The Ken Watson Address
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Shakespeare, Education and Presentism

An edited and abridged overview of the paper: The paper will be published in mETAphor Issue 1, 2017

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The guts of the paper

1. Education
2. Presentism
3. *Macbeth*
4. English
The Pendulum of Literary Studies

Prof. Liam Semler, University of Sydney
Timeline of literary Theory by Karen Nelson
https://www.gliffy.com/go/publish/image/4334446/L.png

• Presentism is part of the evolution of changing literary theories
Principles of Presentism

• Reading historical texts (i.e. Shakespeare) unabashedly through the lens of present concerns;
• Theorising this process of reading;
• Blurring creative and critical, analysis and adaptation;
• Restoring and exploring the life, power and relevance of old literature.
Presentist Shakespeare texts

[resentism has developed as a theoretical and critical strategy of interpreting Shakespeare’s texts in relation to contemporary political, social, and economic ideologies, discourses, and events. In so doing, presentism has consequently challenged the dominant theoretical and critical practice of reading Shakespeare historically.
Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes (eds), *Presentist Shakespeares*. London: Routledge, 2007, p. 3:

[W]e need urgently to recognise the permanence of the present’s role in all our dealings with the past. We cannot make contact with a past unshaped by our own concerns.

In the past ten years, Presentism has become a way of doing literary criticism by explicitly evoking the present concerns that motivate a desire to reread old literature (especially Shakespeare) to discover resonances that it could not have had for its first audiences or readers, because these only became possible as a consequence of what happened between then and now.
Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes (eds), *Presentist Shakespeares*. London: Routledge, 2007, p. 5:

[I]f it’s always and only the present that makes the past speak, it speaks always and only to – and about – ourselves.
Is presentism a form of selfie?

Seeing Shakespeare through our selves and our modern concerns

Prof. Liam Semler, University of Sydney
Shakespeare Studies in the Present
Creative or Critical? Analysis or Adaptation?

Does it matter?

Prof. Liam Semler, University of Sydney
A modern take on Macbeth

Macbeth Island in *Second Life*
*Images and text from Virtual Macbeth Island Guide* by A. Thomas, K. Ely-Harper and Kate Richards
See: [http://virtual_macbeth.wikispaces.com/island+guide](http://virtual_macbeth.wikispaces.com/island+guide)

It is a metaphor for the visitors’ exploration of Macbeth’s motivations, his consciousness and his unconscious. The head has an organic feel to it, it is covered with rocky extrusions, plant life – it’s a ruin in effect where visitors can scramble and explore the nooks and crannies, the weird animals living there and take in the weird visual perspective. The head is lying on its side as:

a) it symbolises the beheading of Macbeth;

b) it symbolises the rise and fall of enlightenment and consciousness.

Note: images removed for copyright
Macbeth Island 2

Images and text from Virtual Macbeth Island Guide by A. Thomas, K. Ely-Harper and Kate Richards
See: http://virtualmacbeth.wikispaces.com/island+guide

The Throne Room. This space symbolises Macbeth’s ego, the prophecies that speak to his ego. This tall narrow space reminds us of an old medieval hall. There are ‘German expressionist’ extremes, weird physics and architectural intrigues at its edges.

The Maze. The maze is comprised of a series of columns/trees .... The purpose for this is that at the end of the play, the forest comes to the castle...at the point of greatest confusion by Macbeth.

Note: images removed for copyright
Macbeth Island 3

Images and text from Virtual Macbeth Island Guide by A. Thomas, K. Ely-Harper and Kate Richards
See: http://virtualmacbeth.wikispaces.com/island+guide

The Chamber of Blood is a womb like, crystalline space; There are no right angles, the sides are sloping and visitors feel like they have gravity against them. It’s Macbeth’s Heart of Darkness. Red light seems to pool, the sides are dripping blood and text. Behind the walls we can dimly see animated excerpts of modern 20th century warfare and catastrophe – these images are ‘cut back’ behind the blood walls. It’s blood lust. Agency of the visitor is taken away here, and the visitor is forced to engage in a ritualistic and mechanical killing. This symbolises Macbeth's lack of emotional control as he attempts to kill anybody whom he deems a threat to his power.
Another Modern take on Macbeth:

Johnny Rotten from punk band Sex Pistols:

I loved *Macbeth* – a gorgeous piece of nastiness. The characters did what they felt, not exclusively because they were evil, but because they didn’t have the inclination to behave any other way.

Adam Hansen’s presentist response:

Shakespeare is close enough for Rotten to make productive connections with his work. To rotten, Shakespeare’s characters show a merciless but energizing disregard for moral niceties and so reflect an earlier period where it was obvious those niceties were not universally maintained. This contrasts with the hypocritical, repressive and restrained state Rotten resists. Yet Rotten intimates that this Shakespearean energy is proto-typically punk, an aesthetically arranged savaging of superficial order and pleasantness.

(Hansen, Shakespeare and Popular Music, 104-05)