

## “Scraps, orts, and fragments” Shakespearean Echoes in Virginia Woolf

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**Abstract** Shakespeare is ubiquitous in Virginia Woolf's works and there is hardly a piece of writing in which the playwright's name is not mentioned. Along with other authors of the past, Shakespeare always represented an ideal benchmark for Woolf's literary output, providing her with the necessary drive to keep on “searching”. This meant experimenting with new forms of writing that, in her personal experience, meant finding new reasons to keep on living. A lifelong search, this usually became more intense before and after the repeated periods of crisis that Woolf had to face: not only on a personal level, but also on a more general one, because of the historical crises her generation had to live through. It was in those moments that Woolf mostly turned to her deep knowledge of Shakespeare's work. I will try to show how Shakespeare's ‘presence’ is particularly crucial in *Between the Acts*, the novel she wrote at the outbreak of World War II. Woolf tried to reply to the general crisis provoked by the new conflict with a work that consciously evoked the historical-literary past of Great Britain and into which multiple references to the Bard's oeuvre are weaved. Shakespearean echoes are “scraps, orts”, testifying to Woolf's extreme attempt to contain the desegregating violence of the war. They represented, in other words, what kept – and still keeps – a community together: its history and culture.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Woolf's Shakespeare and Her Novels. – 3 *Between the Acts*, or Woolf's Shakespearean Novel. – 4 Conclusion.

**Keywords** Virginia Woolf. Shakespeare. World War II. Between the Acts.

### 1 Introduction


William Shakespeare is ubiquitous in Virginia Woolf's written output.<sup>1</sup> From her letters to her diaries, from her critical essays to her novels, there is hardly a page in which the playwright's works are not mentioned, be it as direct quotations or as oblique allusions, or Shakespeare himself referred to in terms of comparison or as the main object of Woolf's literary criticism.

1 Woolf's relationship with Shakespeare has been variously analysed in studies that dealt mainly with her *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*. For the latest one in this sense, see Stanford Friedman 2016, 189-202. To this date the only comprehensive study on the subject is Fox (1990), where the attention dedicated to *Between the Acts* is however limited. In this regard, cf. also Schwartz 1991, 721-46 and Briggs 2006, 8-24.

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The reason, after all, is not difficult to find. It is undoubtedly related to the aura of greatness that had been surrounding the Bard for centuries, and that had been rekindled by the unprecedented critical work carried out by Victorian scholars (Poole 2014). In "Notes on an Elizabethan Play", one of the essays of her *The Common Reader* (1925), Woolf herself wrote:

There are, it must be admitted, some highly formidable tracts in English literature, and chief among them that jungle, forest and wilderness which is the Elizabethan drama. For many reasons not here to be examined, Shakespeare stands out, Shakespeare who has had the light on him from his day to ours, Shakespeare who towers highest when looked at from the level of his own contemporaries. (Woolf 1925, 57)

Exceptional as he was, Shakespeare was both loved and feared by Woolf. First of all, confronting Shakespeare meant confronting the English literary tradition from which she had always felt excluded. The primary reason for this feeling was that she was a woman and, as a consequence, she feared that she would have never mastered a literature written essentially by men.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, she found herself lacking in the academic education that had been granted only to her brothers and male friends of the Bloomsbury Group: coming all from the middle class, they "were educated at public schools and universities" and the refined education they got, she argued, allowed for their fine books (Woolf 2015, 142). Perfectly aware of what she perceived as an unforgivable inadequacy, however, Woolf had put herself on a tight schedule of reading since the early age of fifteen. Despite the considerable knowledge she had acquired over the years, her *Diaries* and essays testify to her perpetual dissatisfaction with her education, which had not been forged in prestigious institutions. In this regard, in "The Leaning Tower", she famously acknowledged:

A boy brought up alone in a library turns into a bookworm; brought up alone in the fields he turns into an earthworm. To breed the kind of butterfly a writer is you must let him sun himself for three or four years at Oxford or Cambridge [...]. He has to be taught his art. [...] Taught it by about eleven years of education – at private schools, public schools, and universities. (L. Woolf 1948, 137)

Confronting Shakespeare, moreover, always required a huge effort on Woolf's part, so much so that she repeatedly gave voice to this feeling in her writings. "I find them [Shakespeare's plays] beyond me", she con-

