

Dangerous Identifications—Beckett and Shakespeare

Patrick Lonergan

Olk, Claudia. *Shakespeare and Beckett: Restless Echoes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 240 pages. ISBN 9781316514939. HB. £75.

Roughly half-way through *Shakespeare and Beckett*, its author Claudia Olk observes in passing that Beckett “loved to recite” Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 71” (94). It is easy to understand why he felt that way. With its insistence that the listener should “no longer mourn for me when I am dead,” the poem is frank in its expression of the realities of bodily decay—“I am fled / From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell” (qtd. in 94)—which will ultimately be matched by the decay of love, friendship, reputation, and more. Noting that Beckett thought that “someone should write a play” about the poem, Olk offers a tantalizing suggestion: “Perhaps,” she speculates, “this is precisely what [Beckett] accomplished in *Happy Days*” (94).

The word “perhaps” is found everywhere in Shakespearean criticism, its ubiquity a consequence of the ambiguity that was so central to his dramaturgy—an ambiguity that, as Olk observes, has allowed his plays to seem relevant across times and cultures. That feature of his work has produced varying and sometimes conflicting interpretations, the best-known example of which is that, both famously and notoriously, in some societies Shylock has been seen as the villain of *Merchant of Venice*, and in others as its hero; the same play used to be staged as a comedy, and nowadays it is more often presented as tragic. As Ben Jonson famously claimed, Shakespeare thus is “for all time”—in part because he allowed his audience to bring these kinds of divergent meanings to the same source texts.

Contrastingly, Beckett is famous—and in many quarters nowadays infamous—for his precision, for his insistence that his plays should be performed exactly as written, and for the relative scarcity of words like “perhaps” in the analysis of his work. That characteristic still allows for personal interpretations to be applied to Beckett’s drama, of course. Olk might look at *Happy Days* and see traces of Shakespeare, for example—but many twenty-first-century audiences will also see the play’s presentation of a woman trapped in a mound of earth beneath a blazing sun as a metaphor for the climate crisis, even as they acknowledge that Beckett died before anthropogenic climate change was widely understood. Even so, such interpretations always apply to context rather than character or theme; Beckett’s intentions in relation to Winnie—and his other characters—are free

of Shakespearean ambiguity, ensuring a relative homogeneity in audience response.

That fundamental difference between the two playwrights gives rise to the question of whether a detailed comparison of them is necessary or worthwhile. We already know that there are Shakespearean allusions in Beckett: to *King Lear* in *Endgame*, to *Hamlet* in *Echo's Bones*. We also know that Beckett had read and annotated Shakespeare's scripts, and that he sometimes borrowed Shakespeare's neologisms for his own plays. And we regularly see examples of theater companies moving fluidly between the two authors' works. The book's cover, for example, presents Marty Rea and Aaron Monaghan in *Waiting for Godot* by Druid Theatre, a production that was enriched in my own viewing of it because I had seen the same actors playing Richard II and Richard III respectively in other Druid productions a few years beforehand (and incidentally, the caption for that photo fails to credit Druid, an omission that ought to be rectified in any future editions).

But Shakespeare's dominance of Western theater is so strong that his influence will always be detectable. And, as Olk herself points out many times, Beckett is a famously allusive writer anyway, peppering his work with references to Schubert and *Effi Briest*; to Dante, Vico, and (of course) Joyce; to Proust and Saint Augustine, Descartes and Saint Paul, Yeats and Synge—and so on. "Beckett himself encourages this kind of archaeological reading," Olk notes (38). So why focus only on Shakespeare?

One of the book's strengths is that it answers that question persuasively by showing how the links between the writers are of significance, while remaining mindful of the admonition from *Disjecta* (1983) that "the danger is in the neatness of the identification" (Beckett qtd. in Olk 10). In other words, Olk identifies interesting links, but is not trying to make more of them than is strictly justified by the evidence in Beckett's writings. The book therefore builds on correspondences that have already been made; for example, she acknowledges that the link between *Endgame* and *Lear* was posited (at least) as early as 1964 when Jan Kott wrote about it in *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (19). However, she is also willing to put forward new correspondences, as when she reads the fourth act of *Lear* as a metaphor for "the theatre in which both Beckett and Shakespeare explore the edges of their very medium" (6)—an analysis that applies to *Endgame* but which can also be used as a way of reading Beckett's other plays, especially his later works. Beckett and Shakespeare, in Olk's analysis, thus wrote their dramas as if on a kind of cliff-edge, both formally and in relation to their societies' norms and expectations.

That discussion of *Endgame* exemplifies Olk's ability to move fluidly from considering documented, provable, and/or intentional correspondences to proposing links that must necessarily be accompanied with more of those "perhapses." Some of her comparisons are instantly persuasive. For instance, with its treatment of how women are entrapped in roles that place them in positions of voyeuristic vulnerability, *Cymbeline* can certainly be detected in trace form in the texture of *Happy Days* (89–91)—a link that had not occurred to me before reading about it in this book. Other proposals struck me as more tenuous, as, for instance, when it is suggested that the father and son in Beckett's *Company* who tramp through the hills are like Edgar and Gloucester in *King Lear* (23). Well—maybe they are, but could it not be proposed instead that they are more like Christy Mahon and his Da at the end of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*? Given that Synge was one of the very few writers that Beckett acknowledged as an influence upon his writing, such an interpretation might also be worth considering.

