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"You Dare to Compare Yourself to Shakespeare?": Philip Roth, American Bard

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Philip Roth's writing has been consistently inspired and influenced by Shakespeare's theater on multiple levels. This essay aims to investigate Roth's Shakespearean imagination by tracing the evolution of characters, themes, symbolism, and motifs derived from the Bard's plays, focusing in particular on *Operation Shylock* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Throughout his career, Roth's negotiations with Shakespeare were often antagonistic and competitive, but, as time passed, allusions to the Bard in his novels became more accurate, while Roth's writing took on a strong performative vein. In his most accomplished works, Roth 'invented' (or reinvented) the character of "the author" – the writer, the playwright, the artist – and set a pseudo-autobiographic alter-ego on the stage of contemporary America. For a writer who continually performed the character of "the author" in his texts as well as outside (in interviews, essays etc.), it is only natural to model his public persona on the English playwright, eventually impersonating the role of "American bard".

Keywords: Philip Roth, Bard, American literature, Shylock, Falstaff

> I am a theater and nothing more than a theater.
> Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*

Perhaps no contemporary American novelist has been more consistently inspired by Shakespeare than Philip Roth. Throughout his long and prolific career, Roth's writing has been affected by theater – especially Shakespeare's – on multiple levels. The purpose of this essay is to investigate Roth's Shakespearean imagination by tracing the evolution of characters, themes, symbolism, and motifs derived from Shakespeare's plays, but also examining what Catherine Morley has recently defined as Roth's "bardic

proclivities", his self-conscious attempts to "relocat[e] 'the Bard' temporally and geographically, effectively bringing him to the United States" (Morley 2016, 115). Roth himself ironically dramatized the surprise and irritation of some critics at his Shakespearean 'impersonations' in his 1990 novel, *Deception*. When the protagonist, an adulterous novelist significantly called Philip, is asked by one of his mistresses why he always depicts women as shrews in his books, the writer mentions Shakespeare, but his interlocutrix angrily erupts: "You dare to compare yourself to Shakespeare?"[1] (Roth 2008, 525)[2]. Given the novel's title and the fact that we are led to read this passage as a mock-interview staged by one of Philip's lovers, one can infer that Roth the performer/narrator is rehearsing the role of the "American bard" for the benefit of multiple audiences: his mistress (in the book's plot), his readers (in the text's fictional universe as well as in real life) and his critics (metafictionally).

After a survey of Shakespeare's presence in Roth's early life and works, I will tackle at length two of his most successful novels with complex Shakespearean reverberations – *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) and *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) – that have since become cornerstones of contemporary American fiction. As a matter of fact, the extent of Shakespeare's influence on Roth's writing escalates throughout the years: from the Sixties to the Eighties, occasional references to the Bard pop up quite at random, when besides writing novels, short stories, essays, and reviews, Roth is also busy writing plays for theater and television, adapting

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[1] Curiously enough, it seems that at least on another occasion, at the very beginning of his career, Roth was unfavorably compared to Shakespeare, as he told his biographer Blake Bailey. After Roth's talk at the 1960's *Esquire* symposium in San Francisco, "some poor woman [in the audience] got up and in a quivering voice asked us some question about 'the bard of Stratford', which I understood to be an unflattering comparison between that gentleman's talents and the combined talents of the three of us on the stage" (Bailey 2021, 204). Given that the other speakers were Ralph Ellison and John Cheever, at least he was in good company.

[2] The works of Philip Roth have been collected in a ten-volume edition published by the Library of America between 2005 and 2017. All the volumes are edited by Ross Miller, except the last one, edited by Roth himself.

some of his own works for the screen. In this period, Shakespeare's influence is particularly strong in Roth's comic works, either as a satirical comment on contemporary politics, or as a self-encouragement to mischievous and unrestrained performances. During the Eighties, when Roth's fiction starts to get substantial critical appreciation all over the world, mentions of Shakespeare become more frequent and accurate, while Roth's writing takes on a strong 'theatrical' vein, also thanks to the author's closeness to actress Claire Bloom. Then, in the Nineties, Roth's metafictional debt toward Shakespeare's theater reaches its peak, manifesting itself in the very titles of his novels and, most importantly, in the performative strain of his most accomplished fiction. Finally, at the turn of the millennium, Roth's ongoing dialogue with Shakespeare shifts from single characters and plays to the Bard's representative figure, when he publicly assumes the Whitmanian role of "American bard".

1. Shakespeare's Theater in Roth's Early Life and Works

According to his friend Benjamin Taylor, in his old age Roth "hated the stage and would, like Cromwell, have shut down all theaters if he could" (Taylor 2020, 91). This is the umpteenth exaggeration by an artist keen to provoke as well as entertain his audience, not only in his novels but also in essays and interviews. Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's most famous alter-ego, says of himself in *The Counterlife*:

> All I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self […]. What I have instead is a variety of impersonations I can do, and not only of myself – a troupe of players that I have internalized, a permanent company of actors that I can call upon when a self is required, an ever-evolving stock of pieces and parts that forms my repertoire. […] I am a theater and nothing more than a theater. (Roth 2008, 300-1)

Theater was always a vital source of reference to Roth because, as he stated in an interview, "it's a part of literature, and a part of literature I know something about" (Lawson 2007). He was always attentive to the effect a performance might have on the audience:

Taylor himself revealed that though the aged writer no longer cared to go to the theater, he was amused by "the theater chronicles" (Taylor 2020, 92), that is, his friend's anecdotical tales about the unusual behavior of the audience during performances he attended.

In fact, Roth's engagement with theater goes back to his college years[3]; as a young student, he "liked jumping around on the stage", as he himself ironically revealed in an interview released in 2007, when he was seventy-four:

> Scandalously, I played the shepherd in *Oedipus Rex*, the one who knows that the baby was found on the lake with its ankles tied together. I played that character as a very old man – I played it as older even than I am now, and I still don't walk that way. Then I played in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, I was the son Happy, and then another half-dozen plays. (Lawson 2007)

He also liked to perform what he called "Fake Shakespeare" with Nela Wagman, the eleven-year-old daughter of a friend, "lurching around the room like Richard III and speaking in pseudo-Elizabethan diction" (Bailey 2021, 343). Such performative skills are a trademark of Roth's public persona, and they became ever more evident as time passed and his public appearances increased along with his growing reputation. According to Joyce Carol Oates, he eventually "evolved into a performance-artist in prose", and in the

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[3] The January 1964 issue of *Playboy* features a short story by Philip Roth titled "An Actor's Life for Me", focused on a young married couple's dreams of becoming a playwright and an actress (Roth 1964). David Brauner notes that "[t]he story was omitted from the supposedly comprehensive bibliography of Roth's works included in Hermione Lee's 1982 monograph and there is no discussion of it […] in any published criticism on Roth", as if the author somehow wanted to repudiate it (Brauner 2016b, 104). David Kepesh's juvenile "penchant for mimicry" in *The Professor of Desire* (1977) leads him to aspire to a career in the theater, and during his college years he is awarded leading roles in university productions of diverse plays, appearing also in a musical comedy where he sang and danced. Years later, however, he feels humiliated by his earlier stage performances that cause him feelings of shame, embarrassment, and self-disgust. For an analysis of acting as a metaphor for sexual performance, see Brauner 2016a.

course of his career, he "perfected his 'rants' – like a stand-up comedian whose very intensity captivates his audience" (Beckerman 2018). Morley describes Roth as "a born performer" who arrived at his eightieth birthday party "[l]ed in by a marching band from Weequahic High School […] to the sound of drums and brass" (Morley 2016, 109).