<sup>2</sup> The bibliography on the subject is extensive. See, among others, Marcus 1987, Coleman 2012, 79-91 and the latest Caughie 2016, 305-18, as well as the references quoted by these scholars.

fessed, for instance, to her brother Thoby in 1901, “[i]s this my feminine weakness in the upper region?” (Woolf 1975, 45). On the same line, in November 1937 she wrote in her *Diary*: “Leonard in his stall. I in mine, reading [...]; but no poetry I observe - No Shakespeare, [...] I want prose to quiet my brain. Or am I lazy?” (Woolf 1985a, 120). This ambivalent relationship with the Bard, which can be extended to all the ‘male’ literary tradition that preceded her, could be said to mirror the one Woolf had with her own father, Sir Leslie Stephen - one of Victorian Britain’s preeminent scholars. In this regard, it is not incorrect to argue, as many critics did, that Shakespeare might have represented for Woolf a sort of father-figure, who acted as an inspiration and a guide, while at the same time provoking in her the inadequacy she had felt towards her own father, brothers and friends (Bodkin 1963, 301-2; Schlack 1983, 61-81).

Woolf, however, was neither mentally weak nor lazy. On the contrary, Shakespeare’s mentioned ubiquity in her writings proves the high challenge that she had posed to herself. Reducing Shakespeare to what Maud Bodkin called “a Beatrice-figure” (1963, 302) would therefore mean limiting Woolf’s complex intellectual relationship with the playwright, which actually involved alert “feminist rewriting” (Novy 1998, 145). Reading, studying and musing on the Bard’s works throughout her entire life, Woolf would eventually emancipate Shakespeare from the gendered and patriarchal vision of the literary tradition, and identify him as her own ideal of the anonymous and androgynous artist that she sketched in her final essays, “Anon” and “The Reader” (Fox 1990, 166-7; Schwartz 1991, 721-46). Particularly, in the first, Woolf outlined what can be defined as her philosophy of the artist’s anonymity and she praised Shakespeare for embodying it (Woolf 2011, 597-9; Silver 1979, 356-441). To prove her year-long and engaging confrontation with him, moreover, it must be noted that already in *A Room of One’s Own* (1928) she had unmistakably written as follows: “the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; [...] it transmits emotion without impediment; [...] it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. In fact one goes back to Shakespeare’s mind the type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind” (Woolf 2015, 74). In this regard, Woolf had also given shape to such an androgynous mind in her novel *Orlando* (1928), an explicit homage both to Vita Sackville West and to Shakespeare’s comedies (Briggs 2006, 16). Furthermore, Woolf’s repeated association of Shakespeare with the maternal fluid element that constituted creative potential for her had another implication. “[R]ather than figuring [him merely] as a fatherly source of inspiration or anxiety”, Schwartz widely demonstrated, “Shakespeare seems to play the part of a maternal muse in Woolf’s creative process, as well as to help shape her feminist vision and agenda” (Schwarz 1991, 722).

Having come to embody her own ideal of artist and writer, it is no surprise that Woolf constantly expressed the urgency to find a new Shake-

speare among the intellectuals of her own generation. As it emerges from one of her essays, Woolf thought it necessary to find a 'Shakespearean' individual during a period of continuous crises, as the first half of the 20th century was. She sought someone who would be able to talk to her, as well as future generations, and contrast the widespread violence by reminding everyone of the positive values that keep a society united:

From these new books our children will select the one or two by which we shall be known forever. Here, if we could recognize it, lies some poem, or novel, or history which will stand up and speak with other ages about our age when we lie prone and silent as the crowd of Shakespeare's day is silent and lives for us only in the pages of his poetry. (Woolf 1986, 59)

Significantly, in this passage Woolf did not write about 'authors', but rather about influential 'works'. Here it is possible to read Woolf's subtle hinting at an unconfessed desire of hers: it might not be necessarily another Shakespeare to write those works, but one of his 'sisters'. In other words, it might be a female writer, just like herself, the one who would be able to speak against the threatening escalation of violence that characterised her generation. In claiming the role of present-day Shakespeare for herself, Woolf could also be the one who would redeem the obscure destinies of the many 'sisters' who had not been given the opportunity to study and express their potentials; such as the unfortunate Judith Shakespeare, whose ultimately tragic life was imagined in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

