

Monika Sosnowska* 
Robert Sawyer**

Introduction: Jan Kott and Posthumanist Entanglements

In a world where humanism still sounds grandiloquent, where human exceptionalism functions as a norm in human and non-human relations, where anthropocentrism resides in human cultural DNA, a transformation of the human relationship to nature and its animate and inanimate occupants requires an urgent rethinking of these distinctions. The emergence and flourishing of “new humanities” or “posthumanities,” with its key discipline known as post-humanism—serves as an opportunity to rethink and refashion the concept of the humanist human (intentional, autonomous, conscious and therefore exceptional) as well as to reexamine the doctrine that “man is the measure of all things.”

By the late twentieth century posthumanities has come to embrace a set of research approaches and tendencies related to posthumanism, and human-centrism is the central target. In general, a humanist worldview is based on the assumption that humans are the main protagonists in a drama we call *Reality*, while everything else plays the role of background actors, then a posthumanist perspective suggests that our world’s stage is capacious enough to house both human and non-human actors, playing roles that are often interchangeable. In fact, humans are “merely players” in a history of the world, being outnumbered both as a species but also as an individual. The nonspeaking and non-singing extras in this production have always constituted the majority of beings/organisms/entities. Such realization allows for a radical extension of *dramatis personae* in the above mentioned play entitled *Reality* by adding all non-human personae to the list, since all personae (meaning all organic and non-organic life) are co-dependent and none is devoid of agential capacities/possibilities.

* University of Lodz, Poland. monika.sosnowska@uni.lodz.pl

** East Tennessee State University, USA. resawyer1@charter.net

In each act and scene of the play mentioned previously, be it a comical, tragic-comical or tragical episode, the organic structure of the play insists on a distribution of agency. According to posthumanist assumptions, any change that happens, either in a real or fictional world of page and stage, has a web-like structure where one thing or episode is connected and is dependent on everything else. Interconnection of all beings is no longer a concept derived from Eastern philosophies. Even a human body is not purely human; if we look at the human body at the cellular level, metagenomic studies prove that only around 10% of homo sapiens's cells contain human DNA. The remaining 90% belong to a large community of species, namely bacteria and viruses. Our bodies create multispecies ecosystems, habituated by microscopic companion species. Human bodies are not exceptional (again) in this respect, since plants and animals also contain microorganisms within them, an ecological community invisible to the eye. Symbiotic beings, characterized by being multiple organisms-within-an-organism, that is WHAT we are, and why we have always been posthuman. Interestingly enough, decentring and/or unprivileging of a human, abandoning the humanist essentialism, re-conceptualizing of "a human" and "human nature," has been taking place in natural science as a byproduct of scientific findings, simultaneously being a crucial "contribution" to an ongoing posthumanist project.

Posthumanist approaches to cultural texts found in literature, film, arts and different media, as this issue demonstrates, have a common denominator: they seek to find out more about the multidiversity of species as well as non-living entities. It aims at moving beyond anthropocentric hierarchy of beings that always situates all non-homo sapiens on a lower plane, an inferior ontological, epistemological, ethical, intellectual, and cognitive position. In an old cultural game of comparison between humans and non-humans, the latter are considered as flawed/lacking/defective. To perpetuate this game, Western representations suggest that different "others" deserve to be referred to in a pejorative way i.e. by suffixing the "-less" on selected adjectives. For example, machines are emotionless, plants are bloodless, animals are wordless. Posthumanism powered by new scientific findings questions such assumptions and representations of "others" in search of relational and affirmative expressions and images. We are privileged to witness the dawning of a fresh, non-humancentric approach, applicable to all texts of culture, allowing for an emancipatory project to embrace the "-less"-communities and the "-less"-entities, those that have spent most of their cultural presences under the humanist regime. Not only can the liberating potential of a posthumanist perspective be freed for "the others," but it can also save "the human" from its cultural and ecological hubris.

One of the most important new fields where posthumanist perspective and theory is tested is Shakespeare studies. The ever-expanding universe of posthumanities could not only resist this expansion, but give birth to a Post-

humanist Shakespeare galaxy, which develops gracefully, yet ficklely, as befits an emerging body in cosmos. Karen Raber, via Bruno Latour, considers what Shakespeare offers: “a chance to relocate the human” (2018: 2) in this massive sphere. As Raber also notes in her interview in this issue, “Posthuman” refers to a being, object, or other entity that lies outside of definitions of “the human”—that is, it might be something like an amoeba or a dog, both of which are considered less than human; it might be a ghost or god, considered more than human; or it might be a robot or android, whose relationship to what we call “the human” is unresolvably vexed.