As a boy, Roth was probably familiar with the "bowdlerized edition of Shakespeare that [his father] Herman had won as a sales prize for Met Life" (Bailey 2021, 27). When he was at college, he found himself studying among "the unrebellious sons and daughters of status-quo America at the dawn of the Eisenhower era", and was naturally drawn to courses that "typified everything that the marketplace deemed worthless", such as "Literary Criticism, Modern Thought, Advanced Shakespeare, and Aesthetics" (Roth 2008, 355). It wasn't long before he found in Shakespeare a bitter admonition on contemporary political events; in his autobiography, he recounts that the day after Adlai Stevenson lost the presidential elections, he stood in class and, "under the pretext of explicating a passage about the mob in *Coriolanus*, excoriated the American public (and, by implication, the Bucknell student body, which had solidly favored Eisenhower) for having chosen a war hero over an intellectual statesman" (356). The tendency to read Shakespeare as a commentary on "the psychological mechanisms that lead a nation to abandon its ideals and even its self-interest" (Greenblatt 2018, 1-2) remained a constant in Roth's life. In 2018, a few months before passing away, the novelist wrote an enthusiastic blurb for Stephen Greenblatt's book on Shakespeare and politics[4]: Roth's endorsement, published on the back cover of the book's first American edition, described the volume as a "brilliant, beautifully organized, exceedingly

[4] In 2018, Roth told Charles McGrath that after having retired from writing fiction he was reading "a heterogeneous collection of books", among them "Greenblatt's book about 'how Shakespeare became Shakespeare', *Will in the World*" (McGrath 2018). In 2013, Greenblatt had accepted the Emerson-Thoreau Medal awarded to Philip Roth by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on his behalf.

readable study of Shakespeare's tyrants and their tyrannies" that "manages to elucidate obliquely our own desperate [in Shakespeare's words] 'general woe'" (Greenblatt 2018). One should not forget that Roth also had a scholarly knowledge of theater and that at the beginning of his career he wrote vitriolic reviews of contemporary drama for *The New York Review of Books*[5].

Besides having been a juvenile actor, a natural performer, and an ardent reader and commentator of plays, for a brief period in the Sixties, after the publication of his first full-length novel, *Letting Go*, Roth also pondered a career as a playwright, though, as he confessed to Taylor decades later, he considered himself "the worst playwright in American history" (Taylor 2020, 92). Nonetheless, from the late Fifties to the Nineties he wrote a number of plays, teleplays, and movie scenarios – some of them completed, others left unfinished after the first drafts and later abandoned – that are now collected in the Philip Roth Papers section at the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.[6] The

[5] According to Bailey, "he wrote two long reviews in nine months that were memorable for their provocative disregard of whatever passed for political correctness in those days" (Bailey 2021, 267). Among Roth's targets were James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*, LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*, and Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice*.

[6] The list of Roth's ventures in drama as it appears on the web catalogue of the Library of Congress includes: "A Coffin in Egypt" (television play, 1959), "Grimes Case" (movie scenario, 1963), "The Fishwife" (one-act play, 1964), "Buried Again" (one-act play, 1964), "A Woman in the House" (television series, with Alfred Alvarez, undated), "Greed, or the Egomaniacs" (play, undated), "The Pregnant Wife" (television play, undated), "The Penetrator" (unproduced movie, undated), a revised version of an English translation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1969, 1981), and the dramatization of his own novels *The Ghost Writer* and *The Prague Orgy*. For an analysis of some of these works, see Witcombe 2014. In his biography, Bailey mentions at least another aborted play with an ominously Shakespearean title, "1957: The Taming of the Id". Roth began writing it shortly after the publication of *Letting Go*, and a revised version of it, titled "The Nice Jewish Boy", was publicly read at the American Place Theatre on 23 June 1965: "The director was Gene Saks, and the two lead parts were read by promising off-Broadway actors, Dustin Hoffman and Melinda Dillon", though, as Bailey reports, "it was no good". After this failure Roth "spent a year or so vaguely considering another rewrite before deciding that he disliked the whole collaborative aspect of theater" (Bailey 2021, 229).

earliest one, a television play titled "A Coffin in Egypt", dates back to 1959 and is about a Jewish collaborator in the Vilna Ghetto of 1941, while the most accomplished (and interesting) one – a one-act play written in 1964 and called "Buried Again" – deals with a Jewish salesman who dies in middle-age and is judged by "a panel of celestial judges who offer him choices pertaining to reincarnation, but he insists on maintaining many of the characteristics of his previous life – in particular, his Jewish identity" (Witcombe 2014, 116).

References to theater and to Shakespeare's plays and characters are frequent in Roth's early novels, but they mostly appear as seemingly casual remarks and occasional allusions. Characters in *Letting Go* (1962) discuss at length at dinner how much easier it is to identify with Shakespearean heroines – Miranda, Ophelia, Desdemona – than with male characters like Hamlet and Othello, while the protagonist of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) is sarcastic about the theatrics going on in his own family and complains to his psychoanalyst: "[A]ctually what we are playing in that house is some farce version of *King Lear*, with me in the role of Cordelia!" (Roth 2005, 362). In his 1989 preface to the thirtieth anniversary edition of his debut book, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959), Roth asks himself: "What did the tiresome tension between parents and children in lower-middle-class Jewish Newark – arguments about *shiksas* and shrimp cocktail, about going to synagogue and being good – have to do with Shakespeare […]?" (Roth 1989). The implicit answer is "not much", at least until Roth realized that "the best of English prose and poetry" he had read at college "could be rooted in anything close to him". At some point in the Sixties, he found out that Shakespeare and the "literature of the kind T. S. Eliot praised" could help him enter "a world of intellectual consequence precisely by moving [him] beyond the unsubtle locutions and coarse simplifications of […] a tiny provincial enclosure where there was no longer room for the likes of him" (Roth 1989). As it happened, Shakespeare initially played a

maieutic role for Roth[7] – the Bard of Stratford was his guide into transgression and indiscretion, a master of mischief who authorized the young ambitious writer to dare and exaggerate, to challenge the literary establishment and go rogue in his works, though this could imply a renunciation of the early fame he had achieved with his first book. Incidentally, this matches Greenblatt's idea that Shakespeare's "enduring and global success […] is due in part to his willingness to let go of it, a willingness perhaps conveyed by titles like *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *What You Will* (the subtitle of *Twelfth Night*), and *All's Well That Ends Well*" (Greenblatt 2016, 394). We could say that Roth's "art of immaturity", as well as his brazen habit of telling the "rude truth"[8] through coarse impersonations, satirical performances, and ludicrous travesties, owe much to Shakespeare's theater.