This should not be seen in contradiction with Woolf's aforementioned life-long anxiety when it came to dealing with Shakespeare. Even though she never really threw off the insecurity that she felt about the Bard, the writer's confidence in her own skills and knowledge had actually increased over the years. Differently from what she had first written in "The Leaning Tower", Woolf eventually came to re-evaluate the independent education she had had. She decided that it had allowed for her critical independence in approaching literature, in spite of what eminent scholars might have written. In this regard, especially in her critical writings, Woolf repeatedly "advised people to read a work on their own, and to mull over their reactions; then to make comparisons with other works; then to try to ascertain the book's 'absolute value'; and only then to the critics" (Fox 1990, 17). In doing so, she was evidently thinking about her own life-long confrontation with Shakespeare. The proof that the times were mature for women to claim their legitimate role as writers of literature was the very fact that, despite the fear and reverence, she too - a woman and a writer - had been engaging in a never-ending confrontation with anybody less than Shakespeare, the undisputed peak of an all-male literary tradition. By the 1930s, as Juliet Dusinberre underscored in her analysis of

Woolf's speech to the female students in Cambridge that lies at the origins of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf came to realise that "[women] didn't need Shakespeare's sister. Shakespeare himself would do" (Dusinberre 2007, 64). For all her life as a writer, Woolf had been shaping her own peculiar relationship with the playwright, and so confident did she grow to be, that she actually acknowledged that Shakespeare too could write "poorly", as *Timon of Athens* or *Pericles* clearly showed (Fox 1990, 140). This constant confrontation between Woolf and the Bard, as the following section will show, played a constantly stimulating and utterly crucial role in her written output as a whole, and particularly in her novels.

## 2 Woolf's Shakespeare and Her Novels

Virginia Woolf's tenacious confrontation with Shakespeare did not merely resolve through looking at his works to draw inspiration from what she perceived as his proto-impressionistic writing style (Sawyer 2009, 2). It also testifies to her continuous effort to penetrate the mysterious power that she felt emanating from the great authors of the past that he embodied for her. In Woolf's view, such power consisted in their being able to constantly provide their contemporaries with the right push to keep on 'discovering'. This meant, for her, always experimenting with new forms of writing, so as to better express oneself and eventually find a reason to go on living. It is not the aim of this essay to go through the much-studied identity between life and writing in Virginia Woolf's experience, but to show how the continuous confrontation with Shakespeare, and Elizabethan literature in general, proved to be of crucial importance for Woolf. Despite her repeated depression crises and her own suicide, Woolf would indeed be an indefatigable 'discoverer' for all her life, as her experimental last novel, *Between the Acts*, completed only a few months before her death, testifies. As Fox usefully summarised:

[An ongoing sense of discovery] is what the literature of the English Renaissance provoked in Woolf. There was not a genre that she failed to touch upon, not a major figure she omitted over the years. Poetry, prose, and drama she read with some thoroughness, nor was she afraid of less-known figures and works. Even the occasional experience of frustration in the face of an uncongenial or obscure work could not diminish her natural taste for the great works of the past, reinforced as it was by her conviction that in the appreciation of such literature one's intellect and nobility were measured. (Fox 1990, 19)

Significantly, Woolf's need for discovery - i.e. for finding new ways to make her life meaningful - intensified before and after the most severe

episodes of crisis. These were not only the ones she experienced on a personal level, but also the historical crises that repeatedly struck her era, and that her generation had to face and somehow overcome (Briggs 2010, 70-88; Cole 2016, 333-46). It was during these moments that Woolf seemed to appeal most to her deep knowledge of Shakespeare's plays. As a committed pacifist and passionate lover of life, Woolf unsurprisingly saw the two devastating world wars as the worst critical moments of the 20th century, and her reactions against them profoundly influenced the style of her fiction. Symbolically, the two wars came to represent the tear in the thread that she had been trying to weave with her writing, so as to prove her intellectual commitment and her role as a writer within society (Whittier-Fergusson 2011, 230-53).

