Rooke's Hooker: Prolepsis, Natural Law, Decentring

in Shakespeare's Dog

Michael H. Keefer

We will base our argument on one animal only—the dog, if you like, which is thought to be the most worthless of animals. But even in this case we shall discover that the animal in question is in no way inferior to ourselves... falling short of humans neither in the accuracy of perceptions, nor in internal reason, nor (to go still further) in external reason, or speech....

Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, ch. 14

1. The two Hookers

"'Hooker,' it might almost be said, is the name of a book rather than the name of a man...." Such, in view of a severe paucity of biographical information, was the opinion of Christopher Morris, whose introduction to the Everyman edition of Richard Hooker's Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity framed my first encounter, more than thirty years ago, with that classic of Elizabethan prose and Anglican theology. But readers of Leon Rooke's novel Shakespeare's Dog are in a position to contradict Morris's claim—to declare with confidence that "Hooker" is the name neither of a man nor of a book, but of a dog—and furthermore, that there are few if any dogs since the time our two species first entered into a symbiotic relationship about whose life and opinions we know more.

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Richard Hooker and Rooke's Mr. Hooker are related by more than their shared name. The latter, after meditating on a blazing vision he has experienced of the deer he had poached, surreptitiously devoured, and digested ("Might now they put Hooker's image up on church wall where saint previously had stood? In niches now vacant, in the Protestant zeal to strip wall and window of the Catholic heresy"), pauses to ask himself, aptly enough: "How stand you, Hooker, on ecclesiastical polity?"\(^3\)

The one-day action of Rooke's novel occupies the eve and early morning of the day, some three years after William Shakespeare's marriage to Anne Hathaway in 1582, of his and his dog's departure for London and a theatrical career. We can draw from this the literally preposterous consequence that by the mid-1580s, at a time when Richard Hooker had probably not so much as contemplated writing his *Ecclesiastical Polity* (Books One to Four of that *opus* were published in 1593, Book Five in 1597),\(^4\) its title was already in the mouth of Shakespeare's dog. In this odd prolepsis can be descried a first anticipation of one of the principal concerns of this essay.

2. Prolepsis

Prolepsis is, quite precisely, the rhetorical figure of anticipation, through which the subsequent and secondary is made to come before, and thus to assert priority over that which 'properly,' in due temporal sequence, precedes it. Although overlooked by Harold Bloom in his study of the "revisionary ratios" through which strong writers evade or surmount the anxiety of influence stemming from their initial dependency upon literary

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\(^4\) Hooker died in 1600; the last three books of *Ecclesiastical Polity* were not printed until the mid-seventeenth century.
precursors, prolepsis is arguably the most powerful such ratio or strategy.\(^1\) The theology of Valentinus, the second-century gnostic heretic, was proleptic in its insistence that the Jewish and Christian orthodoxies which he sought to subvert are corruptions of and declinations from a primordial condition of fullness proclaimed in Valentinus' own writings.\(^6\) John Milton, in identifying the narratives elaborated by Homer, Virgil, and other pagan poets as derived from demonic deformations of the originary truth which he recounts, made *Paradise Lost* a proleptic source of his epic precursors.\(^7\) William Blake in turn trumped Milton, proleptically making the earthly doings of his precursor into no more than a material echo of the primordial events narrated in his poem *Milton*.\(^8\)

Harold Bloom exempted Shakespeare from the patterns analyzed in *The Anxiety of Influence* for two reasons that come close to being mutually contradictory: first, that he “belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness,” and secondly, that he “is the largest instance in the language of a phenomenon that stands outside the concern of this book: the absolute absorption of the precursor.”\(^9\) Shakespeare did not play the game; Shakespeare won the game.

Bloom has more recently revised this opinion, to the point of finding Shakespeare's struggle with his great precursor and rival inscribed within the text of *King Lear*: “I tend to find Shakespeare in Edgar, perhaps because I locate Christopher


\(^9\) Bloom, *Anxiety*, p. 11.
Marlowe in Edmund, but I do not wholly persuade myself." We can with greater conviction discover the influence of another Shakespearean precursor in this same play, notably in one of Lear’s most extraordinary speeches, the “prayer” he addresses from his own outcast abjection to the homeless, to “houseless poverty”:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.  

The precursor in question is none other than Mr. Hooker, Shakespeare’s dog. In the first chapter of Rooke’s novel, we learn that the young Shakespeare, when left to his own devices, was “strict in his conformity”:

He would rattle no sword at another man’s destiny, for all was fair and desirable in his mind’s realm: the sop hated equality.... Will could see men hanged for stealing a biscuit and smile at this prettily. He would take no umbrage at innocent throats slit or widows set aflame for concocting eel’s broth of a Sunday. “We

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are hooked to our stars, Hooker," the stink would say. "We sink or swim by their glimmer."¹²

Hooker's corrective response to the budding poet's moral aberrations was to "fasten deep bite on his ankle and carry my fangs deeper with every shaking."

"Let go, you trollop!" He'd beat fist on my noodle and whap me with sticks and dance on one leg as he howled his pain out over the borough. Yet I'd hold on. I'd gnaw the priss without mercy. Grrr. Chomp, chomp. Until in the end he'd beg my favor, weep forgiveness, charge that he would give thought to mending his reason.... "Loosen me, Hooker." The wretch's eyes would water, and he'd drop down to give me head pats, to play at tickling my tummy, saying, "Please, Hooker! Please! Open your jaws to my ankle this once and I shall ever hereafter open my heart to humanity."

And only when he made me believe he meant it would I let my jaws slacken.

"Ooo, I'm hobbled!" he'd cry. "Ooo, I'm lamed. Get me a cup for begging, Hooker, for you've got me as bleeding-maimed as your lot of stinking beggars. Ooo, this smarts! Let me lean on you, Hooker."