This is immediately evident in *Our Gang* (1971), Roth's satirical novel about Richard Nixon, composed exclusively of dialogues and monologues; here, the author unleashes all his Shakespearean verve to chastise and mock the politician's convoluted speeches, exposing his devious intentions and challenging Nixon's public position on the Vietnam War. In the fourth chapter – subtitled "The Famous 'Something Is Rotten in the State of Denmark' Speech" – Nixon's alter-ego Trick E. Dixon addresses the nation about "the liberation from Danish dominion of a landmark that has been sacred for centuries to English-speaking peoples around the world, and particularly so to Americans":

> I am speaking of the liberation of the town of Elsinore, the home of the fortress popularly known to tourists as "Hamlet's Castle". After centuries of occupation and touristic exploitation by the Danes, the

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7 In a half-serious essay titled "Philip Roth's Final Hours" (written when Roth was still alive), Timothy Parrish imagined the author rereading *Portnoy's Complaint* and "laughing over every page": "How did he think of that? He looked down upon his nakedness. How did we think of that?! (Shakespeare was the answer, but he was too entranced to remember)" (Parrish 2016, 71).

8 *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* is the title of a seminal book by Ross Posnock, who analyzed, among other things, the deep connection between Roth's writing and the Anglo-American literary tradition (Posnock 2006).

> town and the castle, which owe their fame entirely to William Shakespeare, the greatest writer of English in all recorded history, are occupied tonight by American soldiers, speaking the tongue of the immortal bard. (Roth 2005, 529)

It appears that "Shakespeare is employed by Tricky Dixon to sophistically draw on the common cultural history of all English-speaking peoples", relying "on the inability of the American public to sort out fictional and factual elements of this cultural memory" (Kinzel 2013, 21-22). Roth does not just allude to *Hamlet*, but intertextually plays with the entire Shakespearean corpus, so that, when Tricky informs the American citizens that "the ground on duty at Elsinore was so taken by surprise that when roused from his bed by a knocking at the gate, he came to the door in his pajamas and opened it so wide that our brave Marines were able to overrun and secure the grounds in a matter of minutes" (Roth 2005, 529), the reader immediately recognizes echoes of *Macbeth*'s porter scene.

Clearly enough, the American invasion of Elsinore serves as a bitter comment on the incursion of American troops into Vietnam (especially if we consider Tricky's comments about Denmark's "tenth-rate military power" as compared to America's), but Roth also intends it as a literary operation of 'colonization', complete with threats of a likewise literary retaliation:

> [I]f the Danish Army should attempt to harass or dislodge our Marines in any way whatsoever from "Hamlet's Castle", it would be interpreted by Americans of all walks of life, professors and poets as well as housewives and hardhats, as a direct affront to our national heritage. I would have no choice but to respond in kind by retaliating against the statue of Hans Christian Andersen in Copenhagen with the largest air strike ever called upon a European city. […] [S]hould the state of Denmark, now or in the future, attempt to occupy Mark Twain's Missouri, or the wonderful old South of *Gone with the Wind* […], I would no more hesitate to send in the Marines to free Hannibal and Atlanta and Richmond and Jackson and St. Louis, than I did tonight to free Elsinore. (Roth 2005, 530)

Besides rendering the militaristic and patriotic rhetoric used by Nixon into a sophistic and rather comical speech, the idea of "a detachment of one thousand brave American Marines" engaged in a mission to 'liberate' Shakespeare's literary setting from the "foreign invaders" (529-30) can also be read as a metaphor for Roth's powerful appropriation of Shakespeare's legacy; we could say that his systematic appropriation, 'Americanization', and ultimately reinvention of Shakespeare's theater began with this very novel, where the English Bard is used as a justification for American imperialism and Hamlet's famous lines are turned into a political slogan.

Roth's following novella, *The Breast* (1972), tackles the performative aspect of Shakespearean plays through the *topos* of transformation, mainly derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and inspired by Kafka's renowned novella, but also largely employed in Shakespeare's theater. Instead of being transformed into an ass, like Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, comparative literature professor David Kepesh finds himself changed into a giant breast; at the hospital, while the doctors keep wondering about his absurd predicament, Kepesh spends hours discussing Shakespeare with his partner, Claire, and listening to recordings of plays, especially Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* and *Othello*, Paul Scofield's *Lear*, and the Old Vic's production of *Macbeth*. Kepesh does not just listen to the plays, as he states in the novel:

> In the beginning I used to try to amuse myself when I was alone in the evenings by imitating Olivier. I worked with my records during the day to memorize the famous soliloquies, and then I performed for myself at night, trying to approximate his distinctive delivery. After some weeks it seemed to me that I had really rather mastered his Othello, and one night, after Claire had left, I did the death-scene speech with such plaintive passion that I thought I could have moved an audience to tears. (Roth 2005, 637)

If in *Our Gang* Roth learns the Shakespearean art of political satire and linguistic exploitation, in *The Breast* Shakespeare's theater offers him a lesson in performance and impersonation; like his

author, Kepesh studied Shakespeare as a young man, but having discovered after his "endocrinopathic catastrophe" that his own life "is not tragedy any more than it is farce" (637), he uses the Bard's works to train his memory and diction, listens to great actors in order to refine his delivery, and learns to wear the mask of one Shakespearean character after another.

Kepesh's reference to his partner, Claire, in connection with acting – "She is helping me with my Shakespeare studies" (636) – may sound ominous in retrospect. As a matter of fact, Roth's interest in theater went into high gear in the mid-Seventies, when he began dating English actress Claire Bloom, who was to become his wife in 1990; their marriage, however, would last only five years (mostly spent in divorce litigation). In London, "Roth rediscovered the joy of going to the theater, which he'd lost entirely in the States. He prepared for Royal Shakespeare productions by rereading a given play the afternoon of its performance, so he could have it 'right in [his] head' while he watched" (Bailey 2021, 432). From 1977 on, Roth wrote a number of TV dramas with roles for her partner, including a modernization of David Margarshack's translation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. In her autobiography, Claire Bloom reveals that in 1981 (the year *Zuckerman Unbound* was published), she devised "with Philip's help […] several one-woman performances of Shakespeare, initially studies of Viola, Volumnia, Katherine of Aragon, and Juliet"; later on, the two of them concocted a program "even more ambitious: two further Shakespeare presentations, *Sisters and Daughters* and *Women in Love*", where she played the roles of "Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Imogen, Titania, Rosalind, and Isabella" (Bloom 1996, 199).

In the mid-Eighties, Roth adapted a play by Chekhov, *The Pregnant Wife*, for television, along with two of his own novels, *The Ghost Writer* and *The Prague Orgy* (though the latter remained unproduced). Finally, in 1994, in what was probably Roth's last venture into drama, he tried without success to acquire the rights to *Journey into the Whirlwind*, the first part of a two-volume memoir by the late Eugenia Ginzburg, a Russian author who suffered

eighteen-year imprisonment in Soviet penal camps[9]. In the meantime, Shakespeare's theater had already migrated from the stage and the TV screen to the pages of his novels: after the *Zuckerman Bound* tetralogy (1979-85, where he created his most famous alter-ego, who also became the protagonist of *The Counterlife*), and a novel, *Deception* (1990), composed entirely of dialogues between an American writer named Philip and his various mistresses, in 1993 Roth published his first truly Shakespearean novel: *Operation Shylock*; the following year saw him feverishly working on a novel, *Sabbath's Theater*, that would reveal all his bardic furor and be considered by most critics, and by himself as well, his true masterpiece.

