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Shakespearean Afterlives

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It was the art historian Aby Warburg who first applied the term “afterlife,” or *Nachleben*, to the survival, reappearance, or reanimation of ideas and images, especially from classical European antiquity, in other places and times. At the time of his death in 1929, Warburg had been working on an immense project of cultural history, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, or memory map, through which he hoped to trace the *bewegtes leben*, or “life in motion,” of such images as they migrated through space and time. The Atlas was conceived as a set of panels (approx. 150 x 200 cm each, a total of sixty-three at the time of Warburg’s death) made of wooden board covered with black cloth, on which Warburg arranged and re-arranged black-and-white photographs of his chosen images, together with other material like maps and manuscripts, numbered and ordered so as to create

thematic sequences or pathways that would allow the viewer to enter into these afterlives. In a sense, one might say, Warburg's combinatory experiments in the *Atlas* were making historical change and recurrence visible in a form that anticipates the modern interactive, hyperlinked PowerPoint display. I would therefore like to pay tribute to him, and especially his panel No. 48, called "Fortuna," or "Fortune," as I begin this series of reflections on the fortunes and afterlives of a single European author, William Shakespeare.

We should note, too, that though it was Aby Warburg who made the notion of an afterlife crucial to the study of cultural and intellectual history, the idea was most thoroughly appropriated by his contemporary Walter Benjamin. Unsuccessful in his personal relations with the great historian, Benjamin developed the idea of an afterlife in a distinct and original way. In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin distinguished between the life of natural beings— a life in nature— and the life of history, and proposed that:

Is not the continued life of works of art far easier to recognize than the continual life of animal species? The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artists, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame.¹

Benjamin's lines may seem an apt point of

entry to the afterlife of Shakespeare, a writer whose works have certainly enjoyed extraordinary fame. This presentation will not attempt to offer a full account of Shakespearean afterlives. But let me begin by citing an instance of his textual reappearance in the specific context of a new life, or afterlife. This is in T.S. Eliot's poem, "Marina," a text that through its title as well as its content, evokes the joyous recognition of Shakespeare's Pericles, when he realizes that the maiden who stands before him is his daughter Marina: "Thou that wast born at sea, buried at Tarsus, and found at sea again!" (*Pericles*, v.i.198-9). Eliot's modernist poem is brief and obscure, but it clearly draws on this recognition scene, in a play actually of doubtful authorship, *Pericles*. I will turn to some of these textual complications later: for the moment, let me focus on Eliot's moving evocation of that extraordinary moment, both at the start of the poem:

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what
islands
What water lapping the bow
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing
through the fog
What images return
O my daughter.²

and at the close:

Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with
heat.

I made this, I have forgotten
And remember.
The rigging weak and the canvas rotten
Between one June and another September.
Made this unknowing, half conscious, unknown,
my own.
The garboard strake leaks, the seams need caulking.
This form, this face, this life
Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me
Resign my life for this life, my speech for that
unspoken,
The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.

What seas what shores what granite islands towards
my timbers
And woodthrush calling through the fog
My daughter.³

What does the speaker— or more accurately the text— remember? Eliot is thinking of Shakespeare's Pericles, but he imagines the grey rocks, the pine trees and fog of the Maine coast rather than the Greek port of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, where Pericles' ship was docked, and where he met his daughter and recognized her. And his speaker, addressing a daughter Eliot never had but who appears before the aging, time-worn, grief-benumbed wanderer like a gift of grace, describes the making of a ship:

I made this, I have forgotten
And remember.
The rigging weak and the canvas rotten