of Shakespeare is described as a communal activity, but one to which Mary Tickell seemingly regrets not being able to lend appropriate value. Probably from Ipswich (a town in south east England) in 1785, she writes [SLIDE]

my prospect of the  
 Day is confin'd to seeing him take Horse after Dinner  
 and reading Shakespears Historical Plays after tea  
 to Bill [her brother] & Jane – not much to be made of that  
 you'll say – so I won't waste my Paper in mere Words  
 but wait tomorrows hidden Fate - (f. 131r)

The next mention of Shakespeare is found a couple of pages later in the same letter [SLIDE]. What dominates in this instance is the unfortunate interruption of the communal reading caused by irruptions from the outside world—her husband and a friend arriving. The interruption was not the first apparently:

Sunday Morning

Just as I had sent Bill into the Study for the 6<sup>th</sup>:

Vol: of Shakespear, in came T [her husband, Mr Tickell]– with the Sieur Reid, & poor  
 Henry the sixth was laid on the Shelf once more, - (f. 133r)

Another letter of possibly the same year, written “Monday” at “4 o clock”, shows that reading Shakespeare could also be a private activity for Mary Tickell: “so adieu we shall have one more walk & I go to my Shakespear in the Evening” (f. 139r). However, elements in the correspondence indicate that the letters she received from her sister—which she calls “journals”, as they are basically diary-like—could be read aloud as much as Shakespeare and other literary authors were read in the presence of members of the family (see ff. 279r-v). Shakespeare was a presence which accompanied the lives of these individuals.

While these moments were no doubt enriching and elevating, individuals sometimes had trouble expressing the value of the experience in precise words. This was no doubt because they were struggling through their letter writing to transform their everyday experiences into

something that could be shared textually with others and that could also lend some sense to what they were living on a personal basis.

Mary Tickell wanted to produce “a good journal”. Yet she admitted being defeated at times by what she felt was the humdrum nature of her existence [SLIDE]:

My Life now is so very unvaried  
 that it is really impossible to dignify it into  
 any lose sequence – I’m sure for these last  
 three Days there has not been a quarter  
 of an hours difference in them. (17 November 1786, f. 297r)

Her sense of partial failure is common to many other readers. Selfhood is constructed through material, social, intellectual and aesthetic encounters. Books, diaries, journals, letters bear witness to these processes and the examples we have studied previously indicate that life and the material text of authors such as Shakespeare were intertwined in ways that not every individual could easily grasp.

How could Mary Tickell and others hope to account fully for that? As she wrote in December 1786 [SLIDE]: “[I] know from experience how averse a quiet Life of reading working & walking is to the quick varying accidents wch: are the Life & Soul of a good Journal” (f. 318v).

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For two characters in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), Shakespeare “is a part of an Englishman’s constitution”, as indeed “we all talk Shakespeare”.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in some way, Shakespeare’s rise to fame as a dramatist went hand in hand with the emergence of that elusive figure—the modern self.

As I’ve tried to suggest in this talk, Shakespeare became part of individuals’ lives and his works were caught in the complex and dynamic exchanges between the intertwined spheres of the material and the intellectual, the private and the social, the mundane and the symbolic.

It is often considered today that Shakespeare’s works can only truly come alive on stage. This is accurate in many ways, but the life of these plays on stage is only possible because the texts first existed as books. From our modern perspective also, reading is considered to be an activity that is cut off from the world of everyday concerns. For us, it is as if the reading of

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<sup>8</sup> Henry Crawford and Edmund Bertram make these statements respectively in a scene of the novel (*Mansfield Park*, ed. John Wiltshire [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], vol. 3, chap. 3, pp. 390-91).

Shakespeare and of literature can only have an effect on life *after* the book is closed. Yet, as we have seen, all these assumptions are qualified, if not contradicted, by early modern readers' forms of engagement with Shakespeare's text *and* with the world around them.

There is life in old books and manuscripts in the sense that it is possible to reconstruct the experience of reading Shakespeare from the traces and empirical evidence left in early books and manuscripts, even if we always have to remind ourselves that such reconstruction can only be incomplete and is certainly not devoid of subjectiveness. Moreover, what is striking in the evidence we've briefly studied is the closeness between the reading experience and the immediate intellectual *and* mundane life of these early modern readers.

Not everyone was looking for answers in Shakespeare, but nearly all of these readers were at least developing a textual identity and in some cases what could be called "a stylistics of existence".<sup>9</sup> If it is true that, as Charles Taylor wrote, "we are only selves insofar as we move in a certain space of questions", Shakespeare may have been particularly appropriate because of his ability to wrestle through drama with fundamental human dilemmas, while avoiding dogmatic positions in an era when debates were otherwise so polarized and heated.<sup>10</sup> And is this not largely for these qualities that we continue to like him and to read his works today?

Thank you so much for your attention!

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault coins the concept in *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), esp. pp. 71 and 192.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, repr. 2001), p. 34.