2. Roth's Shakespearean Novels: Operation Shylock *and* Sabbath's Theater

Mark Shechner was among the first critics to suggest that *The Counterlife*'s division into five acts "may be Roth's way of hinting that Shakespeare, not Swift, is its patron saint" (Shechner 1989, 220). Finally, in his 1993 review of *Operation Shylock*, Harold Bloom highlighted the close relationship between Roth's writing and Shakespeare's theater – a connection that goes far beyond the mention of *The Merchant of Venice*'s Jewish character in the title (Bloom 1993). More recently, in *The American Canon*, Bloom argued that "[i]n Shakespearean terms, Roth writes comedy or tragicomedy, in the mode of the Problem Plays: *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*" (Bloom 2019, 394). In fact, what David Scott Kastan, the editor of the Arden edition of *1 Henry IV*, wrote about Shakespeare's history plays applies to Roth's novels of the Nineties as well: "Comedy here isn't subordinated to

[9] Confident that Ginzburg's "powerful and moving story" had all the elements of a drama for the screen, Roth wanted to adapt it into a film for British television, because he believed Ginzburg was "to the Russian terror what Anne Frank was to the Holocaust, as a witness and writer". When Mondadori, who owned the television rights, refused the writer's offer and decided, against the wishes of Ginzburg's son and heir, to sell the rights to a Hollywood scriptwriter, Roth withdrew from the project and abandoned drama forever (Bedell Smith 1984).

history, nor does it compete with history. Rather, comedy is revealed to be part of the very same fabric, exposing the exclusions and biases in our usual definitions of history" (Kastan 2002, 16); works like *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000), like Shakespeare's history plays, can be understood "in two senses, from above, so to speak, or from below", depending on whether the reader/audience "values the polished and composed over the boisterous and robust", or, "like those that filled the playhouse yard", demands "something more immediately engaging, energetic and various" (Kastan 2002, 35). No wonder that Roth's most accomplished works have been greatly appreciated by scholars and literary critics, but also acclaimed by the general public, given that they lend themselves to a number of readings.

During the celebration of Roth's eightieth birthday, Hermione Lee chose as a topic for her speech[10] what she deemed "a central theme in Roth's work", namely, "How often, how dramatically, and how usefully, Roth invokes Shakespeare in his comic tragedies of feeling it as a man" (Lethem et al. 2014, 18). Lee tracks down many Shakespearean features in Roth's oeuvre:

> Roth hears and responds in Shakespeare to the extreme conjunctions of plain, simple, demotic speech and high rhetoric, the power and audacity of original language, the bursting out inside tragedy of wild grotesquery and buffoonery, the leaps of imagination between violence and pathos, tenderness and savagery, the full-blooded erotics, the sense of mortality, and the questioning of what it means to be human. (Lethem et al. 2014, 21)

However, Shakespeare's theater also inspires Roth in subtler, metafictional ways. For instance, the Shakespearean idea that we

[10] The speech was delivered during the ceremony organized by the Philip Roth Society in conjunction with the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee in the Newark Museum's Billy Johnson Auditorium in Newark, New Jersey, on 19 March 2013. The contributions were collected and published in a volume edited by Jonathan Lethem, issued by the Library of America in 2014 and titled *Philip Roth at 80: A Celebration* (Lethem et al. 2014).

are all characters performing on the great stage of human existence, subject to the antics of a mischievous puppeteer, and bound to interpret the role assigned to us, is the core of both *Operation Shylock* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Reflecting on Shakespeare's plays, Greenblatt mentions the "strange sense that his characters and plots seized upon him as much as he seized upon them" (Greenblatt 2016, 394). Roth himself felt something similar about his two novels, as he confessed in an interview: "You know, you find the character, and the character dictates the book, […] his potential as a person, his life's work, his passions, his hatreds – if you get the right combination, you're on fire, you're on fire, and I felt on fire with *Sabbath's Theater*" (Sykes 2011).

In *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, Roth once again blends fiction and autobiography to reflect on the difficult cohabitation of Jews and Muslims in the occupied Palestinian territories, a theme he had already tackled in the second section of *The Counterlife*. Here, however, the positions of all parties are presented through a cacophony of voices – assertive, hostile, powerful, troublesome, hilarious, authoritative, recitative – uttered by a group of characters determined to perform their roles to the very end, endlessly chatting and arguing, polemicizing and bickering in an ongoing dialogical counterpoint. Ironically, a character talks extensively about *loshon hora*, or "evil speech", "the laws that forbid Jews' making derogatory or damaging remarks about their fellow Jews, even if they are true" (Roth 2010, 306). In fact, the choice of a proper "voice" becomes an historical and typical Jewish issue in the novel:

> Part of the Jewish problem is that they never know what voice to speak in. Refined? Rabbinical? Hysterical? Ironical? Part of the Jewish problem is that the voice is too loud. Too insistent. Too aggressive. No matter what he says or how he says it, it's inappropriate. (Roth 2010, 305)

The novel's incendiary plot unfolds in Jerusalem over three days. It ignites when the protagonist and narrator, an American writer called Philip Roth, becomes aware of a mysterious lookalike

who goes around Jerusalem posing as him; he impulsively decides to go to Israel in order to confront his double, whom he names Pipik, a nickname Roth himself was given as a child. In an essay called "A Bit of Jewish Mischief" that appeared in *The New York Times* just before the publication of the novel, Roth presented *Operation Shylock* as a true narrative of facts (Roth 1993) – a "confession", as the subtitle indicates. In the novel's preface, the author explains that while he was in Jerusalem, he was contacted by an elderly secret agent, Louis Smilesburger, a Prospero-like figure who recruited him for "an intelligence-gathering operation for Israel's foreign intelligence service, the Mossad", to be conducted in Athens, code name "Operation Shylock" (Roth 2010, 7). Then, in the epilogue, the protagonist declares that he was instructed to delete his forty-odd-page-long final chapter called "Operation Shylock", where he had reported on the mission, because it contained "information too seriously detrimental" to the Israeli government (327). He also considered that "it might be *best* to present the book not as an autobiographical confession […] but […] as fiction, as a conscious dream contrivance" (330). So, in the final "Note to the Reader", the author admits that "This book is a work of fiction" and concludes by stating: "This confession is false" (367), though, given the novel's subtitle and what is stated in the epilogue, we cannot be sure whether the "confession" the author is referring to entails the whole book or just the final note. If this were not enough, Roth's provocative mischief reached beyond the pages of the novel and extended to interviews, during which he duped journalists and critics by swearing over and over again that what happened to him in the book was literally true.