What should therefore come as no surprise is that, whenever war is mentioned in her novels, readers are almost invariably presented with a more or less subtle reference to Shakespeare.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, it is as if Woolf counterbalanced the deathly reality of war with the lively energy of a Shakespearean quotation. This is for instance what she did in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), when the sounds of the war emerged in all their dreadfulness in the hallucinated and hallucinating visions of shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith, dark *doppelgänger* of luminous Clarissa. It is indeed a line from *Cymbeline* – “Fear no more the heath of the Sun” – that is used as *leitmotiv* throughout the novel and which Clarissa continuously repeats to herself. As Woolf knew well, even if war had ended, fear lingered on and could cause disruptive effects in everybody's apparently quiet lives. As the Shakespearean quotation testifies to Woolf and her *alter ego* Clarissa, however, humanity could not give in to fear and they could not give up on their lives. On the contrary, by means of Shakespeare's line, Woolf forcefully shows through Clarissa's story how life goes on in spite of everything, and living precisely means looking after what is inexorably fleeting – life itself and the other human beings.

At other times, Shakespearean echoes would surface in Woolf's novels as oblique comments on the much-despised war. This is the case in her allusions to *Troilus and Cressida* and *Coriolanus* throughout the writings she produced during the 1930s and 1940s. While witnessing Hitler's seize of power in Germany and the preparations for a new war in Europe, Woolf, aghast, had begun rereading these two plays. As a result, in some notes dating back to this period, she wrote about how struck she was by Shakespeare's ability to “coin full blooded image[s]” of “cormorant war” (quoted in Fox 1990, 140). Here, Woolf drew inevitable comparisons with her own time when she wrote of how, even for Shakespeare, war evidently broke

3 For a detailed analysis of all the Shakespearean echoes and quotations in Woolf's novels, cf. Fox 1990, 95-158.

out in periods where “we have only the ghosts of ideas”, as testified for instance by Ulysses’s speech in *Troilus and Cressida* (140). In another passage, she acknowledged instead how Coriolanus’s “ragged, turbid: broken: violent” language perfectly reflected “the physical effect of fighting” in the classical past, and how it aptly mirrored the war-like slogans of her own present (142).

For her entire life, as written above, Woolf had confronted Shakespeare – as well as other great authors of the past – because she acknowledged their importance in passing on crucial messages to humanity, but also to somehow prove her own credentials as an intellectual. In the 1940s, after the success of her novels and her critical essays, Woolf even felt confident enough to criticise Shakespeare’s ‘weaker’ plays. Should it be surprising, therefore, that when she started working on her last novel, under the threats of the impending outbreak of World War II, she opted for a highly theatrical work, both in terms of textual nature and plot? The answer is no and the following section will provide evidence for it. While Fox contended that *The Waves*, with its “concentration on the dramatic soliloquy” is Woolf’s ‘most Elizabethan book’ (136), I will build on David McWhirter’s claim about the novel being the closest thing to a Shakespearean play that she managed to write (McWhirter 1993, 787-810). In addition, I will underscore how in *Between the Acts*, which may be rightly defined as a kind of echo chamber of all the themes that had always been dearest to the writer, Woolf tried to face the (personal and collective) anxieties for the impending war with a novel that purposely evoked the historical and literary past of the United Kingdom. I will focus, in particular, on the multiple echoes of and (mis)quotations from Shakespeare, which emerge intermittently but steadily on the surface of Woolf’s novel. Even though they are ‘scraps, orts and fragments’, they will be shown to testify to her extreme attempt to stem the overflowing violence of a war-like historical context, by holding on fast to what keeps a community together: its history and culture.

### 3 *Between the Acts*, or Woolf’s Shakespearean Novel

Virginia Woolf set *Between the Acts* during a 1938 midsummer night, the last glimpse of normal life before the black hole of World War II would start to swallow up her entire world.<sup>4</sup> The immediate reference to Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is easy to catch, and it would have been even more explicit had she kept one of the novel’s first working titles: “Last

4 For an outline of the significance of *Between the Acts* against the background of Woolf’s last written production, cf. Snaith 2015.

night I began making up again: Summers Night: a complete whole; that's my idea" (Woolf 1985a, 133).<sup>5</sup> The story centres around the staging of a traditional summer pageant organised for the local community at Pointz Hall, the country manor of the Oliver family. Written by the elusive Miss La Trobe – Woolf's last *alter ego* – the pageant is a kind of epitome of British history, from the first Celtic peoples to the 20th century, with several references to the most important writers of the different epochs. The events are all condensed in a single day and the passing of time is significantly pressing, just like in Shakespeare's own last play, *The Tempest*, which is notably one of the main subtexts and sources of quotations for the novel.

