

*Shakespeare and the Object*  
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This first issue of the journal *Costellazioni* is devoted to Shakespearean drama, considered from a particular thematic and interpretative perspective: namely, the role of the object in the texts, performances and critical reception of the dramatist's plays. In addition to addressing objects in their most literal sense, as material things, this collection endeavours to focus on various aspects of the Shakespearean object: the stage object or property; the body of the character and/or actor in its materiality; the *objet d'art*; the object as symbolic and/or metaphorical vehicle; objects as modifiers of dramatic, theatrical and cultural reality; the dialectic between object/thing and object subject; the relationship between the object, the space of fiction and the space of performance; the processes of valorization of objects, etc.

Tools, utensils, coins, clothes, weapons, pieces of furniture, pictures, jewellery, coats of arms, food, and other objects have long been an essential target of investigation for such disciplines as history, archaeology, anthropology, and ethnography and sociology. For these disciplines objects have always been a privileged means in the understanding and reconstruction of the life of different cultures, in different times and remote places. Objects tell us about women and men's ordinary lives, their habits and their preferences; their social conventions, rituals and worship; their gender and social status; their relationship with the natural world.

Besides the documentary interest in objects for the social sciences, the relationship between objects, language and the mind has been an important area of investigation for centuries. Indo-European philologist and pioneer of the 'words and things' method, Rudolf Meringer famously remarked that words are inseparable from the things they stand for, and therefore that there cannot be a "history of words without history of things."<sup>1</sup> More recently, applied linguist Charles Goodwin has emphasised how human interaction, which is conventionally considered to be established at a linguistic level, also takes place through the crucial role that gestures and objects have, considering the agent-object interaction a central locus of investigation.<sup>2</sup>

Philosophers have also speculated on the so-called mind-body interrelationship, leading to a number of theories attempting to explain the widely-debated question on how cognition and things interrelate. Material Engagement Theory (MET), among the others, has examined "our way of looking at things and the conceptual vocabulary we use to express the distinctively human ability to think through, with, and about the material world."<sup>3</sup> The belief according to which the material world is part of our cognitive system, partly shaping it, is at the core of many studies. In their *Handbook of Material Culture*, Tilley, Keane, Küchler, Rowlands and Spyer have argued that the bilateral correlation of people and objects is constitutive of both the material and the human world:

Material culture studies in various ways inevitably have to emphasize the dialectical and recursive relationship between persons and things: that persons make and use things and that the things make persons. Subjects and objects are indelibly linked. Through considering one, we find the other. Material culture is part and parcel of human culture in general, and just as the concept of culture has hundreds of potential definitions and manifestations and is never just one entity or 'thing' so has the material component of culture. Where a thing or an object and a person, or culture and material culture, 'begin' or 'end' can never be defined in the abstract. All depends on the context of analysis and research.<sup>4</sup>

Recent reflection of the object has placed it in a dialectical relationship with the 'thing'. Thing theory, as it is known, began its public life in a celebrated issue of *Critical Inquiry* (2001) edited by Bill Brown. In his introductory essay Brown draws on Heidegger's distinction between the thing and the object. Objects are codified and recognizable, they know their place and their function in the world; objects become things when they cease to behave according to their recognized function:

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<sup>1</sup> Cit. in Allison Paige Burkette, *Language and Material Culture* (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015), 2; 9.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Goodwin, 'Things and Their Embodied Environments', in *The Cognitive Life of Things: Recasting the Boundaries of the Mind*, ed. Lambros Malafouris and Colin Renfrew (Cambridge, UK; Oxford, UK; Oakville, CT: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2010), 103–20; See also Carl Knappett, *An Archaeology of Interaction: Network Perspectives on Material Culture and Society* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind a Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Y. Tilley et al., *Handbook of Material Culture* (London; Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2013), 4.

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.<sup>5</sup>

In cultural practice, this distinction is not hard and fast: things can lose their role as objects but take on new roles, a new objectness, just as objects tend to oscillate between codification and more anarchical thingness. We think we know and can control objects, but they may slip loose of our cognitive command and suddenly appear estranged, mysterious, unrecognizable, new. One of Shakespeare's ways with objects, as some of the essays in the collection show, is to continually question our understanding and our supposed ownership of them.