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is the author of what could be defined as a violent and bloody 'Jewish mischief'[11]:

[11] According to Harold Bloom, "[w]ithout Shylock, *The Merchant of Venice* would be one of the most inventive of romantic comedies; with him, it is a severe enigma" (Bloom 2002, 19-20). We could say something similar about *Operation Shylock*: without the character of Philip Roth, it would be an inventive, flamboyant spy story not to be taken seriously. With Roth's authorial alter-ego, however, it becomes a sort of a puzzle and acquires ominous historical meanings.

when Antonio cannot repay the Jew's loan of three thousand ducats, Shylock demands "in a merry sport" (Shakespeare 2011a, I.iii.141), as a "merry bond" (169), a pound of the man's flesh. His cruel mischief stems from his vindictiveness for the insults and abuses he received as a Jew, but the reasons he gives the doge for his merciless behavior – "I'll not answer that! / But say it is my humour. Is it answered?" (IV.i.41-42) – are not so dissimilar from the justifications Smilesburger offers in *Operation Shylock* for the violence Israelis perpetrate against Palestinians: "I will offer no stirring rhetoric when I am asked by the court to speak my last words but will tell my judges only this: 'I did what I did to you because I did what I did to you'" (Roth 2010, 323). Not coincidentally, the password the Mossad gives the narrator for his contact in Athens is the opening line of Shakespeare's Shylock: "Three thousand ducats" (Shakespeare 2011a, I.iii.1).

At some point in Roth's novel, the Jewish antiquarian Supposnik, a secret agent working for Israeli police who is also a scholar of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, gives the narrator a long lesson on Shylock's figure as a negative crystallization of the Jewish identity, linking it to America's stereotypical national personification:

> [F]or four hundred years now, Jewish people have lived in the shadow of this Shylock. […] To the audiences of the world Shylock is the embodiment of the Jew in the way that Uncle Sam embodies for them the spirit of the United States. Only, in Shylock's case, there is an overwhelming Shakespearean reality, a terrifying Shakespearean aliveness that your pasteboard Uncle Sam cannot begin to possess. (Roth 2010, 250-51)

Clearly, the elusive "Operation Shylock", together with the novel bearing the same title, should also be read as Roth's mission to rehabilitate the figure of the Jew in America – "a response to the potent myth of Shylock" (Bloom 1993) that aims at rewriting and

somehow correcting the Jew's character[12]. Nevertheless, Roth's lookalike is convinced that Israeli violence against Palestinians will eventually be fatal for the Jewish people, causing a new Holocaust – just as, at the end of Shakespeare's play, Shylock's vindictive mischief backfires and ruins him. According to Pipik, "with its all-embracing Jewish totalism", Israel is "deforming and disfiguring Jews as only our anti-Semitic enemies once had the power to do" (Roth 2010, 71). Following this logic, Israelis wear Shylock's mask, willingly impersonating the role of the treacherous and petty Shakespearean Jew.

Yet, in the novel's final pages, Roth mischievously overturns the situation once again, when his homonym narrator confesses his admiration for the ruthless Mossad agent who recruited him:

> Yes, Smilesburger is my kind of Jew, he is what "Jew" *is* to me, the best of it to me. Worldly negativity. Seductive verbosity. Intellectual venery. The hatred. The lying. The distrust. The this-worldliness. The truthfulness. The intelligence. The malice. The comedy. The endurance. The acting. The injury. The impairment. (Roth 2010, 362)

Such a description goes directly back to the stereotypes about the Jewish identity attributed to Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock – the very stereotypes Roth's novel was intended to dispel and that his narrator ends up admiring and reinforcing. In this sense, Harold Bloom is right in stating that the narrator's real double is not so much Pipik as Shylock because he represents "the embodiment of the Jewish self-hatred of which Roth has so often been accused" (Shostak 2004, 145). In the fictional epilogue, the narrator declares to have excised from *Operation Shylock* the eponymous chapter, as if to argue that Jewish identity cannot be fixed or defined once and for all, being a composite set of experiences, opinions, voices, and viewpoints, often violently in conflict with one another. "[I]f all

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[12] Debra Shostak writes that "Operation Shylock must in some sense be translatable as 'Operation Represent-the-Jew'", not only metaphorically but also literally, since Smilesburger asked the narrator "to represent Jews in a secret mission to uncover Jewish backers of the Palestinians" (Shostak 2004, 145).

individual presence is performance", Debra Shostak argues, "then cultural identity, too, is moot, and postmodern ontology accomplishes whatever the Diaspora has failed to do with respect to 'Jewishness'" (144-45). Similarly, no clear position on the Arab-Israeli conflict emerges from the novel since all characters engaged in the debate expose valid reasons for their own ideas – or, like Shylock and Smilesburger, they simply refuse to give a rational explanation for their own actions.

In his review, Bloom argued that "*Operation Shylock*'s 'Philip Roth' is a descendant of the greatest of fictive humorists, Sir John Falstaff, who is there to be insulted and to return more, and more wittily than he receives" (Bloom 1993). Of course, Bloom could not have known that Roth's following novel, *Sabbath's Theater*, would feature a truly Falstaffian protagonist, Mickey Sabbath, the Jewish puppeteer who perfectly embodies Roth's Shakespearean art of ambiguities: at the same time victim and perpetrator, failed performer artist and brilliant confidence man, Sabbath is the very essence of Shakespearean (and Jewish) mischief; his life is a non-stop performance on diverse stages, from the theater off-off-Broadway where, at the beginning of his career, he staged a failed *King Lear*, to the subway car where as an old man he recites passages from Shakespeare's tragedy while begging for alms.

In Sabbath's voice, we find echoes of the greatest Western literature, from Rabelais' Gargantua to Cervantes' Quixote, from Chaucer's Wife of Bath to Melville's Ahab; nonetheless, the novel's tutelary deity is undoubtedly Shakespeare. As an epigraph for the book, Roth chose a line of the aged Prospero in Act V of *The Tempest* – "Every third thought shall be my grave" (Shakespeare 2011b, V.i.312) – and the author himself described Sabbath as "a jokester like Hamlet, who winks at the genre of tragedy by cracking jokes as Sabbath winks at the genre of comedy by planning suicide" (Roth 2017, 397). According to Hermione Lee, Sabbath is "Prospero and Falstaff and Lear and the Fool all rolled into one" (Lethem et al. 2014, 18).

