

 **Magdalena Cieślak**

University of Lodz

## A Review of *Variable Objects: Shakespeare and Speculative Appropriation*, edited by Valerie M. Fazel and Louise Geddes (Edinburgh UP, 2021)

William Shakespeare, a literary and cultural icon, and his no less iconic texts continue to fuel the performance and adaptation landscape, various areas of pedagogy, and, inexhaustibly, academic criticism. Dynamically developing theoretical approaches, be it corpus linguistics, media studies, adaptation studies, or posthumanism, reach out to Shakespeare for stimulating research material, taking Shakespeare studies further into exciting and productive areas. One of the issues that keeps returning to the centre of various discourses is the question of what Shakespeare is, and how to approach, understand, and analyze this complex assemblage of meanings—the poet of Stratford-upon-Avon, the theatre person, the theatrical texts themselves, metonymically referred to by the name of the man, as well as their afterlives in print, performance, and appropriations across centuries, cultures, and media. What emerges as an intuitive answer to that question is “Shakespeare”—the Shakespeare object—easily recognizable through its numerous fragmentary landmarks.

*Variable Objects: Shakespeare and Speculative Appropriation*, a collection edited by Valerie M. Fazel and Louise Geddes, ventures the exploration of that very concept. With its rich and stimulating interdisciplinary approach, it examines how “Shakespeare” keeps circulating in our world, but it does a lot more than discover ways to read Shakespeare’s texts anew. Recognizing “the interchangeability of humans and objects as its starting point” (VO 2), the volume takes for granted the power of Shakespeare’s texts to generate an abundance of new ideas. What it does is to propose a focus on how fragments and objects, material and immaterial, human and non-human, rhizomatically networking away from the “Shakespeare”

centre, eventually lead us back to it, allowing for “a more flexible, inclusive understanding of what Shakespeare is” (VO 2).

Primarily engaging with the concept of appropriation, *Variable Objects* continues to develop ideas put together in an earlier collection by Fazel and Geddes, *The Shakespeare User: Critical and Creative Appropriations in a Networked Culture* (2017). Published as part of the *Reproducing Shakespeare: New Studies in Adaptation and Appropriation* series, the 2017 volume proposes to see the presence of Shakespeare in digital culture in terms of use and explores how Shakespeare, understood as both the texts and the myth around the man, is no longer read but “broken down and reassembled by a body of users whose valuation of Shakespeare is unpredictable and often resistant to pre-conceived notions of cultural hegemony” (TSU 3–4). In *Variable Objects*, Fazel and Geddes explore those ideas in the context of adaptation and appropriation studies, relying on several interconnected discourses that are crucial to how Shakespeare studies have recently developed, such as digital media, posthumanism, or object-oriented ontology. Taking Jane Bennett’s philosophy of materiality (2010’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*) as its core, the volume also references numerous ground-breaking Shakespeare criticisms, such as Christy Desmet’s alien networks, Douglas Lanier’s rhizomes, and W. B. Worthen’s performance theory, as well as adaptation, appropriation, and new media studies of Stephen O’Neill, Alexa Huang, Daniel Fischlin, M. J. Kidney, Thomas Cartelli, and many other outstanding scholars in those fields. The volume takes those notions further, entering into dialogue with them and proposing to see Shakespeare primarily as a speculative object—not as a passive text or an icon to be owned, interpreted, or appropriated within the frames of hegemonic discourses, but as an entity with an affective agency and with “infinite meaning” (VO 2). The logic of speculative appropriation put forth by this approach sees the Shakespeare object as an equal participant in the affective dialogue with the appropriator; once the assumption of the appropriator’s interpretative autonomy is rejected in favour of the object’s agency, the dialogue opens up to unpredictable paths, as the book attempts to demonstrate.

The variable networks of potential meanings that emerge from our dialogues with Shakespeare—texts, fragments, and objects, both human and non-human—do not rely on our critical, interpretative, or appropriative efforts, and cannot be constrained by them. Shakespeare objects, understood as Bennett’s complex assemblages, generate their own energies. Shakespeare’s fecundity, the book argues, is not only in how the texts get iterated, transformed, and networked, all to celebrate the cultural supremacy of the Bard of Avon. Fazel and Geddes have a more complex agenda in mind. Seeking affective power in the Shakespeare composite

object, they propose a theory that accounts for the fact that Shakespeare remains recognizable, in its various forms and shapes, across media and cultures, however erratic its appropriation logic may be.