Apart from what has been written about Woolf's life-long confrontation with the playwright, her need to have Shakespeare ingrained in her mind is testified by a project she had undertaken for many years and which can now be reconstructed by the reading of her final notes and diary entries. "Towards the end of her life", Alice Fox explained, "Woolf was writing a history of English literature, for which she read a large number of primary and secondary sources on medieval and Elizabethan life; and she was drafting an essay on the Elizabethans at the time of her death" (Fox 1990, 1-2). In addition, the outbreak of another war had become more and more imminent and, as shown above, periods of impending crisis had always inspired Woolf to return to Shakespeare. Acutely aware of the looming devastations, Woolf wrote to her friend Ethyl Smith on 1 February 1941, "By the time I've reached [reading] Shakespeare bombs will be falling" (Woolf 1980, 466). Even though her diaries and notes testify to her feeling of the ultimately helplessness of the intellectuals in situations of conflict, it is significant to acknowledge that Woolf still replied to these war echoes in her own way. After having listened to one of Benito Mussolini's speeches, in which the *Duce* had clearly shown his expansionistic intentions towards Abyssinia, she started writing a novel imbued with culture and literature.

The impulse to get back to writing meant looking for a new experimentation in terms of form and structure, which resulted in the fusion of drama and prose that characterises *Between the Acts*. As usual, it also meant trying to find a meaning for an existence that was threatened by war once again. This looming threat, after all, is immediately presented by Woolf in the first sentence of the novel: "it was a Summer's night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool" (Woolf 2012, 307). From the very opening, Woolf fractures the apparent tranquillity of the community of people who live at Pointz Hall, inserting a disturbing element such as the "cesspool" in their conversation. This patently hints at a dimension of decay and disgust, the same

5 The title of the novel was subsequently changed by Woolf herself into *Pointz Hall* – the name of the Oliver family manor –, and eventually into *Between the Acts* by Leonard Woolf, when he published it after his wife's death.



dimension where Woolf not too covertly placed war. This disgust of hers, mixed with fear, emerges soon afterwards, absorbed in the words of the unpleasant and rather chauvinist character of Giles:

Giles nicked his chair into position with a jerk. Thus only could he show his irritation, his rage with old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee with cream when the whole Europe - over there - was bristling like... He had no command of metaphor. Only the ineffective word 'hedgehog' illustrated his vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes. At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly. (331)

Woolf's anger against those "old fogies" who had allowed Europe to be turned into once again a war-like "hedgehog" can be clearly perceived in this passage. After all, it was precisely to make the difference in the patriarchal and war-like society of her times that Woolf had chosen to become who she was - an intellectual and a writer. To this point she went so far as to write "my thinking is my fighting" in her *Diary*, as an irritated reply to Vita Sackville West's younger son, who had blamed her and the other member of the Bloomsbury Group for not engaging enough to prevent the war (Woolf 1985a, 285; Froula 2005; Allen 2010, 85-112).

Choosing to write a novel such as *Between the Acts*, moreover, is very relevant in the light of Woolf's creative experience, also because it marked a significant change. In her previous novels, she had always proven to be particularly fascinated by her characters' individualities. Woolf was the one who had dug well-known "caves" behind her characters, as she wrote in her *Diary*, so as to bring on the page their most intimate thoughts, their most hidden self (Woolf 1978, 263). This time, on the contrary, she realised that a 'we' was most needed (Benziman 2006, 53-71). In the 1940s, Woolf eventually understood that she had to do the exact opposite of what she had written in her *The Common Reader* a few years before, when she had praised the comforting solitude of her own readings:

What is it that we are coming to want so persistently, that unless we get it instantly we must seek elsewhere? It is solitude. There is no privacy here. Always the door opens and someone comes in. All is shared, made visible, audible, dramatic. Meanwhile, as if tired with company, the mind steals off to muse in solitude; to think, not to act; to comment, not to share; to explore its own darkness, not the bright-lit-up surfaces of others. It turns to Donne, Montaigne, to Sir Thomas Browne, to the keepers of solitude. (Woolf 1925, 66)

The writing of *Between the Acts* represented Woolf's realisation that, with the impending war, doors had to be kept open and her ideas actually "shared,

made visible, audible, dramatic". Woolf's last novel was, in other words, her personal contribution to the creation of a peculiar sense of community, of a patriotism that she realised her country desperately needed. Obviously, her peculiar patriotism had nothing to do with the boorish propagandistic slogans that the rising totalitarian regimes were evoking everywhere; nor with the abhorred idea of the German *Volk*, around which Hitler had been rallying his most war-like generals and converts. As Julia Briggs put it:

