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# “THE SECRET OF PERPETUAL LIFE”: VIRGINIA WOOLF’S SHAKESPEARE

by

MARLENE DIRSCHAUER

## Introduction: Entering her father’s library

The seeds of Virginia Woolf’s career as a writer and critic were sown in her father’s library. From an early age, she was allowed the “free run of a large and quite unexpurgated library. [...] Read what you like,” Woolf later remembers her father telling her – and read she did (*The Captain’s Death Bed* 73). As Alice Fox notes, Woolf “was already set on a rigorous course of reading by the time of the first diary, when she was fifteen. The sheer numbers are impressive, and the difficulty of the works might have staggered readers years her senior” (2). Shakespeare’s plays held a special place among the many books she read. As Woolf’s autobiographical writings suggest, he was part of the family’s intellectual inventory, and his works were read and quoted regularly. Woolf’s childhood and teenage encounters with the poet were the beginning of what would become a lifelong engagement with his works. She read and re-read Shakespeare throughout her life, and both her fiction and non-fiction are shot through with Shakespearean echoes and references. Her reading notes “cover over twenty of Shakespeare’s plays, a few times recording two separate readings; and it is clear that notes on other readings once existed” (Fox 19). In fact, among the many writers that inspired and shaped her work, Shakespeare might be the single most important influence. Woolf counted herself among the “company of worshippers” (*Letters I* 45), and more than once pictured Shakespeare as a kind of larger-than-literature figure:

Evidently the pliancy of his mind was so complete that he could furbish out any train of thought; &, relaxing lets fall a shower of such unregarded flowers. Why then should anyone else attempt to write. This is not ‘writing’ at all. Indeed, I could say that Shre [sic] surpasses literature altogether, if I knew what I meant. (Woolf, *Diary III* 300-301)

However, her assessment of the poet was no blind bardolatry. Woolf comments on Shakespeare’s major characters that they “might have been cut with a pair of scissors – as far as mere humanity goes” (*Letters I* 45). She also privately finds *Othello* too wordy (*Diary III* 183), wonders whether “Shakespeare spoil[s] his psychology on account of the play” (*Letters V* 447), and states that after reading Milton, even Shakespeare “would seem a little troubled, personal, hot & imperfect” (*Diary I* 193). Still, she was perpetually drawn to him. If she once wrote about her brother that Shakespeare was the “place where he got the measure of the daily world. He took his bearings there; and sized us up from that standard” (Woolf, *Moments* 142), then to Woolf, Shakespeare was the place where she got the measure of literature. She took her bearings there; and sized all other writers, including herself, up from that standard.

While the hours Woolf spent behind books certainly laid the foundation for, and would continue to shape her own writing, her reading also had to compensate for what she did *not* have: unlike her brothers, she lacked a formal education. Given how much she owed to books, it is not surprising that she would later argue that “[l]iterature is no one’s private ground; literature is common ground” (Woolf, *Collected Essays II* 181), and that she would conceive of literature as a democratic space: “One may think about reading as much as one chooses, but no one is going to lay down laws about it. Here in this room, if nowhere else, we breathe the air of freedom. Here simple and learned, man and woman are alike” (Woolf, *Selected Essays* 63). Woolf’s appraisal of the egalitarian character of literature is in stark contrast to her critique of the patriarchal institution of the library as expressed in *A Room of One’s Own*:

[...] here I was actually at the door which leads to the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction (*A Room* 7)

Thus, Woolf’s definition of literature as a “common ground” must be taken with a pinch of salt – especially when it comes to Shakespeare. The Shakespeare that Woolf first inherited from the literary world represented by her father and brother was one that firmly lay in the hands of male readers and critics, a fact that threatened to stifle the very “air of freedom” she would come to associate with reading. Paradoxically, then, Shakespeare could simultaneously be the freest, and the least available of poets to a woman writer of the early twentieth century. This essay claims that Woolf’s liberating Shakespeare from the grip of patriarchy for her own sake, was beneficial to them both.