But to quibble in this way is to misunderstand what the book is trying to achieve. Olk is neither a detective nor an archaeologist; she is not seeking evidence of influence with the tools of decoding or extraction. Rather, her aim is to identify the importance of both writers as figures who both engender and symbolize moments of transformative change within the history of dramatic literature. Taking a long but useful detour into Beckett's indebtedness to Joyce (a writer who was much more obviously in dialogue with Shakespeare than Beckett was), Olk shows how the two Irishmen engaged with literary history in ways that were both creative and destructive—which is to say that both drew from past models but, by doing so, brought about a rupture from that past. Just as it is now difficult to read Homer without thinking of *Ulysses*, so it is now difficult to watch *King Lear* or *Macbeth* without thinking of *Endgame* or *Godot*. Thus, Shakespeare, Joyce, and Beckett become enmeshed in the contemporary period in ways that are more complicated than can be captured in the standard model of linear literary influence.

These and many other stimulating suggestions are presented across seven chapters that are organized thematically rather than in relation to specific texts or the chronological development of either oeuvre. Those themes include echoes, sleep, the purgatorial, and "endgames," and there is also the chapter just mentioned about how Beckett's reading of Joyce influenced his reading of Shakespeare. I mean it as a description rather than a criticism when I state that the seven pieces can be read in no particular order and that each of them works equally well as a standalone discussion that can

be read in its own right. Here the book's subtitle—"restless echoes"—is apposite: each of the seven sections is an echo of the others, exploring the same overall theme but resounding slightly differently against the surfaces of the different plays under discussion. I admired and enjoyed Olk's decision to adopt a style of composition that seemed appropriate to the subject matter: there is some necessary repetition at times, but the overall result is the creation of an argument that feels as if it has been layered iteratively, much as Beckett's plays frequently are.

The book's Introduction states that it will focus on the dramatic works of each writer, and certainly there is ample consideration of many of the important plays—*Endgame*, *Happy Days*, *Footfalls*, and *All that Fall* are given detailed treatment for Beckett, and the discussion of Shakespeare is strong in its references to *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *the Tempest*, and (of course) *King Lear*. The importance of Beckett's prose fiction for the book must be emphasized, however—there is useful, insightful, and detailed commentary on *More Pricks than Kicks*, *Molloy*, and *Murphy* as well as on less well-known works such as "The End" and "Fizzles."

For that reason—and again I intend this as a statement rather than a criticism—it must be acknowledged that the book is more focused on the literary than the theatrical qualities of these writers' works. That does not mean that Olk ignores the theatrical—the impact of directors such as Peter Hall and Alan Simpson and of actors such as Billie Whitelaw and John Gielgud is mentioned, and there is also a suggestive if brief exploration of how Beckett's engagement with Shakespeare paved the way for some of Tom Stoppard's innovations. But the book leaves open a fruitful area of investigation for scholars to consider in the future, which is how the links that Olk identifies can deepen our understanding of the staging of both authors' plays. To give just one example, when the South African director Yael Farber put her gravediggers in bowler hats (making them appear like Beckettian tramps) in a 2018 production of *Hamlet* for the Dublin Gate Theatre, she was showing how new productions can make it seem as though Shakespeare is indebted to Beckett, rather than the other way around. What, then, might it mean to stage Shakespeare "after Beckett"?

Similarly, as Olk points out, the problem of nothingness features in many of the plays of both Shakespeare and Beckett—and that problem is usually considered by scholars who focus on language, philosophy, and religion. But in the theater, nothingness is also a problem of space: where do we put it, how do we show it, and how do we ensure that the audience knows it is there? Whether one thinks of the cliff-edge in *Lear* (which, of course, is

not a cliff edge) or of the “corpsed” exterior that lies beyond the walls of the *Endgame* set, we find both writers engaged in considering deeply the problem of how to make space for nothingness. Olk’s book is important in its own right, but I also welcomed how it clears the ground for the practice-based investigation of these and many other questions.

Returning to the question that I began with myself, then—can we say, after reading this book, that *Happy Days* is a theatrical adaptation of “Sonnet 71”? To that suggestion I would offer a resounding “perhaps”—but would add that what matters is the asking rather than the answering. “Beckett works through Shakespeare, not around him” (210), writes Olk—and in showing how that is the case, she also does the necessary work of identifying how we as readers have to work through both writers (not around them). Their influence is proverbially all-pervasive, both within the theatre and the academy—so much so that it can sometimes be tempting to treat them as an established presence rather than as a problem that must be grappled with, again and again. The “restless echoes” presented by Olk are—as the subtitle implies—inevitably unresolved: they continue to resound, continue to repeat—continue, like Didi and Gogo in *Godot*, to wait for that which will never quite arrive. Olk provides a model for the kind of questioning that we must nevertheless go on with. Enriched by the deepest familiarity with both authors’ oeuvres, and strengthened by incisive close readings of their texts, Olk’s *Shakespeare and Beckett: Restless Echoes* is an original contribution to our understanding not only of Beckett and Shakespeare, but of intertextuality, cultural transmission, and the ongoing anxiety of influences.

University of Galway

Patrick Lonergan, Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at University of Galway, is a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He is the author of many books on Irish theater and literature, including *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* (2009) and, most recently, *Theatre Revivals for the Anthropocene* (2023). He is currently completing a book on the history of Shakespearean performance in Ireland. He is a member of the Editorial Board of *HJEAS*.