In earlier novels, she had explored the experience of an individual in relation to a group, and the movement towards and away from a centre ('What we need is a centre. Something to bring us together...'). In 'Pointz Hall' [*Between the Acts*], these contrasting impulses are at once more conspicuous, yet also more closely linked. [...] Yet unity is not without its dangers, disastrously evident in totalitarianism, where mass demonstrations deter individuals from thinking morally for themselves, and encourage crowds to set up upon outsiders. (Briggs 2005, 374-5)

Woolf had always been perfectly aware of the dangerous connections between the kind of 'unionism' fostered by social institutions and what she called Hitlerism; which she had witnessed to be rampantly spreading through her beloved England (Miller 1998, 135). Building on a genre - the pageant - that had always been bent to serve opposing ideologies, Woolf's unusual patriotism in *Between the Acts* found its own shape in a peculiar epitome of English literature and culture in which her acquaintance with Shakespeare's *oeuvre* played a crucial role. "[S]he recognized and loathed the threat of nationalism", Briggs acknowledged, "yet she loved England - the St Ives of her childhood (Eden before the fall), London (her only patriotism, she told Ethel Smyth). [...] [In particular,] she loved the medium she worked in, the language and its literature, for literature, she insisted, was 'no one's private ground; [it] is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there'" (Briggs 2005, 370).

It is undoubtedly true that, through her use of the ambiguous genre of the pageant, Woolf aimed to establish subtle connections between that genre and the "contemporary fascist spectacle" that was spreading in Europe (Miller 1998, 135). With respect to the nationalistic slogans of the rising fascism, however, Woolf's patriotism emphasised the luminous living examples of England's diverse cultural and literary past, and thus undermined the nationalistic logic that underlay such slogans. Woolf clearly perceived that an appeal to that culture and literature was most needed in her present, which was becoming more and more sombre, and which threatened to shed an even more sombre light on the future. "Culture and literature", as Marina MacKay put it, "are mobilized, then, in the fight against what Woolf considers the inorganic forms of group consciousness that fascism brings into existence by force" (MacKay 2016, 155). What

better way, therefore, than presenting her readership with a novel that attempted to emulate the plays of the nation's most famous son and that was utterly weaved in his quotations, so as to remind everyone of the elements that kept them together? Here lies the meaning of the Shakespearean echoes that make up the fragmented thread of *Between the Acts*: they represent the culture and civilisation that was common to all British people. With his history plays, Shakespeare had indeed managed to create the myth of a proto-British national unity, whose fragile reality his contemporaries had somehow enjoyed, thanks to Elizabeth I's deft rule. In a likely attempt to evoke the much-loved Elizabethan Age, Woolf managed to fuse the Queen and the Bard into the character of her last *alter ego*, Miss La Trobe, and thus bring both their luminous examples into the 20th century - into her own present of lurking war. In *Between the Acts*, however, it is as if Woolf took Elizabeth I's and Shakespeare's persuasive rhetoric away from the war-like speeches of the much despised politicians and gave them back to her readership in their authenticity, thus highlighting their cultural significance. At least momentarily united by the no-matter-how-fragmented theatrical representation taking place at Pointz Hall, both characters and readers eventually came to embody a peculiar community that was seen by Woolf as the only hope to mend the tear produced by war (Briggs 2006, 12-3).

The community of people gathered at Pointz Hall in *Between the Acts* was actually peculiar, because it was not only composed of British citizens. Along with the descendants of the ancient local families, many newcomers were to be found among the audience of Miss La Trobe's pageant: "a scatter of odds and ends", as Woolf wrote (Woolf 2012, 341). This is significant because, once again, the writer distanced herself from the resounding slogans of the nationalists and rather evoked a culturally diverse melting pot, a "pot pourri" as it is called in the novel (Woolf 2012, 380). That was, after all, what she loved about her London, on which, as she had foretold, bombs had indeed started to be dropped: "[t]he passion of my life, that is the City of London - to see London all blasted, that too raked my heart" she wrote one of her friends on 11 September 1940 (quoted in McIntire 2007, 192). However, it was not easy to keep together such a culturally diverse community. Significantly though, the character who managed to do it, at least for a little time, was the artist herself, the anxious Miss La Trobe - whose name actually means "finder" or "inventor" (Briggs 2006, 20). She is the one who put together the pageant that everybody came to see, and represents Virginia Woolf's last, and possibly most explicit, *alter ego*, as well as the female counterpart of Shakespeare's Prospero. Just as the latter hastily played his magical tricks on the others characters of *The Tempest* to bring about his subtly political reform, Miss La Trobe knew well that also her masked appeal to culture, reason and peace had to be passed on quickly, before her audience would disperse.