Posthumanist Shakespeare as a sub-discipline in Shakespeare studies pays a great deal of attention to ways in which new meanings in Shakespeare’s works can be constructed and invokes numerous questions: How to mean by Shakespeare (using Terence Hawkes’ expression) in a posthumanist way? On what basis can we claim that Shakespeare is our posthumanist? How can we approach Shakespeare in the 21st century, taking into account scientific data about ourselves as organisms-within-an-organism in constant flux and our symbiotic nature? How can we read his text to discover more about ourselves, about a multispecies nature of human nature; about the significance of non-humans in a planetary web of actions and reactions? Hasn’t Shakespeare always been “our contemporary” (to evoke the Kottian phrase) and haven’t we always been posthuman to some extent? Shakespeare as a playwright investigated human nature to mean by us. Jan Kott (1914-2001) as a theatre and drama critic advocated interpretations valid for us and demonstrated Shakespeare’s contemporaneity, and we as literary critics suggest that he is our posthumanist. We keep Shakespeare our contemporary by rendering him our post-humanist. Kott’s title of his influential book, *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, which contains a series of essays written over several years is our great inspiration. His reflections on Shakespeare’s works shaped the presentist title of this special issue of *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*.

In his analyses of Shakespeare’s texts and theatre productions, Kott availed himself of a technological expression—“the grand mechanism,” which suggested how all things unavoidably interconnect, and what we will refer to as “entanglements” for this issue. As Rey Chow explains, the word “suggest[s] a topological looping together that is at the same time an enmeshment of topics, which create loops of meaning,” in short a “tangle of things held together or laid over one another in nearness and likeness” (Chow 1). Such entanglements can be related to quantum physics, where the term “designates mysterious connections between particles” because they produce simultaneous “reactions that are not due to proximity” (Chow 2, note 2). Such scientific similarities between literature and the physical sciences is a staple of the posthuman project, which, as we will note, Kott seems to have been aware.

What many theatre practitioners and literary critics are not aware is that Kott was fascinated by such seemingly different topics, and in one instance, while admitting he was intrigued by Leon Chwistek's paintings, Kott confesses he was more interested in Chwistek's "system of logic" rather than his art (*Still Alive* 48). Indeed in his autobiography he claimed that Chwistek's "own system of binary notation for phrases and cardinal numbers . . . anticipated computer notation" (48-49) and Kott then details Chwistek's formula:

It consisted of two signs: a dot and a dash. One was a dot, two a dot and a dash, three a dash and a dot, four two dots, and so on. This new system obsessed me. Once I was awakened in the middle of the night by [his wife] Lidia's laughing out loud when, in a dream, I repeated: "A dot, a dash, two dashes." (49)

Other major interests for Kott included existential philosophy which he studied in France, the genre of "Theatre of the Absurd," the notion of the grotesque, polemics on political history, and theatrical practice, so much so that his innovative ideas strongly influenced Peter Brook when he was director of the Royal Shakespeare Company. His book *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, according to Michael Taylor, is "the most widely read book on Shakespeare since A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904); Taylor adds that "Kott replaces the . . . authoritarianism of Tillyard's Elizabethan World Picture" with what Kott refers to as the "Grand Mechanism," mentioned above, which is "equally Elizabethan (and Polish) and expresses the conviction that history has no meaning and stands still, or constantly repeats its cruel cycle," a complex and intertwined reading of history (180).

Our issue works on two planes of entanglement, each piece meshes with the others, and they also highlight entanglement individually. For example, essays by James Tink and the trio of Elizaveta TsirinaFedorova, Julia HabaOsca, Jose Saiz Molina highlight Kott's prescient notions of a post-humanist world, while an entanglement of the human with the non-human is considered by Anne Sophie Refskou's, Przemyslaw Pożar's, and Robert Sawyer's contributions. We also show the technological entanglement of the distant past in Darlena Ciraulo's essay on print culture, and in the current digital age, in Seth Lewis's piece. Similar to Kott's own multiple fascinations, Lisa Starks shows us how the literary, religious and Shakespearean worlds of *Twin Peaks* remain entangled, while Robert Darcy demonstrates how Shakespeare's sonnets can be profitably entangled with posthuman facial recognition technologies.

As the essays in this issue show, Jan Kott provided us with a prescient warning about the notion of a posthuman world, a location we all currently occupy. What we do in this space—now infected by a global pandemic—is not just up to us as humans, but also determined by the various agents, microscopic objects, and cellular units that act on us as much as we act on them. In Joe

Campana's "Afterword" in this issue he also raises the question about where do we go from here, agreeing with our belief that a central benefit of studies anchored in Shakespeare, especially in a journal like this one, is that adaptation, translation, and remediation rise to the fore in (post)humanist approaches.

Shakespeare's painting for this issue, by Danielle Byington entitled "Shakespeare in Pieces," reflects our belief that "Shakespeare" is composed of bits and pieces, an assemblage of colorful parts or collage; however, if one part is removed—the image becomes incomplete and somehow deformed, just as our human or even posthuman bodies would be since they too are organic structures. The image also invites us to appreciate diversity on a socio-cultural level, as well as the biodiversity in nature which surrounds us.

WORKS CITED

- Chow, Rey. *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2012.
- Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare our Contemporary*. English translation. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964.
- Kott, Jan. *Still Alive*. English translation. Princeton: Yale UP, 1994.
- Raber, Karen. *Shakespeare and Posthumanist Theory*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018.
- Taylor, Michael. *Shakespeare Criticism in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford, Oxford UP, 2001.