Literary and cultural historians have been increasingly engaged with questions concerning the relationship between words, literature and things, generally coming to recognize that we cannot fully understand the early modern period in England without reference to its material culture. Lisa Jardine's ground-breaking *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (1996) proposed a novel outlook on Renaissance culture based on the examination of its commodities, highlighting the "triumph of worldly goods" that underlies early modern England.<sup>6</sup> The interest in objects is also at the core of Marjorie Swann's *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (2001). Swann documents the widespread proliferation of forms of collecting in early modern England, from the aristocratic vogue for art collecting to the 'middling sort' accumulation of 'curiosities' such as coins, medals, minerals, natural and manmade objects, and even texts, which began to be collected in the seventeenth-century in the so-called 'cabinets of curiosities.'<sup>7</sup>

The discussion on material culture and objects has inevitably involved Shakespeare to the extent that the meaning of his work has come to be considered as ineludibly connected to the social, ideological and cultural value of the objects in his plays, thus resulting in a fruitful interrelation of literary and material culture. The exhibition on *Shakespeare: Staging the World*, held at the British Museum in July–November 2012, is an outstanding example of the growing interest in objects as a means to understanding the Elizabethan playwright. The exhibition assembled a remarkable number of objects and images illustrating the stories of early modern men and women, with a particular focus on Shakespeare, his characters and the objects (including actual historical objects related to Henry V or Richard III) that they interacted with. The distinction between the intrinsic and added value of the objects was implicitly suggested by the website of the exhibition, which advertised its objects not for their intrinsic significance but for the reflected value of their connection with Shakespeare: "Maps, prints, drawings and paintings, arms and armour, coins, medals and other intriguing objects are all examined through the lens of Shakespeare's plays."

Susan Broomhall has recently discussed the emotional backlash – and the techniques used to elicit that – experienced by the visitors observing objects at the exhibition, remarking that a "range of generally positive emotional responses from museum-goers emphasize awe and wonder at the sheer beauty, artistry and technical skill of early modern material culture."<sup>8</sup> Broomhall also emphasises that those emotional responses are not solely elicited by objects, but are somehow orchestrated by curatorial strategies aiming at developing "conceptual, sensory and physical relationships between visitors, certain spaces and material objects in order to create affective states, moods and empathy or emotional reaction."<sup>9</sup> Still on the subject of the exhibition of Shakespeare-related objects, Neil MacGregor, art historian and former director of the British Museum, observes that objects have a fundamental hermeneutic role: "objects can do what textual criticism cannot. They bring into view anxieties not voiced by actors, but which the audience brought with them to

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', ed. Bill Brown, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 4.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 124.

<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 2–6.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Broomhall, 'Cabbages and Kings: Curating the Objects and Emotions of English Encounter with the World through Shakespeare', in *Shakespeare and Emotions: Inheritances, Enactments, Legacies*, ed. R. S. White, Mark Houlahan, and Katrina O'Loughlin (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 194.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

the theatre – anxieties which shaped their response to dynastic struggles and foreign wars that they watched being enacted on stage.”<sup>10</sup>

Some scholars, such as Murray Pittock, laments a lack of historiographic interest in objects, in favour of a descriptive and antiquarian attention, taking little account of the role of objects for the creation of cultural memory.<sup>11</sup> Recent scholarship on Shakespeare and material culture, however, has begun to consider objects from different viewpoints, examining them as a representation of ideological, cultural, and social stances. Catherine Richardson, for instance, has examined the many ways in which objects are presented in Shakespeare’s plays and how meaning come to be negotiated between words and things. In her *Shakespeare and Material Culture* (2011) Richardson observes that material culture offers an insight into the culture of the day underlining that “above all, things were good for thinking with in early modern England – the physical form of objects was always a starting point for considering the nature of humanity, its sorrows and joys and the strength and quality of its relationships” and that material culture had “a national profile and significant prominence in political, moral and religious debate.”<sup>12</sup>

This collection opens with an essay by Andrew Hadfield, which sets out from the experience of the British Museum *Staging the World* exhibition, and goes on to pose the question of whether we need a theory of things in order to understand – among other phenomena – the objects in Shakespeare’s plays. In particular, Hadfield questions Bill Brown’s theoretical premises regarding the ungovernable thingness of things:

The point is that things are not as obvious to conceive as we might imagine them to be and they require careful thought in order to bring them, philosophically and actually, into view. But is this true? And is it true when we think about the early modern world? Do we have to understand the sinkness of the early modern sink, the forkness of the fork, or the cockatriceness of the cockatrice in order to write about these objects? Will they be contaminated and distorted if we apply the language of textual analysis, which, in turn, already borrows much of its vocabulary from the language of objects? At a more mundane level are we losing sight of what really matters in foregrounding things?