Undoubtedly, the two characters who better represent Sabbath's tragicomic essence are Lear and Falstaff: besides raging and acting

irrationally, "[f]or part of the novel Sabbath is Lear on the brink of suicide blaming, as the old king does, the women in his life" (Scheckner 2005, 228). Surely enough, the old puppeteer considers himself "a man / More sinned against than sinning" (Shakespeare 1997, III.ii.59-60). However, Shakespeare's tragedy is more than a simple background to Roth's novel, since it helps Sabbath reframe his own life and cope with the ordeals of his youth. As an old man, he still broods over the "disastrous" version of *King Lear* he staged as a rookie director, with his ex-wife, Nikki, as Cordelia, and himself impersonating Lear. In the novel's long second chapter, titled "To Be or Not To Be", Sabbath gets on the subway (the "Suicide Express") "shaking his cup and reciting from *King Lear* the role he hadn't had occasion to perform since he'd been assailed by his own tomatoes", making fun of the cultural establishment by devising an imaginary catch-in phrase to promote his present performance: "Shakespeare in the subway, *Lear* for the masses – rich foundations love that stuff. Grants! Grants! Grants!" (Roth 2010, 562). This thought prompts a long flashback through Sabbath's past that goes on for about eighty pages, until the narration abruptly comes back to the present with six lines from Act IV of *King Lear*, starting with: "Pray, do not mock me / I am a very foolish fond old man" (641; Shakespeare 1997, IV.vii.59-60). Sabbath's recitation stops when he forgets a line, and then his reverie starts again, but his past experiences intermingle with Shakespeare's play creating an original mishmash of memories, desires, frustrations, and expectations in a pseudo-Shakespearean style and language:

> Methinks what? Methinking methoughts shouldn't be hard. The mind is the perpetual motion machine. You're not ever free of anything. Your mind's in the hands of *everything*. The personal's an immensity, nuncle, a constellation of detritus that doth dwarf the Milky Way; it pilots thee as do the stars the blind Cupid's arrow o' wild geese that o'erwing the Drenka goose'd asshole as, atop thy cancerous Croatian, their coarse Canadian honk thou libid'nously mimics, inscribing 'pon her malignancy, with white ink, thy squandered chromosomal mark. (Roth 2010, 641-42)

Another two-page flashback follows, styled as an interior monologue juxtaposed with lines from the play, and Sabbath relives the most traumatic event in his childhood, the death of his brother Morty in World War II: "And Lear says it was a Tuesday in December 1944, I came home from school and saw some cars, I saw my father's truck […]" (642). Finally, the narration returns to the present and we find out "what had caused him to go blank": a beautiful young girl sitting in the subway has been staring at him, and now she gives him the line: "'Methinks', she said, quite audibly now, 'I should know you, and know this man'" (646). The two go on reciting Shakespeare's lines until Sabbath, who all the while has been thinking about his ex-wife, mistakes the girl (who is impersonating Cordelia) for Nikki's daughter and asks her who her mother is. The spell is suddenly broken, and while the girl realizes her terrible mistake in talking to an equivocal stranger in the subway ("To have been moved by this mad monstrosity because he could quote Shakespeare!"), Sabbath declaims, "no less brokenly than Lear, 'You are the daughter of Nikki Kantarakis!'" (647), causing her to panic and flee. The section aptly ends with Sabbath quoting once again Lear as if addressing his readers – "Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish" (648; Shakespeare 1997, IV.vii.83-84) – while acknowledging through free indirect speech his own pathetic situation, not much different from Shakespeare's protagonist: "This was true. It was hard for him to believe that he was simulating any longer, though not impossible". This awareness is followed by another quotation from Lear's dying speech – "Thou'lt come no more; / Never, never, never, never, never" (Shakespeare 1997, V.iii.306-7) – and by a final remark about the inevitability (or is it the unacceptableness?) of old age: "Destroy the clock. Join the crowd" (Roth 2010, 648).

Despite the centrality of *King Lear* in Sabbath's life, he explicitly identifies himself with Falstaff. When a disgusted girl refuses to participate in an orgy and yells at him: "You're nothing but a fat old man!", he wittily replies: "So was Falstaff, kiddo. So was that huge hill of flesh Sir John Paunch, sweet creator of bombast!" (420),

and then quotes Shakespeare to describe himself: "That villainous, abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan" (Shakespeare 2002, II.iv.450-51). Peter Scheckner draws a convincing parallel between Shakespeare's fat knight and Roth's transgressive, bawdy puppeteer, "who instinctively understands the best way to overpower the mess of life is to choose more of it":

> Roth creates the same role for Mickey Sabbath as Shakespeare did for Sir John: Mickey, a failed puppeteer, is the uninvited guest in a world he finds wholly antagonistic. Not princes, kings, or pretenders to the throne, but laws, sexual restraints, social protocol of every sort, and the political correctness of art and speech are what Sabbath most hates. […] Conscious that in their respective worlds they were expected to die with honor or crawl with dignity to old age, both become wondrously disrespectful, profane, vulgare, and, given the constraints of old age and poor health, riotously sexual. This is how they will maintain their humanity. (Scheckner 2005, 221)

While characters in *Operation Shylock* play their mutually antagonistic roles on the historical stage of the middle eastern conflict, Roth describes Sabbath as "a multitudinous intensity of polarities, polarities piled shamelessly upon polarities to comprise not a company of players but this single existence, this theater of one" (Roth 2017, 397). Sabbath is a cunning illusionist, an experienced ventriloquist, and a malicious trickster who is also the author of his own character: we must not forget that, like Shakespeare and Roth, he is playwright and performer at the same time. The performative aspect of the novel – testified by Roth's (and Sabbath's) attention to the subtlest aspects of language, the grain of words, the inflection, the rhythm, even the accent of any spoken syllable – is also its most striking feature, and results from an evolution in the author's Shakespearean imagination. In fact, Sabbath's verbal explosions, as well as the refined literary and metafictional allusions buried in the novel's subplots, make him not only a descendant of the Falstaff of *Henry IV* but also, and somehow more importantly, the ideal twin of the insulted and humiliated (though hardly defeated) Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. As

Giorgio Melchiori remarked, Falstaff's comic play is "the culmination of Shakespeare's experiment with English as a living organism subject to infinite individual variations", "the most thorough exploitation of the potentialities of the English language in all its nuances" (Melchiori 2009, 4-5). In Roth's novel, Sabbath cannot stand the trite sentences, the specialized jargon, the catchphrases, and the cliches slavishly uttered by his wife Roseanna, so that his frequent tirades against "AA slogans and the way of talking she had picked up from AA meetings or from her abused women's group" (Roth 2010, 449) make him so mad that he could easily echo Falstaff's bitter complaint: "Have I lived to stand at the taunt of one that makes fritters of English?" (Shakespeare 2009, V.v.141-42).

Moreover, Sabbath's Croatian mistress, Drenka, is strongly reminiscent of Shakespeare's Mistress Quickly, "an arch-equivocator and manipulator of language with a 'genius for unintended and unperceived obscenities'" (Melchiori 2009, 8). Sabbath's repeated efforts "to make Drenka a decent narrator of her [sexual] adventures" (Roth 2010, 436) call to mind the comic scene of the Latin lesson in *Merry Wives*, where the parson's attempts to teach grammar to a boy are constantly "interspersed with the grotesque misconstructions and salacious equivocations of Mistress Quickly" (Melchiori 2009, 6):

> [Drenka] was weakest at retaining idiomatic English but managed, right up to her death, to display a knack for turning the clichéd phrase, proverb, or platitude into an objet trouvé so entirely her own that Sabbath wouldn't have dreamed of intervening – indeed, some (such as "it takes two to tangle") he wound up adopting. (Roth 2010, 437)

Drenka emerges from Roth's novel as a true, if involuntary, artist of the word: her English is full of misplaced sentences, broken periods, and unintentional puns, but her malapropisms turn out to be comic witticisms quite worthy of the Elizabethan stage: "a roof under my head … when the shithouse hit the fan … you can't compare apples to apples … the boy who cried 'Woof!'" (437). On

the contrary, Sabbath's wife "Roseanna looked to belong to another group of Shakespearean heroines entirely – to the saucy, robust, realistic circle of girls like Miranda and Rosalind" (448).