First, I argue that because Woolf lacked the authority that came with ‘inheriting’ Shakespeare, she circumvented the politics of the paternal line by making him her contemporary. Insisting, again and again, not only on the timeliness, but on the ‘nowness’ of Shakespeare, was a way of making him more accessible to herself. Secondly, I show that Woolf shifted the focus from “Shakespeare as a man” (which, tellingly, is the title of her father’s essay on the poet) to Shakespeare as the creator of a language that she was free to tap into, explore, and transform. The idea that Woolf’s feminist appropriations of the poet and his works ultimately not only served herself, but Shakespeare, too, will underly both strands of my argument.

### **Leaving her father’s library: A Will of her own**

Growing up as a girl who experienced firsthand the educational inequality between the sexes left Woolf with a sense of inadequacy that even the free access to her father’s library could never entirely make up for. She felt her lack most acutely when comparing herself to her brother Thoby, who was one and a half years her senior, and whose intellectual education was of particular interest to their father (Woolf, *Moments* 119). The two siblings, “attracted by some common admiration,” often discussed Shakespeare (Woolf, *Moments* 142). Decades later, Woolf wrote about her brother that he “had consumed Shakespeare, somehow or other, by himself. He had possessed himself of it,

in his large clumsy way” (*Moments* 142-43). She describes Thoby as “ruthless; exasperating; downing me, overwhelming me” in their arguments, and observes how he seemed to her “equipped; as if placing it all. I felt (not only then) that he knew his own place; and relished his inheritance” (Woolf, *Moments* 142). Woolf’s portrait of her brother resonates with the broader argument she makes in *A Room of One’s Own*, where she points to the inequality of opportunity between the sexes when addressing the received idea that “women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare” (42). Her choice of words to describe her brother’s relation to Shakespeare – “consume,” “possess” – indicates the male claim, if not monopoly on Shakespeare as a literary figure, while the fact that Shakespeare makes her brother feel “equipped” and “relishing his inheritance” as a man also signals the poet’s unique role in shaping British male identity.

Woolf’s more or less autodidactic apprenticeship often left her feeling intimidated by her brother’s more academically trained assessment of literature in general, and Shakespeare, in particular. As a nineteen-year-old, she writes to Thoby questioning the humanity of Shakespeare’s characters, but then quickly rows back, claiming that his characters are “beyond her”. Half-jokingly, she asks: “Is this my feminine weakness in the upper region?” (Woolf, *Letters I* 45). As if afraid of her own courage, she tentatively brings forth her criticism of Shakespeare only to immediately ask her brother to “explain” Shakespeare to her. “Just explain this to me – and also why his plots are just cracky things – [...] What a dotard you will think me! but I thought I must just write and tell you –” (Woolf, *Letters I* 45-46).

In several letters to Thoby, in which she touches upon the differences of their positions, her resentment lies barely hidden beneath this surface jocularly: “Oh dear oh dear – just as I feel in the mood to talk about these things, you go and plant yourself in Cambridge,” Woolf writes (*Letters I* 46), and in another letter, dated from May 1903, she complains:

I dont [sic] get anybody to argue with me now, and feel the want. I have to delve from books, painfully and all alone, what you get every evening sitting over your fire and smoking your pipe with Strachey etc. No wonder my knowledge is but scant. Theres [sic] nothing like talk as an educator I’m sure. Still I try my best with Shakespeare – (Woolf, *Letters I* 77)