After surveying a number of other critical and theoretical contributions from new historicism and material culture, including Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-fashioning*, Jardine’s *Worldly Goods* and Paula Findlen’s *Early Modern Things*, Hadfield outlines the case study of a particular and conspicuous Shakespearian object, namely Hamlet’s “bodkin”, viewed from lexical, textual, material and performative points of view. He arrives at the conclusion that “We do not always need to have new theories to justify what we do or to think through problems we encounter.”

Catherine Richardson’s essay on Shakespeare’s late plays focuses on another Shakespearian object, the mantle. Dialoguing with critical literature concerning Shakespeare’s late style (with particular reference to the work of Russ MacDonald), Richardson proposes to reconsider the topic of Shakespeare’s ‘lateness’ from the point of view of his late materiality, which involves an intimate relationship between language and object: “considering the late plays’ materiality forces us to pay due attention to both, and it has the potential to get to the heart of the curious features of genre, language and temporality which these plays exhibit”. Richardson discusses in particular *Cymbeline*, with its manifold objects (diamond, bracelet, ring, letters, flowers, writing materials, a taper, musical instruments, the Queen’s box of poison, numerous types of clothing, etc.), many of which recur several times in the play. In particular, its highly symbolic “curious mantle” – alluded to, but not staged – is “a part of solemn procession and signifying high status, it is associated with royalty and coronation, appearing as the historical and political zenith of *Henry VIII* where it stands in visually for the new baby Elizabeth who is ‘richly habited in a mantle’”. The mantle itself, moreover, may be taken as a metaphor for the ‘curious’ material poetics of Shakespeare’s late plays.

Donald R. Riccomini discusses the role of objects in *Macbeth*. Riccomini argues that objects enter into a dialectic relation of control and resistance with the dramatic characters, who

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<sup>10</sup> Neil MacGregor, *Shakespeare’s Restless World* (New York: Viking, 2012), xiv.

<sup>11</sup> Murray Pittock, *Material Culture and Sedition, 1688-1760: Treacherous Objects, Secret Places* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 13–14.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Richardson, *Shakespeare and Material Culture* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–5.

unsuccessfully attempt to control them in the belief that they may function according to conventional notions of cause and effect. After a methodological introduction on object-oriented ontology, and on a number of theoretical concepts connected to the study of objects – including concepts of “weird realism”, “withdrawal”, “allure”, and “vicarious causation” (based on the works of Graham Harman) – Riccomini considers the role of objects in the play. According to Riccomini’s reading, objects should be considered in the complex relations that they entertain with each other as well as in diachronic relation to their previous and future usage. Central to Riccomini’s analysis is the distinction between “sensual objects” that can be controlled and “real objects” with undisclosed qualities that resist control. The tension between these two types of objects is at work in *Macbeth*, where the protagonist, in spite of his desire to exert his control over things, must face a reality in which objects slip from his immediate understanding and grasp, since they also carry with them traces of their past usage and anticipations of their future change. Riccomini distinguishes three different functions that objects fulfil in *Macbeth*: they remind us of past crimes; they tempt the protagonist through their “allure”; and they demonstrate their operative independence, which is granted by their “vicarious causation”. The essay analyzes real objects – such as the dagger, stones and the bell – acting at different levels of reality (weird reality) as well as body parts that become objects/tools, such as the hands, and even Macbeth’s head, the final object of significance in the play.