In the end, Roth's oeuvre can be read as a unique, long work in sixteen volumes: each plot reinterprets, refutes, and enhances the previous one, while the same characters seem to enter and exit their novels' stages like players between the acts of a drama, changing costumes and playing different parts, but always swearing "by the very fangs of malice", like Viola disguised as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, that they are not what they seem. No wonder that, in a metafictional twist at the end of *The Facts*, Zuckerman recommends his author to name his autobiography "*Goodbye Letting Go Being Good*" (Roth 2008, 437), playing on the titles of three novels by Roth. In a number of interviews, Roth explained that Sabbath's character stemmed from ideas he conceived while writing *Operation Shylock* and that Seymour "Swede" Levov, the morally irreproachable protagonist of his following novel, *American Pastoral*, originated from Roth's intolerance of Sabbath's "instinctual turbulence" (Roth 2017, 397). What differentiates Roth's earlier characters from his most mature and accomplished ones is exactly their Shakespearean complexity: according to Bloom, "the difference between Portnoy and Sabbath is the shadow of Shakespeare, of King Lear's madness, and of Falstaff's refusal of embitterment and estrangement" (Bloom 2019, 395).

For all their Shakespearean reverberations, the most striking feature of Roth's novels of the Nineties is probably their characters' voices. Sabbath's fingers have "a distinctive voice, their power to produce their own reality can astonish people" (Roth 2010, 484); for the puppeteer, "[c]ontentment is being hands and a voice" (594), but it will be his own voice, recorded on a tape while he is harassing a female student, that will cause his sacking from the university where he teaches. In *American Pastoral*, the voice of the protagonist's daughter plays a crucial role in the plot: "If only Merry had fought a war of words, fought the world with words alone" (Roth 2011, 318), thinks Levov referring to the girl's stutter, maybe events could have unfolded in a less tragic way. The second novel of the trilogy,

I Married a Communist, focuses on radio-star Ira Ringold, who dramatizes inspiring episodes of American history imitating the voices of people like Wild Bill Hickock and Jack London; naturally enough, Zuckerman, the story's narrator and a great admirer of Ira's performances, calls the book of his own life "a book of voices" (Roth 2011, 606). Coleman Silk, the protagonist of the trilogy's final novel, *The Human Stain*, was raised by a father who "had another way of beating you down. With words. With speech. With what he called 'the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens'"; the father's voice sounded "as though even in ordinary conversation he were reciting Marc Antony's speech over the body of Caesar" (Roth 2011, 790). One cannot disagree with Morley, who states that "the Shakespearean theme surely reaches its peak in the American trilogy" (Morley 2016, 109): truly enough, all three protagonists are, each in his own peculiar way, tragic heroes, whose downfall would befit the last act of a Shakespearean tragedy. Yet without *Operation Shylock*'s Jewish mischief and Sabbath's fastidious tirades about the English language, along with his outrageously rough performances, Shakespeare would have probably remained little more than a well-read allusion in Roth's pages, a topic discussed by learned characters, or a device to vehiculate comic and satiric attacks.

As Greenblatt argues, "Shakespeare is the embodiment worldwide of a creative achievement that does not remain within narrow boundaries of the nation-state or lend itself to the secure possession of a particular faction or speak only for this or that chosen group" (Greenblatt 2016, 396). In Roth's oeuvre, as in Shakespeare's plays, no opinion is more authoritative than the next one, no final answer is ever given, no character can consider him or herself the author's sole mouthpiece: each point of view is systematically compensated by an opposite take; the same character can play different roles (as it happens in *The Counterlife*), or even trespass ontological boundaries and chastise his own author (as Zuckerman does in *The Facts*). Behind each mask there is always another one, because, in the end, everything leads back to the same Prospero-like demiurge, "Philip Roth", a supreme

authorial figure whose name we are always supposed to write in quotation marks. In turn, "Shakespeare created out of himself hundreds of secondary agents, his characters, some of whom seem even to float free of the particular narrative structures in which they perform their given roles and to take on an agency we ordinarily reserve for biological persons" (Greenblatt 2016, 395). The omnipresence of Roth's authorial personae in his texts keeps us from forgetting that each character's utterance finally stems from the same tireless conjurer of stories, who can impersonate with the same credibility an irreverent ventriloquist and malicious playwright like Sabbath, as well as a chameleon-like biographer and emphatic chronicler like Zuckerman, who in *American Pastoral*, while dancing with an old college acquaintance, identifies himself so completely with the character he is writing about that he takes on his voice for the rest of the novel, virtually disappearing from the pages of his book.

3. *An American Bard at Last!*[13]

In the latter part of Roth's career, and especially after his death in 2018, some journalists and literary critics have been saluting the novelist as the "American bard"[14], thus explicitly linking his multifaceted authorial personae to a great lineage of writers – from Shakespeare to Whitman – regarded not only as great, representative poets, but also as repositories of national lore whose "role was to memorialize the history, myths, and stories of a nation" (Morley 2016, 110). As if to officially sanction Roth's status

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[13] This is the incipit of an enthusiastic anonymous 1855 review of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, actually written by Whitman himself, who self-promoted his public persona by proclaiming himself the "American bard".

[14] Among others, Sylvia Barack Fishman (Joseph and Esther Foster Professor in Judaic Studies at Brandeis University) described Roth as "the Shakespeare of our American age" (Fishman 2018), while Melissa Knox (University of Duisburg-Essen) called him "a Jewish bard […], our American bard" (Knox 2015). J. M. Coetzee was already convinced that "at his very best", Roth "reaches Shakespearean heights" (Coetzee 2004).

of "American bard" in prose, towards the end of her speech at Roth's eightieth birthday party, Hermione Lee remarked:

> I am not quite trying to tell you that Philip Roth is The Bard, and I'm not trying to turn Newark into Stratford-on-Avon or this Newark venue into the Globe Theatre. After all, for one thing, as might already have occurred to you, Shakespeare wasn't Jewish. And for another, Shakespeare didn't live to 80, only to 52 – by which time Philip Roth had got as far as *Zuckerman Bound*. My god, think of what Shakespeare might have written if he'd lived as long as Philip Roth!
> But I am saying that Roth has Shakespeare deep in his head and that there is something Shakespearean about the way he uses him. (Lethem et al. 2014, 20)

As Morley stated, "Roth's bardic propensities extend well beyond his engagement with a long line of influences, and even beyond his deployment of Shakespearean themes", to "[t]he consideration of the language in terms of its audial impact, the matching of the sounds and the subject" that clearly suggest "a mind given over to the business of language-making and performance" (Morley 2016, 110). Not surprisingly, one of the narrators in *I Married a Communist*, the high school teacher Murray Ringold, runs into Zuckerman after "attending a conference which – in its title at least – registers Roth's ambition: 'Shakespeare and the Millennium'". In this way, argued Morley argued, "Shakespeare is brought into the new millennium, both generically and thematically, in a tale of public betrayal in which Roth infiltrates and appropriates the themes and tropes of Shakespearean tragedy" (115).

