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Connecting two continents: Shakespeare in Hemingway

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Abstract:

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) is one of America's foremost novelists and short story writers of the twentieth century and Shakespeare (1564-1616) is the greatest dramatist of the world that England produced in the sixteenth century. The two artists are separated from each other by thousands of miles and three hundred years. Their métiers were also different: Shakespeare's was in drama and poetry; Hemingway's was in novel and short story. How then can Shakespeare be present in the works of Hemingway? And then how much Hemingway could be influenced by Shakespeare?

Key words: Hemingway, Shakespeare, Novel, lineage, Othello, *A Farewell to Arms*, fantasmagoria.

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Ever since Jamestown (Hudson) was founded by the English expatriates in 1607, America was imperceptibly drifting away from their English past. The first announcement of America's separation from England was done by Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), which promulgated that "America has her own language". Next Emerson made the clarion call: let American literature shake off the English moult and let it be nourished with indigenous sensibilities.

Gradually this *zeist geist* of America reached the pitch of a craze, so to say.

It is not true that Hemingway was born into an *in situ* American literary vacuum----- there were Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64), Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-96), Herman Melville (1819-91), Emily Dickinson (1830-86), Mark Twain (1835-1910) and more. Why then should Hemingway turn to Shakespeare, the English? The answer is simple: Shakespeare dominated the literary scenario of America ever since the arrival of the Mayflower. Hemingway's inclination towards the wonder world of Shakespeare ensued in his Oak Park school, Michigan, where he was assigned "several of Shakespeare's plays". Charles M. Oliver writes about Hemingway's school studies: "Before graduation he and his classmates were assigned more English classics: several of Shakespeare's plays..." (Oliver,4). There was another reason for Hemingway being drawn to Shakespeare as well as to England (recall, for now, that Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms* is a nurse from England). Hemingway's grandfather Ernest Hall (b.1840) came to America from England, with clear and emphatic English accent. So the link is obvious, and so Hemingway's emotional attachment to England and her greatest dramatist Shakespeare is clear. It is also clear from Hemingway's often bragging of his English lineage.

Shakespeare's presence in Hemingway is observable both directly and indirectly. Like the title of William Faulkner's (another American novelist, almost idolatrous of Shakespeare)

The Sound and the Fury, title of Hemingway's short story "A Sea Change" has been taken from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Ariel's song in Act I,sc.ii):

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer *a sea change* [...] (italics mine)

Titling apart, Shakespeare's presence in many of Hemingway's works is obvious. Take first the direct quote from Shakespeare "By my troth, I care not: a man can die but once; we owe God a death" (2 *Henry IV*,ii) which appears in as many as three works of Hemingway: in the short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber", in *Across the River and Into the Trees*, and in his Introduction to the short story collection *Men at War*.

Hemingway remembers Shakespeare most times in his mid-century novel *Across the River and into the Trees*. In the first page of the 3-page -chapter 17 of the novel, the old colonel Cantwell, in his fatasmagoria, talks to the portrait of his 19-year old dream girl Renata and tells her that Shakespeare is "The winner and still the undisputed champion." Next he asks if she has read *King Lear*. He tells her that "Soldiers care for Shakespeare too, though it may seem impossible", and then asks her if she wanted some more Shakespeare. At the beginning of chapter 30 of the same novel, Hemingway writes about Colonel Cantwell and Renata: "They were not Othello and Desdemona, thank God, although it was the same town and the girl was certainly better looking than Shakespearean character". In fact, although Hemingway writes in the novel that Cantwell and Renata were not Othello and Desdemona, while writing *Across the River and into the Trees*, he must have had in his mind Shakespeare's *Othello*. The similarities between Othello and Cantwell are obvious: both are high military personnel and over-aged, compared to their fiancées; both do the most talking in the respective texts while both the fiancées are rather reticent; both are highly romantic; and both are making love in Venice. Jeffrey Meyers justly writes: "The relationship of Othello and Desdemona (specifically

mentioned in the novel) is vital to an understanding of Cantwell and Renata (Meyers, 43).” In fact, the similarities are so striking that we tend to fancy that Hemingway’s *Across the River and into the Trees* is a novelization of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Carlos Baker, on the other hand, thinks otherwise: he has found similarity between Hemingway’s “mid-century novel” *Across the River and into the Trees* and Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* or *The Tempest*.