Tellingly, she felt more at ease discussing Shakespeare with her female friends. She meets Katherine Mansfield, and recounts Mansfield’s shared “passion for writing,” and how the two of them held “religious meetings together praising Shakespeare” (Woolf, *Letters II* 382). It is in a letter to her intimate friend Vita Sackville-West that she most explicitly comments on the reasons for what Briggs in her essay title calls Woolf’s “silence on master William”: “These professors hem one down in their hen-coops. What is poetry and so on: their replies to questions have kept me dumb,” and it seems to take the shared effort to overcome this sense of inferiority: “Shall we write a little book together?” (Woolf, *Letters III* 227). The book never came to fruition, a fact that is somewhat symptomatic of Woolf’s relationship to Shakespeare. For while I agree with Alice Fox that “there is no question of the centrality of Shakespeare in Woolf’s imagination” (19), this centrality is rather the effect of a lifelong accumulation of notes that were often made in the margins. Thus, Woolf writes:

His fame intimidates and bores [...] Shakespeare is getting flyblown; a paternal government might well forbid writing about him, as they put his monument at Stratford beyond the reach of scribbling fingers. With all this buzz of criticism about, one may hazard one's conjectures privately, make one's notes in the margin. (*Collected Essays IV* 436)

This might explain why Shakespeare is not once the *central* figure of any of her essays; and yet at the same time, Woolf never stopped making notes about him, and her scribbling fingers never stopped encircling him. Shortly before her death, she observed that “the truest account of reading Shakespeare would be not to write a book with beginning middle and end; but to collect notes, without trying to make them consistent” (qtd. in Briggs 9) which, as Julia Briggs rightly says, “is largely what she did” (9).

If already her father, Leslie Stephen, who, after all, was one of the most eminent men of letters of the nineteenth century and editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, begins his essay on Shakespeare by applying the performative contradiction that “no one should write about Shakespeare without a special licence” (1), Woolf felt the pressure of this licence even more keenly, and what is more, she detected its gendered bias. How, then, did she defy the constraints she felt issuing from a “paternal government” that seemed to have the poet in its grip? And how did she get from being a “dreamy amateur” (Woolf, *Diary III* 210) who timidly brought forth her own readings of Shakespeare, to not only being a critic whom several people specifically urged to write *about* Shakespeare, but to also being a writer whom several critics actually compared *to* Shakespeare?

### Shakespeare across the ages: Asking Hamlet to tea

What most evidently complicates the thesis of a mutual dependency of these two canonical authors is the temporal distance between them. Yet, Woolf herself repeatedly relativised this distance by creating, in Robert Sawyer's words, “a new contemporary vision of [Shakespeare]” (2). Her diaries and letters convey her sense of a strikingly intimate relationship with Shakespeare. When her husband, Leonard Woolf, teasingly told her that “I'm the only person who [understands you],” Woolf replied: “You and Shakespeare” (*Letters IV* 327). She sometimes looked at reality as if through the poet's eyes, so that contemporary life gained a Shakespearean quality: “At any rate I thought of him when the singing was doing – Sh[akespear]e I thought would have liked us all tonight” (Woolf, *Diary II* 223). The gap between the past and the present seems to become negligible as Woolf imagines the early modern poet as her contemporary, while attributing present-day reality with the ability to produce Shakespeare:

Indeed, it was so lovely in the Waterloo Road that it struck me that we were writing Shakespeare; by which I mean that when live people, seeming happy, produce an effect of beauty, & you dont have it offered as a work of art, but it seems a natural gift of theirs, then – what was I meaning? somehow it affected me as I am affected by reading Shakespeare. No: its life; going on in these beautiful surroundings. (Woolf, *Diary II* 273).

Woolf here goes as far as to equate Shakespeare with life. Rather than being a monumental, untouchable, set-in-stone figure, she pictures him as a continuing, ever adapting and adapted presence, on par with life itself.

Woolf's unfailing remedy against a Shakespeare who "intimidates and bores," was entering into intimate dialogue with his works. As Hermione Lee puts it, "at the heart of the pleasure of reading is the delight in a free union, like a very intimate conversation or an act of love" (410). This becomes evident in passages such as the following one from her essay "Middlebrow": "All you have to do is to read [Shakespeare]. [...] If you find Hamlet difficult, ask him to tea. He is a highbrow. Ask Ophelia to meet him. She is a lowbrow. Talk to them, as you talk to me, and you will know more about Shakespeare than all the middlebrows in the world can teach you" (*Collected Essays II* 201).