The volume is divided into three sections, each taking the new materialist discourse on Shakespeare appropriations in a slightly different direction. The contributions in part I—Disciplinary Objects—from Sujata Iyengar, Molly Seremet, and Robert Sawyer—discuss specific material objects, like the handkerchief in *Othello*, Ophelia's remembrances or flowers in Q1 *Hamlet*, and the currencies and algorithms of digitalized Shakespeare. These objects, the authors argue, have a forceful presence and, with their unpredictable energies, affect the meanings and circulation of Shakespeare.

In part II, L. Monique Pittman, Vanessa I. Corredera, Kristin N. Denslow and Karl G. Bailey discussing *Westworld*, Andrew Darr analyzing *Elsinore*, the videogame, Anna Blackwell exploring the Shakespearean biopic, and Emily MacLeod examining race and gender in *The Hollow Crown*, study how the vibrancy of objects is manifested in media. These chapters explore the ways in which various media frame the agency of objects, including thingified, racialized, or gendered bodies, or objects with prosthetic qualities. Studying their influence on humans, as well as other objects, the chapters invite us again to see Shakespeare—the texts, the man, the characters—not as an object to be used and reused in media adaptations, but as one invested with its agency and power, much perhaps like the hosts in *Westworld*.

In part III, Shanelle E. Kim, Valerie Clayman Pye and Cara Gargano, Louise Geddes, and Michael Lutz explore various relations between human and object mainly in the performance context. From a critical race studies perspective, the liminal status of a black slave—between a human and a thing—is explored with reference to *Othello*. *Macbeth* is discussed as a (variable) hyperobject, with its quantum potential animated in performance by human and non-human “actants.” The vitality of Shakespeare's most recognizable texts and their Great Roles, such as *Hamlet*/Hamlet, are explored as celebrity objects caught up in a celebrity network of actors, roles, performances, and texts. Finally, the volume closes with a discussion of how the motif of the end of the human, mainly in *King Lear*'s appropriations, can illustrate the potential for alternative futures for Shakespeare.

The volume's contributions are diverse and insightful, each engaging with the new materialist outlook differently to help the reader discover the unruly powers and energies in the complex Shakespeare assemblages. A number of plays and a variety of genres and media are scrutinized, offering a wide array of case studies that illustrate how to celebrate variously

framed objects with their potential variable meanings. As a collection, the book accepts the understanding of diverse and multiple Shakespeare appropriations as ways to acknowledge and celebrate the unpredictable agency and power of the Shakespeare object, not of the hegemonic and cultural power of the appropriator.

The proposed perspective is fascinating, but also challenging in that it once more destabilizes the appropriation landscape and invites yet another reconsideration of what Shakespeare means. Accepting the prism of object-oriented ontology and “vibrant” materialism, the volume explores Shakespeare—the man, the myth, the author, the texts—as “a multiplicitous object that is both human and not” (VO 9). Such an understanding takes the analysis of Shakespeare appropriation beyond the dialogue between the source and its appropriation, and, embracing what Bennett sees as the vitality of things, stresses the agency of matter in reference to Shakespeare objects. Thus, the book explores the titular “variable objects” as part of a larger (eco)system which keeps reorganizing and reassembling itself to generate new energies and create new meanings.

*Variable Objects* is, I believe, one of the most important books addressing current dilemmas in Shakespeare studies and definitely one of the most exciting of those published recently. It invites readers of various backgrounds to rethink the potency of the word “Shakespeare” and its implications. Through its contributions, the book manages to erase the iconic image of William Shakespeare, the man with the ruff, or of his works, heralded by the Folio edition, performance broadsheets, or Elizabethan theatres. It allows something more to shine through the word: the various objects that, however fragmented or dispersed, through their affective power remain recognized as, but not reduced to, “Shakespeare,” and that generate endless and vibrant meanings in appropriations across media and genres.

#### WORKS CITED

- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391623>
- Fazel, Valerie M., and Louise Geddes. *The Shakespeare User: Critical and Creative Appropriations in a Networked Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-61015-3\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-61015-3_1)
- Fazel, Valerie M., and Louise Geddes, editors. *Variable Objects: Shakespeare and Speculative Appropriation*. Edinburgh UP, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474481410>

**Magdalena Cieślak** is Associate Professor in the Department of English Studies in Drama, Theatre and Film at the Institute of English Studies at the University of Lodz, Poland. She specializes in Renaissance drama, especially Shakespeare, and the relationships between literature and contemporary popular media in the context of cultural studies. She works in the areas of cultural materialism, feminism, gender studies, queer theory and posthumanism, and researches the intersections of literature and media in those theoretical contexts. She is the author of *Screening Gender in Shakespeare's Comedies* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5738-3522>  
[magdalena.cieslak@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:magdalena.cieslak@uni.lodz.pl)