The shadow of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* over Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* is also conspicuous. In both the drama and the novel, the lovers are star-crossed; in both the cases love turns out to be a fiasco; and both the stories tell of love cancelled by war or familial skirmishes. Carlos Baker has found yet another and more potent resemblance between the drama and the novel ----- the common catastrophe. Baker writes: “Neither in *Romeo and Juliet* nor in *A farewell to Arms* is the catastrophe direct and logical result of the immoral social situation. Catherine’s [*A Farewell to Arms*] bodily structure, which precludes a normal delivery for her baby, is an unfortunate biological *accident* (italics mine). The death of Shakespeare’s lovers [*Romeo and Juliet*] is also precipitated by an *accident* (italics mine) -----the detention of the message-bearing friar. The student of aesthetics, recognizing another kind of logic in art than that of mathematical cause-and-effect, may however conclude that Catherine’s death, like that of Juliet, shows a kind of artistic inevitability. (1980, 99).”

Carlos Baker has also found similarity between Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The semblance is not unfounded so far as, *inter alia*, the protagonists of both the drama and the novel failingly fight single-handed against the huge injustices. But Baker’s claim that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has resemblance with *King Lear* is hard to admit for the obvious reason that in the novel the protagonist is fighting against fascism while in the drama the protagonist is fighting against ingratitude. On the other hand we must agree with him that Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* well stands comparison with Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The daughters of Lear-----Goneril and Regan----- who deprived him of his rightful possessions, as if regenerated into the hungry sharks to deprive Santiago of his rightful catch of the marlin. With the arrival of the first one of the band of greedy sharks, robbing of Santiago of his possession----- the marlin-----began, each shark eating away 40 pounds of flesh from the fish’s body. Baker writes: “With the arrival begins a tragedy of deprivation as piteous as that which King Lear undergoes. Lear’s hundred knights, the only remaining sign of

his power and the badge of his kingly dignity, are taken from him in batches of twenty-five. A series of forty-pound rippings and tearings are now gradually to reduce Santiago's eighteen-foot, fifteen-hundred-pound marlin to the skeleton he brings finally to shore. (Baker, 312)."

Further, interestingly, the phrase "God rest you merry" in the title of Hemingway's short story "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen" echoes the same phrase or its close variations in as many as six plays of Shakespeare:

i. *The Merchant of Venice* (I,iii: Shylock to Antonio: "Rest you fair, good signior.")

ii. *As You Like it* (V,i: William to Touchstone: "God rest you merry, sir."; and V,iii: Touchstone to First Page: "God be wi' you; and God mend your voices !")

iii. *Measure for Measure* (IV,iii: Duke to Lucio: "Sir, your company is fairer than honest. Rest you well.")

iv. *Romeo and Juliet* (I,ii: Servant to Romeo: "Ye say honestly:rest you merry!")

v. *Antony and Cleopatra* (I,i: Demetrius to Philo: "but I will hope/Of better deeds tomorrow. Rest you happy !")

vi. *King Richard III* (I,iv: Brakenbury to Clarence: "I will, my lord: God give your grace and good rest !")

vii. *The Tempest* (V,i: Prospero to Alonso: "For the like loss I have her sovereign aid/ And rest myself content.")