Shakespeare's legacy in Roth's works remained strong in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as the title of the author's twenty-sixth novel, *Exit Ghost* (2007), testifies. Roth made it clear in an interview that the source of the title is a stage direction in *Macbeth*, though he is aware that the same direction also appears in *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*: "Last year in the summer I was going to see a production of *Macbeth* here in America, and I re-read the script that afternoon, and I came upon the Banquo scene, ghost scene, and it just leaped out – exit ghost" (Lawson 2007). In the novel, the aged

Zuckerman returns to New York to have a surgical procedure that could enable him to restore his sexual potency, but he finds a city completely different from the one he had left eleven years before. People are shocked by the somehow unexpected re-election of George W. Bush, described by a character through a line of Hecate's and the three witches in *Macbeth* as "a wayward son, / Spiteful and wrathful" (Roth 2013a, 510; Shakespeare 2015, III.v.11-12). Significantly enough, Zuckerman's farewell from Roth's fictional universe consists in metaphorically stepping from the (political and social) stage and setting himself among the audience:

> I was familiar with the theatrical emotions that the horrors of politics inspire. From the 1965 transformation into a Vietnam hawk of the peace candidate Lyndon Johnson until the 1974 resignation of all-but-impeached Richard Nixon, they were a staple in the repertoire of virtually everyone I knew. You're heartbroken and upset and a little hysterical, or you're gleeful and vindicated for the first time in ten years, and your only balm is to make theater of it. But I was merely onlooker and outsider now. I did not intrude on the public drama; the public drama did not intrude on me. (Roth 2013a, 525-26)

Similarly, a roommate of the protagonist of Roth's following novel, *Indignation* (2008), prepares for the role of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* and recites his lines aloud, practicing his exit line, which sounds like another of Roth's bitter valediction (directed to his critics?): "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you" (Roth 2013b, 114; Shakespeare 2008, V.i.371). *The Humbling* (2009) is entirely focused on an aged Shakespearean actor who fails to play Prospero in *The Tempest* and then realizes he is no longer able to remember his lines from *Macbeth*: "He couldn't do low-intensity Shakespeare and he couldn't do high-intensity Shakespeare – and he'd been doing Shakespeare all his life. […] The only role available to him was the role of someone playing a role" (Roth 2013b, 228-29). The actor is obsessed with "Prospero's most famous words", which he has "mangled" on stage: "Our revels now are ended. These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air" (Shakespeare 2011b, IV.i.148-50). For him, these final

two syllables "had the aura of an obscure indictment even as they came to make less and less sense" (Roth 2013b, 230). One cannot fail but read this as another statement of surrender by the author: not coincidentally, after a final novel, *Nemesis* (2010), structured like a Greek tragedy, in 2012 Roth announced his definitive retirement from writing, somehow replicating "[t]he most celebrated retirement" in literary history, "Shakespeare's return to Stratford after the staging of *The Tempest* in 1611", when he "followed Prospero into the civilian life of a distinguished country gentleman" (McCrum 2012).

According to Harold Bloom, "Shakespeare has taught us to understand human nature" – he "invented" the human character as we understand it, so that "[p]ersonality, in our sense, is a Shakespearean invention, and is not only Shakespeare's greatest originality but also the authentic cause of his perpetual pervasiveness" (Bloom 1998, 2-4). Similarly, Greenblatt talks of Shakespeare as being "the greatest expert the world has ever known" in "'distributed personhood' […]: the ability of an artist to fashion something […] that carries agency, his own and that of others, into the world where it can act and be acted upon in turn" (Greenblatt 2016, 395). In the same spirit, we could say that in his most accomplished works, Roth 'invented' (or reinvented) the character of "the author" – the writer, the playwright, the artist – and set him on the stage of contemporary America. It is only a secondary issue that sometimes he called this quintessential artist/performer "Philip Roth", causing resentment among critics and willingly engendering misinterpretation and confusion between the man and the character, the actor and his roles. Roth himself told Hermione Lee, who interviewed him for *The Paris Review*, that "a writer is a performer who puts on the act he does best – not least when he dons the mask of the first-person singular. That may be the best mask of all for a second self" (Lee 1984). And what better and more ambitious role for a writer who performs the character of "the author" than William Shakespeare himself, the man who "changed our ways of presenting human nature, if not human nature itself", and who, ironically enough, "does not

portray himself anyway in his plays", declining, as Bloom states, "to create himself"? (Bloom 2002, 16-17). In spite of the media frenzy generated by the publication of Blake Bailey's 'official' biography of Roth, we could say about the "American bard" what Greenblatt stated about the Bard of Stratford: "it is not really necessary to know the details of Shakespeare [sic] life in order to love or understand his plays" (Greenblatt 2016, 394) because both artists live a perfectly full-rounded life inside their works.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that if Shakespeare is the hidden author, then Roth is the hypervisible one. In this sense, whether the reason was a Bloomian "anxiety of influence" or a Hemingwayan "competition with dead men", Roth's negotiations with Shakespeare were often antagonistic and competitive. In *I Married a Communist*, after reading Feste's line from the last act of *Twelfth Night* – "And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges" (Shakespeare 2008, V.i.369-70) – Murray, who is one of the two narrators of the novel, laments that he "was being asphyxiated inside Shakespeare" (Roth 2011, 680). Referring to this passage, Morley speaks of Roth's "uneasy engagement with Shakespeare" that is part of his "literary engagement with precursors as an implicit feature of the contemporary epic of America" (Morley 2016, 115-16). In the memoir *Patrimony* (1991), a deep reflection on genetical heritage as well as on the significance of cultural and literary legacy, Roth describes his father as "the bard of Newark" (Roth 2008, 657) who passed him the lore of the city; though in *The Facts* he considers his father's repertoire not so large – "family, family, family, Newark, Newark, Newark, Jew, Jew, Jew" – he candidly admits: "Somewhat like mine" (Roth 2008, 319).

While explicitly acknowledging his descent from the "bard of Newark", Roth tacitly alludes to his 'parentage' with the Bard of Stratford by progressively encouraging a juxtaposition between his works and Shakespeare's. In a 2006 interview, Roth acknowledged *Hamlet* as an inspiration for the crucial graveyard scene of *Everyman* (2006) and left the journalist speechless by half-jokingly confessing: "So I thought, 'OK, let that happen. Let's see. Let's see if I can do it better than Shakespeare'". The interviewer reported: "He laughs,

softly at first and then in bursts. 'So I had *Hamlet* here, and my pages over here'" (Ulin 2006). We can easily imagine Roth keeping a volume of Shakespeare's plays always open on his writing desk, to guide him through the stages of his career. In *The Facts*, he states: "The stories I told of my protected childhood might have been Othello's tales about the men with heads beneath their shoulders" (Roth 2008, 379), while in *I Married a Communist* Zuckerman says: "When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: 'Listening'" (Roth 2011, 606). In Roth's case, we could easily add: "watching and reading Shakespeare's plays". As to whether he was really serious in comparing his work to that of the Bard of Stratford, or even in trying to outdo Shakespeare, we can only rely on his Falstaffian answer to the stunned journalist: "I'll leave that to people like you […] to be foolish enough to judge" (Ulin 2006).

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