The meeting point between the two authors was language itself; it was the "common ground" they shared. "Remote and extravagant as some of Shakespeare's images seem," Woolf writes,

at the moment of reading they seem the cap and culmination of the thought; its final expression. But it is useless to labour the matter in cold blood. Anyone who has read a poem with pleasure will remember the sudden conviction, the sudden recollection (for it seems sometimes as if we were about to say, or had in some previous existence already said, what Shakespeare is actually now saying), which accompany the reading of poetry, and give it its exaltation and intensity. (*Selected Essays* 70)

Claiming a close conspiracy between Shakespeare and his readers, Woolf portrays the poet as a mouthpiece of ideas already thought or yet to be expressed.

Because Woolf took the liberty of breaking the temporal barriers between literary eras (a liberty most fully at work in her novel *Orlando*, whose protagonist's lifespan stretches from Shakespeare's to Woolf's age), she was able to redefine the relationship between Shakespeare and herself, and to make it one of direct competition, as the following diary entry reveals: "I never yet knew how amazing his stretch & speed & word coining power is, until I felt it utterly outpace & outrace my own, seeming to start equal & then I see him draw ahead & do things I could not in my wildest tumult & utmost press of mind imagine" (Woolf, *Diary III* 300-301). Woolf's words attest to her obvious reverence for the poet, but more importantly perhaps, they also reflect on herself: to be able to "start equal" one must compete in the same league. Shakespeare may "outpace & outrace" her, but they are both after the same thing, and entrants in the same contest, as if the three centuries that lie between them didn't matter.

While her letters and diaries are scattered with allusions that evoke the nowness of Shakespeare, it is in *A Room of One's Own* that Woolf most explicitly elaborates her idea of how the voices of the past are "continuing presences" (102). Drawing on Coleridge's concept of an androgynous mind, she cites Shakespeare as the primary example: "The androgynous mind is resonant and porous; [...] it transmits emotion without impediment; [...] it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. In fact one goes back to Shakespeare's mind as the type of the androgynous [...] mind" (*A Room* 89). Only a writing that originates in an androgynous mind, Woolf goes on to argue, "explodes and gives birth to all kinds of other ideas, and that is the only sort of writing of which one can say that it has the secret of perpetual life" (*A Room* 91).

Her concept of androgynous writing not only defies rigid lines between the sexes and the ages, but it also implies a move away from the individual person – historical, gendered, mortal – to the writing itself – impersonal and potentially immortal. To Woolf, the great works of art are intimately interconnected, and, as Beverly Ann Schlack



observes, “Shakespeare in particular has achieved that impersonal, archetypal truth in which individual personality is transcended” (125). Thus, Woolf famously claims: “Masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice” (Woolf, *A Room* 59). By moving from the personal to the impersonal, from the individual to the collective, Woolf indirectly challenges the idea of the male genius whose work ‘autogenetically’ creates itself. Instead, she emphasises the “mass behind the single voice” and draws attention to the conditions that are necessary for the individual to produce a masterpiece. Literary history thus appears as a dynamic, ever evolving process in which one book gives life to the next, and in which the books to come keep alive the books of the past.