[During the first intermission] Miss La Trobe stepped from her hiding. Flowing, and streaming on the grass, on the gravel, still for one moment she held them together – the dispersing company. Hadn't she, for twenty-five minutes, made them see? A vision imparted was relief from agony... for one moment... one moment. (Woolf 2012, 353)

Was it not for the already patent connection between the Shakespearean Prospero and Miss La Trobe, it could also be argued that Woolf established an even subtler connection between her *alter ego* and Shakespeare himself. Just as the Bard made a culturally diverse audience rush to the Globe to see his own plays, in Pointz Hall this same aim is accomplished by Miss La Trobe.

In weaving the multiple Shakespearean echoes in the linguistic thread of her novel, Woolf opposed the words pronounced by the actors of her pageant to the lurking threats of impending war, which constantly emerge to disrupt the pageant's dramatic illusion and testify to Woolf's own fears and uncertainties. Despite these difficulties, however, the repetition of these echoes would actually prove effective. They touched the "invisible strings" of each single member of the audience, as an elderly lady acknowledged, and, most of all, managed to awaken the very spirit of community that Woolf had understood to be necessary at the time. As Miss La Trobe herself admitted: "she was not merely a twitcher of individual strings; she was one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices into a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a recreated world" (378).

Here is, then, the true meaning of the Shakespearean "scraps, orts, and fragments" that constitute the thread of *Between the Acts* – as Miss La Trobe defines them, by quoting Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (397). These "fragments" somehow resolve the aphasia produced by the historical events in the characters of the novel, as well as in Woolf herself: "[w]e haven't the words", Mrs. Swithin protests at a certain point (332). The literary scoriae that Woolf weaves in the text, therefore, make her story, as well as history, go on; and this was what Woolf subtly wanted her readership to understand. It did not matter that they were misquotations, distorted and imprecise most of the time: what really mattered was their repetition. Thanks to this repetition, Woolf wrote, life was revived, unity was created, and war contrasted: "[i]t didn't matter what the words were; or who sang what", Miss La Trobe admitted, "Round and round they whirled, intoxicated by the music" (351). Thanks to these literary redundancies, despite the difficulties and the recurring interruptions that hint at the impending war, the pageant and life itself can go on – even if imperfectly. Unsurprisingly, Miss La Trobe's anxiety for the repeated threats to her pageant ("[i]llusion had failed. 'This is death'" [372]) is opposed by Woolf's multiplication of the Shakespearean echoes. *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, the *Sonnets*: virtually every line of the last part of the novel shows a more or less direct reference to the Bard's works, which look so

much like that “heap of broken images” that T.S. Eliot had used to keep his own *The Waste Land* together.

Similarly to Eliot’s final appeal to silence and peace, after such an accumulation of resounding Shakespearean echoes, Miss La Trobe’s own pageant ends in silence, and she brings on stage Woolf’s present moment of a Europe on the verge of World War II. During those ten minutes of silence, as Miller argued, “the spectacle is not the drama, but [the audience’s] lives which, by implication, they watch with dumb abandon. They are unable to think critically, unable to look at the program and notice the grand repetition they are facing as the spectacle of tyranny and war unfolds in Europe” (Miller 1998, 157). Setting aside the music and symbols that characterised nationalistic pageantry, Woolf proves once again her subtle critique of the aforementioned dialectic of such art. Her pageant is indeed something else. Differently from the depersonalising message that this genre usually imposed on the audience, the ten-minute silence at the end of Miss La Trobe’s pageant aims precisely to make the audience think over what they have just seen and especially over the threats looming on their own present days. In fact, this is not the real end of the pageant, nor of the novel. Woolf’s explicitly hopeful message has yet to come.