Hamlet is arguably the Shakespeare play in which the clash between the material and the spiritual, between subject and object, between word and action, puzzles most and at many different levels. The clash between word and action is summarised in the play by the protagonist himself, who remarks “I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing’s to do” (IV,4, 42-42). Jean-Louis Claret’s essay offers a reading of *Hamlet* as a drama whose development is typified by the constant interplay of “word” and “sword”. The much discussed distinction between words and actions, between the protagonist’s own drive to act, and his constant procrastinating on verbose speculations is analysed by Claret with particular reference to objects. Claret demonstrates how in *Hamlet* the line separating actions from words is often blurred, thus resulting in continuous substitutions between these two categories within the drama. The dissociation between words and actions – together with a dehumanising process identified in the drama – finds a unifying moment in the performance of the *Murder of Gonzago*, that will convince Hamlet to turn his words into action. Another topical moment discussed in the essay is Hamlet’s departure to England, which is considered by the author as the protagonist’s new birth as tragic hero who can finally reconnect word and action, sword and word: through Hamlet’s substitution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s letter words and actions finally coalesce, allowing the word to act as a real weapon. The continuous shift from word to object also invests characters. Claret offers a reading of some characters particularly associated with objects in the play: this is the case of Ophelia, who accepts to be used as bait in 3.1, or Guildenstern, who becomes a “sponge” (4.2.11), or Hamlet himself when, in his dialogue with Guildenstern, he takes on the defining features of a musical instrument (3.2.355-363).

Mariacristina Cavecchi examines the ambivalent role that objects play in Armando Punzo’s adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays. Punzo works both as director and actor for the Compagnia della Fortezza, a company that runs theatre programmes in the Volterra prison, in Tuscany. The company – which was founded in 1988 and anticipated several similar projects around the world<sup>3</sup> – has produced, among others, several plays that are liberally adapted from Shakespeare. Cavecchi analyses the use of objects in two adaptations by the company, *Hamlice – Saggio sulla fine di una civiltà* (2010), and *Mercuzio non vuole morire – La vera tragedia in Romeo e Giulietta* (2012). Drawing on Punzo’s *Alice nel paese delle meraviglie – Saggio sulla fine di una civiltà* (2009) – in which the influence of Carroll’s theory of language on the director is unmistakable – Cavecchi observes that these adaptations are characterised by an apparent elusiveness of meaning which spectators only temporarily experience. Punzo’s reliance on a mixture of words, images and stage-objects that intermingle with surreal and paratactic contaminations, as well as with overlapping situations, distracts from meaning and contributes to the creation on stage of a carnivalesque atmosphere, a subversion of reality that in the case of convicts is a constrictive and oppressive one. Punzo’s “theatre of the impossible”, as he himself defines it, is grounded on the idea that theatre should foster change in the audience, in the actors, and in the dramatic characters, all sharing a similar condition of captivity. Punzo sees

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<sup>3</sup> Rob Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare: For These Deep Shames and Great Indignities*, Palgrave Shakespeare Studies (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 20.

Shakespearian characters as prisoners of their fixed and immutable roles, who needs to be liberated from repetition and from their dependence on the original script: his adaptations enact this process of emancipation partly through literary contamination. Spaces and objects assume a pivotal role in Punzo's adaptations, challenging canonical dramatic logos and language. Objects do not act as mere props, but are used to question the spectators' own certainties, becoming tools that help characters free themselves from their conventional reality. Cavecchi examines the function of several objects in Punzo's adaptations: some of them – such as the huge key, the cup of tea, and the mushroom in *Hamlice* – are imported directly from Carroll's novel; others – such as the typewriter that lies on red satin on the stage in *Mercuzio non vuole morire* – act as reminders of the characters' revolt against Shakespeare.

*Love's Labour's Lost* is one of the plays by Shakespeare in which the interrelation of words and objects, puns and language games has also been a target of interest for scholars.<sup>14</sup> In IV,3, when the King of Navarre and his three lords decide to forsake the oath not to see any women during their three-year study, they bend and adapt language to their own needs, unlike the ladies in the comedy who show unmistakable commitment to words and what they signify. As H. R. Woudhuysen puts it, for the lords “words and things, the signifier and the signified, do not have a natural but an arbitrarily imposed, purely socialized relationship”.<sup>15</sup> Aurélie Griffin discusses in her essay the interplay of words and things with specific reference to gender issues in *Love's Labour's Lost*, drawing on art historian Daniel Arasse's notions of emblematic and iconic details. In Shakespeare's comedy, Ferdinand and his Navarrese lords follow the courtship convention to give women tokens of their love and affection: a string of pearls, gloves, diamonds, and a miniature portrait. All favours are accompanied by letters, which make the connection between words and things even more resilient and, in the case of the miniature portrait, raise questions about the representational coincidence of paintings and poetry. According to Griffin's reading, the use of favours as a means of seduction results in the objectification of the ladies themselves: the presents, which are functional to the courtship process, underline the recipients' femininity, even becoming metonymies of the feminine. Griffin examines these objects and their aesthetic sophistication, providing an explanation for their functional and symbolic roles, not least in relation to their erotic and narcissistic qualities. The essay demonstrates how objects enter into an intricate network of interrelations both within the play and with the external world, thus signalling the distinction between artificiality and reality.