Ironically, to keep Shakespeare alive, Woolf first had to kill him. Shakespeare drowns in the very novel that is Woolf’s first truly modernist one, *Jacob’s Room*, published in 1922. It is the novel about which Woolf said that in writing it she finally found her own voice. It is *also*, and perhaps not coincidentally, the novel that she wrote as an elegy to her older brother Thoby. In *Jacob’s Room*, the protagonist, Jacob Flanders – who is roughly modelled on Thoby – is sailing along the Cornish Coast, having taken Shakespeare as holiday reading. According to the narrator, this was a bad idea, because

[w]hat’s the use of trying to read Shakespeare, especially in one of those little thin paper editions whose pages get ruffled, or stuck together with sea-water? Although the plays of Shakespeare had frequently been praised, even quoted, and placed higher than the Greek, never since they started [their journey] had Jacob managed to read one through. (Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* 38)

Indeed, Jacob’s endeavour to read Shakespeare on a boat ends badly for Shakespeare: “The sail flapped. Shakespeare was knocked overboard. There you could see him floating merrily away, with all his pages ruffling innumerable, and then he went under” (Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* 39).

In Freudian terms, this was a necessary patricide: just as Woolf was, in hindsight, grateful for her father’s death because his life would have “entirely ended [hers]” and would have made writing impossible (*Diary III* 208), Woolf needed to make Shakespeare float merrily away and go under. By demystifying him and mocking a distinctly male-dominated bardolatry, her own modernist *and* feminist voice was free to emerge. Yet crucially, Shakespeare does not disappear completely in that scene. If Woolf’s humorous use of metonymy is here taken literally, then Shakespeare, rather than his writing, is drowning. While Shakespeare “goes under,” his work resurfaces: for Woolf of course implicitly references the drowning of Prospero’s book in *The Tempest*: “And, deeper than did ever plummet sound, / I’ll drown my book” (5.1.56–57). The scene offers an intriguing performance of the death of the author, while simultaneously ensuring the survival and continued significance of his words for the present.

This idea of a continuous presence of the past, which underlies Woolf’s understanding of literary history as something that is not a static entity, but very much alive, prevents old books – including the works of Shakespeare – from ending up as dusty objects on library shelves. On that account, Shakespeare needs Woolf just as much as she needs him, for “as always, Woolf’s echo brings something new to her allusion, transforming and reactivating its words” (Briggs 21). As I will show in the last section of this essay,

her creative engagement with Shakespeare's works breathes life back into them, and thus helps preserve the living library that is Shakespeare. The focus will be on some exemplary moments of transformation which reveal how Shakespeare's images "give birth" to scenes in Woolf's fiction; or, to argue from the vantage point of the filial generation, how scenes from Woolf's fiction revive Shakespeare's images.

### Words giving birth: The productivity of influence

Woolf's fiction perfectly exemplifies the productivity of influence addressed in *A Room of One's Own*, where Woolf, as has been mentioned above, characterises androgynous writing such as Coleridge's or Shakespeare's as one that "explodes" in the minds of others and "gives birth to all kinds of other ideas" (*A Room* 91). It is the micro-level of language – the single word, phrase, or line – that proves most fertile to Woolf. Her meticulous focus on Shakespeare's language helped her to push past the potentially barren idea that "everything was in Shakespeare," as her brother would have it (Woolf, *Moments* 142) – an idea that naturally begs the question "why then should anyone else attempt to write?" (Woolf, *Diary* III 301). Instead, her "formalist" approach, as Briggs calls it (21), offered Woolf a gateway to access Shakespeare anew as a female reader and writer. Thus, she calls him "a great master of words" (Woolf, *Diary* III 182), and emphasises his "power to make images": "Shakespeare must have had [this power] to an extent which makes my normal state the state of a person blind, deaf, dumb, stone-stockish & fish-blooded" (*Diary* III 104). Woolf's microscopic interest in Shakespeare's language is particularly tangible in her essay "On Craftsmanship". Reflecting on the "suggestive power" of some Shakespearean images, she draws on one of the most famous passages in *Macbeth*:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red. (2.2.59–62)

Woolf comments: "The splendid word 'incarnadine,' for example – who can use that without remembering 'multitudinous seas'? [...] Words belong to each other, although, of course, only a great poet knows that the word "incarnadine" belongs to 'multitudinous seas'" (*Collected Essays* II 248-49).