After this ten-minute break, all the actors of the show are brought on stage for the last time. From the first Britons to those living in the present days of the audience, they start reciting their own lines all together, so as to create a peculiar harmony out of an apparent disharmony: “[d]ispersed are we; who have come together”, a voice from the gramophone shouts tirelessly, “[b]ut [...] let us remain, whatever made that harmony” (Woolf 2012, 399). Needless to say, Woolf is quoting Shakespeare, once again. She chooses a famous line from *The Tempest*, which reiterates her hope to go back to those vital elements that could bring a community together and which Shakespeare embodied for her. “The collective vision played out in *Between the Acts*”, Catherine Wiley summarised, “asks both audience and reader to imagine the radical possibility of how we can stop history from repeating itself as war” (Wiley 1995, 5). This is exactly the question that another off-screen voice asks, as the people in the audience are getting ready to go back to their own lives – possibly, it is Woolf’s own voice, who is trying to make them pause and think for yet a few more minutes:

Before we part [...] let’s talk in words of one syllable, without larding, stuffing or cant. Let’s break the rhythm and forget the rime. And calmly consider ourselves. Ourselves. Some bony. Some fat. [...] Liars most of us. Thieves too. [...] The poor are as bad as the rich are. Perhaps worse. Don’t hide among rags. [...] Oh we are all the same! [...] Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how’s this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by [...] orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves? (Woolf 2012, 394)

As her novel shows, Woolf had clearly found the answer to this fundamental question. In the notes she had scribbled down in those months, she had notably written that “there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself” (Woolf 1985b, 72). If, then, we are everything that exists – fragments, orts, and scraps ourselves –, is it not evident, she wrote in *Between the Acts*, that “we should unite?” (Woolf 2012, 397). Surely, it was evident to her. Again, it is not surprising that, in the novel that testifies the most to her effort to contrast the tearing brutality of the war, Woolf condensed so many references to Shakespeare. As she would argue in *Anon*, which dates back to the weeks before her own death, her contemporaries – herself included – used to refer to the Elizabethans so as to demonstrate their noble intents (Silver 1979, 386).

Significantly, however, while forcefully claiming the need to strengthen a communal unity, Woolf rediscovered the importance of everyone’s individuality, which she seemed to have set aside in this novel. If acknowledging that we too are fragments, orts, and scraps means acknowledging our ineradicable differences, still the harmony produced by the fore-mentioned choral scene testifies to “some genuine attainment of a collective selfhood” (Benziman 2006, 68-9). “Only if the masses delude themselves into seeing culture as an all-powerful unit over which they have no control” Wiley had argued in this regard, “can Fascism triumph” (Wiley 1995, 16). Therefore, only if we can manage to make our differences coexist within the shared set of values that culture represents, Woolf seems to claim, we can actually prevent the devastation of new dictatorships and wars. In other words, only if we realise that we can always question and (re)shape our own culture – just as Woolf had been doing in her life-long confrontation with Shakespeare.

#### 4 Conclusion

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf celebrated the imperfect community that had created the history and culture that she deeply relished, and on top of which Shakespeare shone as the best outcome. That history and that culture, Woolf unmistakably wrote, could and had to be opposed to the barren and destructive reality of war and violence that tended to dominate in the world. Partially setting aside her faith in the individuality of each person, it was in the community and in the union among different people, created by their shared culture that Woolf eventually seemed to find the meaning of life and the only possibility to contrast violence and hate. She loved life so much that she continued to look into it until the end of her own existence, in order to give it a meaning and turn it into a useful example for other people. Despite the imperfections and shortcomings, Woolf repeatedly demonstrated, life had to be always celebrated and protected. This is

actually the meaning of the aforementioned Shakespearean quotation from *Cymbeline* - "Fear no more the heath of the Sun" - that Clarissa Dalloway repeats to herself until the end of her own story. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Woolf came back to this play even in *Between the Acts*, during the play-within-the-play moment of the comedy represented in honour of the fictional Queen Elizabeth. By modifying the explicit quotation of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Woolf significantly turned the imperative "Fear no more" into a kind of dialogue that ended with the characters' - thus Woolf's - message of hope being eventually understood and passed onto the readers: "[t]was a winter's night [...] I mind me that, I to whom all's one now, summer or winter. | You say the sun shines? I believe you, sir..." (Woolf 2012, 348).

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