From the similarities between the dramas of Shakespeare and the novels of Hemingway, all that we have so far discussed, we may conclude that Hemingway was definitely influenced by Shakespeare, or that Shakespeare is, of course, present in Hemingway's works. To this we may add a guesswork about the brief, bare style of Hemingway's expressions as well as his theory of omission or his ice-berg theory (particularly in his works till 1932). We know that

Hemingway, as a cub reporter, was instructed by Toronto *City Star* to write short, (or brief) and direct sentences, but this instruction Hemingway must also come across in several of Shakespeare's plays (recall that he boasted of reading Shakespeare once a year):

i. *Hamlet*, II,ii: Polonius to Gertrude:

My ledge, and madam, to *expostulate*

[...]

Were nothing but to waste night, day and time.

Therefore, since *brevity is the soul fo wit*

And *tediousness* the limbs and outward flourishes,

I will be brief: your noble son is mad.

ii. *Romeo and Juliet*, V,iii: Friar Lawrence to Prince:

I will be *brief*, for my *short* date of breath

Is not so long as is a *tedious* tale.

iii. *Richard III*, I,iv: Robert Brakenbury to 2 Murderer:

Brak.: What, so *brief*?

2 Murd.; 'Tis better, sir, than to be *tedious*.

iv. *2King Henry Iv*, II,ii: Prince : Peace ! [reads] "I will imitate the honourable

Romans in *brevity*.'

(all italics mine)

Here Shakespeare juxtaposes brevity and expatiation or expostulation, like oxymoron, to emphasize the need of brevity in expression. If Hemingway read Shakespeare so much (again recall that he read the plays of Shakespeare once a year) then he certainly internalized the benefit of short, brief sentences and expositions. And this might have contributed to Hemingway's bare and brief sentences as well as to his theory of omission or his iceberg principle.

Early in his writing carrier, to be rather specific, after the phenomenal success of his satire, *The Torrents of Spring*, Hemingway, being unwisely over-confident of his métier, "promised his readers that there would be a sequel in which he told about ending his

relationships with Dos Passos, Coolidge [the 30th President of the US], Lincoln [the 16th President of the USA], Menken and *Shakespeare*.” (Italics mine) (Wagner-Martin, 71). Here by ‘relationships with’ we should perhaps mean ‘influences of’, and here, so, Shakespeare’s influence on him is admitted by Hemingway himself. And this assumption is corroborated by Edmund Wilson, who in the *New Yorker* of 2 January 1971 wrote that Hemingway “boasted that he was ‘trying to knock Mr. Shakespeare’ (Meyers, 440)”.

Not only this, in the whole body of his works Hemingway has mentioned the name of Shakespeare very sparingly and has never expressed his indebtedness to the bard. In his single work, *Ulysses*, James Joyce ----- and he openly admitted that he owed much to Shakespeare----- has cited Shakespeare’s name as many as 51 times, and in Hemingway’s whole work Shakespeare’s name is mentioned not more than half of that times. However, it is true that though he once tried to knock Shakespeare down, at a later date Hemingway gave up his fancy. Moreover, in a letter to Maxwell Perkins from Paris on 15 December 1929, he wrote : “... the only thing I don’t like is that people think I was trying to compare myself with Shakespeare by making the crack about the Two gentlemen of Verona [sic] 9Baker,1981,317).” However, the fact is that Hemingway was ingrateful not only to Shakespeare but to some others as well, whose contributions towards his becoming a great writer is famously undeniable----- Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude stein, Ezra Pound, F.Scott Fitzrald, *et al.* But, as we have seen above, Shakespeare was a great influence on Hemingway. Perhaps Hemingway suffered from anxiety of influence, and so always consciously kept himself well guarded against any supposition of Shakespearean influence. However, again, as we have seen above, in Hemingway’s whole oeuvre Shakespeare’s palimpsestic presence in undeniable. William Faulkner of Southern America (Mississippi) never stopped to acknowledge his being unendingly influenced by Shakespeare in all his writing, and he is so much Shakespearean that he has earned the endearing sobriquet, ‘Southern Shakespeare’. Hemingway of Northern America (Michigan) seems to be oblivious of Shakespeare, but, be it as it may, would it be too much if we fancy to apply to Hemingway the other sobriquet, ‘Northern Shakespeare’?

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