The fruit of Woolf's meticulous reading also show in the above-quoted letter to her brother in which she criticises Shakespeare for the inhumanity of his major characters, while she at the same time emphasises the superbness of certain lines in *Cymbeline*:

I have spotted the best lines in the play – almost in any play I should think – Imogen says – Think that you are upon a rock, and now throw me again! And Posthumous answers – Hang there like fruit, my Soul, till the tree die. Now if that doesn't send a shiver down your spine, even if you are in the middle of cold grouse and coffee – you are no true Shakespearian! (*Letters* I 45-46)

A few years later, Woolf would return to *Cymbeline* when writing her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, where Imogen's and Posthumous' lines provide Woolf with rich material to depict one of the key encounters between her own protagonists, Rachel Vinrace and Terence Hewett. And yet, her characters, of course, also depart from their Shakespearean

predecessors in significant ways, as the following conversation between Rachel and Terence makes clear:

‘You’re not beautiful,’ he began, ‘but I like your face. I like the way your hair grows down in a point, and your eyes too – they never see anything. Your mouth’s too big, and your cheeks would be better if they had more colour in them. But what I like about your face is that it makes one wonder what the devil you’re thinking about – it makes one want to do that –’ He clenched his fist and shook it so near her that she started back, ‘Because now you look as if you’d blow my brains out. There are moments, [...] when, if we stood on a rock together, you’d throw me into the sea. Hypnotised by the force of his eyes in hers, she repeated, ‘If we stood on a rock together –’ (Woolf, *The Voyage Out* 281)

Terence’s unflattering blazon of his fiancée is reminiscent of sonnet 130, with Rachel’s colourless cheek evoking Shakespeare’s verse, “But no such roses see I in her cheeks” (Sonnets 130, l. 6). Moreover, both women are attributed with curiously unilluminating eyes, which “never see anything” and “are nothing like the sun” (Sonnets 130 l. 1), while Terence’s clenching fist faintly echoes the stage-direction in *Cymbeline*, where Posthumous, not yet recognising his beloved, strikes Imogen so violently that she falls (5.5.228).

The scene heavily draws on Shakespeare, but it lacks both the reconciling volta of Shakespeare’s sonnet, and the tenderness of Posthumous’ “hang there like fruit my soul / Till the tree dies” (5.5.263), a line that reinforces the ultimate inseparableness of the lovers. The fact that Shakespeare’s lovers embrace, while Woolf’s are somewhat lost in words, is central here. The stage direction that directly follows on, and thus renders impossible, Imogen’s “and now / Throw me again” (5.5.262) (Imogen utters these words while she is “[Embracing him]”) helps explain Posthumous’ otherwise non-sequitur remark, “hang there like fruit my soul / Till the tree dies”: the embracing bodies on the stage mimic the image of a tree (Posthumous/the body) from which hangs a fruit (Imogen/the soul); thus entwined, the tree can only “throw” its fruit when it itself falls (i.e., when Posthumous dies). Woolf takes up on this imagery to push Shakespearean romance to its limits: *her* lovers essentially lack this sense of unity and of completing each other. In Woolf’s modernist spin, the Shakespearean image disintegrates. Rachel does not marry, but dies a lonely, feverish death, depicted as a drowning underneath the surface of reality, so that it is, ironically, her, and not Terence, who is eventually ‘thrown’ from the rock and into the watery depth as which Woolf pictures her protagonist’s death. Echo-like, and endowed with no voice of her own, Rachel can only repeat Terence’s allusion to Shakespeare. Yet mere repetition is not viable; the vision, as Woolf writes in *To the Lighthouse*, “must be perpetually remade” (197). This not only concerns the genesis of individual works of art, but, more generally, the phylogenesis of literature: “How could they go on with poetic plays after Shakespeare?” Woolf asks Sackville-West and advances her most radical view of intertextuality: “It is one brain, after all, literature; and it wants change and relief. The text book writers cut it up all wrong [...] Literature is all one brain” (*Letters IV* 4).