As a number of scholars have remarked, the Renaissance was “an era in which astrology, alchemy and magic thrived in London”.<sup>16</sup> Alchemy was popular both in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, especially in the years in which Shakespeare composed his late plays. Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), while presenting a critical and satirical outlook on the alchemist's ambitions, epitomises the widespread interest in alchemical practices and in the association between alchemical art and the works of nature. The Renaissance debate on the opposition between God's creations and human artifice resonates throughout *The Winter's Tale*. In 4.1, for instance, the discussion on biological and mechanical modes of production, i.e. on natural vs. artificial, is exemplified by Perdita and Polixenes' discussion on “carnations and streaked gillyvors, / Which some call Nature's bastards”.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Perdita, whose pastoral ideals prevents her from allowing the gyllivor in her rustic garden, Polixenes argues that “Nature is made better by no mean / But Nature makes that mean. So over that art, / Which you say adds to Nature, is an art / That Nature makes.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See among the others Keir Elam, *Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse: Language-Games in the Comedies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Ralph Berry, ‘The Words of Mercury’, ed. Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare Survey* 22 (1970): 69–78; William C. Carroll, *The Great Feast of Language in Love's Labour's Lost* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976); Karen Newman, *Shakespeare's Rhetoric of Comic Character: Dramatic Convention in Classical and Renaissance Comedy* (New York: Methuen, 1985); Katherine R. Larson, trans., ‘Conversational Games and the Articulation of Desire in “Shakespeare's Love's Labour's Lost” and Mary Wroth's “Love's Victory”’, *English Literary Renaissance* 40, no. 2 (2010): 165–90.

<sup>15</sup> William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen (Walton-on-Thames, Surrey: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1998), 18–19.

<sup>16</sup> Lauren Kassell, *Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 229.

<sup>17</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale: Third Series*, ed. John Pitcher (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2010), 264, IV,4, 82–83.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 265 IV,4, 89–92; See also Jeffrey Masten, Wendy Wall, and Aaron Kitch, eds., ‘Bastards and Broad-sides in *The Winter's Tale*’, in *Institutions of the Text* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 58–60.

In her essay, Martina Zamparo focuses on one specific object in Shakespeare's plays, namely the statue of Queen Hermione in the final scene of *The Winter's Tale* (1610). The statue is considered both as an *objet d'art* but also as a representation of the alchemical, hermetic, and Paracelsian traditions, according to which man participated in the creation process, thus representing the contemporary debates over the role of Art and Nature. Relying on studies such as Tayler's *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature* (1964), Zamparo maintains that Shakespeare's play exhibits a sustained interest in the philosophical problem of Art vs. Nature that is very similar to the dialectic opposition at work in the alchemical tradition. The essay illustrates different instances in which alchemical views can be found in the play – also with reference to popular views of alchemy as described in several treaties of the day – but the main focus is the statue scene, in which Hermione is apparently revived from death by means of artistic creation. Zamparo focuses on the implications of the statue regarding the creation of living art, connecting the play with the Paracelsian belief that alchemy might change the character of things. Likewise central to the discussion is James I's concern with esoteric knowledge and his interest in alchemical and Hermetic treatises. Zamparo reads Shakespeare's play as a possible celebration of James' belief in divine and magic powers and in his ability to act upon nature in order to mend the natural world.

The essays collected here suggest the wide variety of topics, critical views and investigative approaches that are currently at work in literary scholarship on Shakespeare and material culture: from theoretical discussions on the ontological and epistemological relevance of objects in literature and drama, to enquiries into their symbolic, ideological or social value; from *objets d'arts* to the objects and props used in performative contexts; from gender-charged objects to undefinable "things". This collection is itself offered as object for further reflection on the materiality of Shakespearian drama.

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