The afterlife of another passage from *Cymbeline* in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* offers a particularly beautiful illustration of the intricate workings of this “one brain,” which, if we are to believe Woolf, engendered both Shakespeare’s play and her own novel. Scholars such as Diana E. Henderson and Jane de Gay have thoroughly analysed the

significance of Shakespeare's "Fear no more the heat of the sun" to Woolf's novel; in addition, I would like to draw closer attention to the wider significance of Guiderius and Arvirágus' song, especially the ensuing lines, "Fear no more the frown o' th' great; / Thou art past the tyrant's stroke" (*Cymbeline* 4.2 264–265). While these lines are not directly quoted in Woolf's novel, they resonate beautifully with her continuous reminders to herself not to fear the "frown" of the male critic. The indifference toward worldly concerns thus turns into an indifference toward the patriarchal voice. Woolf increasingly freed herself from the constraints of the "tyranny" of narrative conventions she had so vividly described in her modernist manifesto "Modern Fiction". In the essay, she expresses her growing impatience with the dominant trend of contemporary fiction, arguing that

[t]he writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in his thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest [...] The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. [...] Must novels be like this? (*Common Reader I* 149)

By the time she wrote *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf had realised that they do not. The lines from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* offer an intriguing example of the different ways, either tacit or explicit, in which Shakespeare's words fell on the rich soil of Woolf's creative mind, generating new transformations, and being thereby themselves transformed.

### Conclusion: "We are the words"

To grasp the extent of Woolf's indebtedness to Shakespeare, *and* the extent of Shakespeare's indebtedness to Woolf, the two writers must be read and re-read in conversation with each other, non-hierarchically, and across the temporal gap that separates them. To make this conversation possible, Woolf had to demolish the monumental Shakespeare passed onto her through the patriarchal line – one that could never become completely hers: she had to throw overboard the kind of Shakespeare that lay in the hands of the male critic, the kind of Shakespeare that was idolised by university boys who took him on their sailing trips as the figurehead of their intellectual prowess. For her own sake but also, as I argued, for Shakespeare's, Woolf needed to drown and bury the idea of Shakespeare as the male genius writing in the vacuum of his own greatness. Instead, she emphasised the democratic openness that his works embody, which not only made him available to her, but which was also the prerequisite for his works to be "perpetually remade" – by passing on the "secret of perpetual life," they were themselves transformed, and thus, able to survive.

It is in this light that I read Woolf's enigmatic comment in her autobiographical fragment "A Sketch of the Past": "there is no Shakespeare. [...] We are the words" (*Moments* 85). Woolf's Shakespeare is not for the happy few, but for the many. Her radical de-personalisation and feminist democratisation of the poet, which at the same time reinforced the continuing omnipresence of his words, made it possible for a female writer born four hundred years after him to draw Shakespeare into the present of her

writing and to claim him not only for herself, but for future generations, because, for better or worse, “we are the words.”

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Der vorliegende Essay argumentiert, dass Virginia Woolfs feministische Aneignung Shakespeares nicht nur ihrem eigenen Schaffen diene, sondern auch zum Weiterleben des Dichters beitrug. Anhand verschiedener autobiografischer Passagen wird zunächst aufgezeigt, wie Woolf die Tradition einer patriarchalisch geprägten Deutungshoheit über Shakespeares Werk infrage stellt und stattdessen die demokratische Offenheit seiner Dichtung betont, deren Transformierbarkeit nicht nur in ihrem eigenen Schreiben zutage tritt, sondern die Shakespeares Werk insgesamt zu einer Art ‚lebendigen‘ Bibliothek macht. Anschließend wird entlang ausgewählter Textmomente die wechselseitig fruchtbare Beziehung zwischen Shakespeare und Woolf exemplarisch untersucht.