And so the false biddy would slouch, hobble, and lean.¹³

¹² Rooke, Shakespeare's Dog, p. 34.
¹³ Ibid., pp. 35-36.
Remembering that the names Hooker and Rooke are a near-rhyme, we may uncover in this Shakespearean precursor a double identity: Elizabethan dog, to be sure, but also, proleptically, a very contemporary writer, whose voice retains a distinctive North Carolinian twang.

3. Theologies of natural law

“To impart of holy things to the dogs is forbidden,” wrote Clement of Alexandria in the late second century, “so long as they remain beasts.” Among Mr. Hooker’s canine compeers there is a near consensus that he evades this condition. Marr, his faithless partner, is the first to raise the issue; her opinion is seconded by Wolfsleach, her accomplice in dog-adultery:

I gave the harlot a shriveling stare. She took it with a pouty, maddening grin. “I don’t like you,” she glomped. “You’ve changed. You get more like the Two Foots every day.”

Piddle on the cur.

Wolf limped over to lay his head down on her, whining like a bowlegged toad complaining how I’d broke his legs. To lift a hooded glance at me, saying, “Marr’s right, Mr. Hooker. You’ve gone round the bend. You’ve turned against dog. Next, we know, you’ll be wearing pants. You’ll be scribbling too.”

If Richard Hooker was a theologian by profession, Rooke’s canine Hooker is one by predilection—though to very different effect. Both might be described as theologians

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of natural law, but while for the Anglican cleric natural law is the frame of order\textsuperscript{16} through which a wholly sovereign divine authority governs its creation (and itself), for the dog it amounts to an ethical imperative underlying his passionate commitment to egalitarian justice.

Richard Hooker is a conservative whose defence of an Anglican \textit{via media} rests upon a theology of natural law that had been authoritatively formulated by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century;\textsuperscript{17} he voices his resistance to reform of the established church in order that, as he says, “posterity may know we have not loosely through silence permitted things to pass away as in a dream….”\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity} is a magisterial polemic against Calvinist views on church government which had come to threaten key elements of the Elizabethan settlement: episcopal control of and royal supremacy over the church.\textsuperscript{19} Its argument hinges on Hooker’s recognition of a link between the insistence of Calvin and his English disciples that the principles of church government must be drawn from scripture alone, and their assertion that any concession of agency to secondary causes, human or other, would amount to a derogation of the absolute sovereignty of God’s will.

\textsuperscript{15} Rooke, \textit{Shakespeare’s Dog}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{16} I borrow this phrase from the title of an anthology now long out of print: \textit{The Frame of Order: An Outline of Elizabethan Belief Taken from Treatises of the Late Sixteenth Century}, ed. James Winny (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957).
Since for Calvin the daily rising of the sun and the slightest velleity of any human will are alike directly willed by God, natural law has only a residual and perversely negative function in the Calvinist cosmos: like the law of Moses, by which “wee are made more inexcusable,” its purpose is to show that we must bear responsibility for our (divinely willed) damnable condition. Calvin writes of natural law that St. Paul, “where he teacheth that by the creation of the world was disclosed that which was to be known concerning God, doeth not meane such a disclosing as may be comprehended by the wit of men: but rather sheweth, that the same proceedeth no further but to make them inexcusable.” He sees nature as radically opposed to divine grace—to the point of declaring that the flesh must be mortified until everything we have from ourselves is “anneanty et aboly.”

In what may initially seem a similar manner, Hooker writes that “Those things which nature is said to do, are by divine art performed, using nature as an instrument; nor is there any such art or knowledge divine in nature herself working....” But this instrumentality operates in terms of an all-pervasive structure of law, which in Aristotelian fashion directs natural agents “in the means whereby they tend to their own perfection,” at the same time also “touch[ing] them as they are sociable parts united unto one body ... bind[ing] them each to serve unto other’s good, and all to prefer the good of

the whole before whatsoever their own particular....”\textsuperscript{24} Nature and grace are for Hooker cooperating rather than antithetical forces;\textsuperscript{25} likewise, he views nature and reason as overlapping categories.\textsuperscript{26}

In this light, human traditions assume a value that Calvinists would utterly deny to them: “The general and perpetual voice of man,” Hooker writes, “is as the sentence of God himself. For that which all men have at all times learned, Nature herself must needs have taught; and God being the author of Nature, her voice is but his instrument.”\textsuperscript{27} Noting that many “principal points” of Christian faith are nowhere mentioned in scripture, but have been deduced out of it “by collection,” Hooker raises the question of “how far we are to proceed by collection, before the full and complete measure of things necessary be made up.”\textsuperscript{28} Having argued that Calvinist principles of church government are for the most part “collections” of this kind, he can urge that it makes better sense to follow Anglican tradition, supplementing the laws of scripture with “rules and canons of that law which is written in all men’s hearts....”\textsuperscript{29}

Hooker’s anxious sense of a parallel threat to the structures of the Anglican church and the ideology of natural law gives rise to some of his most resonant prose:

Now if nature should intermit her course, and leave altogether
though it were but for a while the observation of her own laws; if

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., I. iii. 5, vol. 1, p. 161.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., III. viii. 6, vol. 1, p. 312: St. Paul “teacheth ... that nature hath need of grace, whereunto I hope we are not opposite, by holding that grace hath use of nature.”
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., I. viii. 9, vol. 1, p. 182: “Law rational therefore, which men commonly use to call the Law of Nature, meaning thereby the Law which human Nature knoweth itself in reason universally bound unto, which also for that cause may be termed most fitly the Law of Reason; this Law, I say, comprehended all those things which men by the light of their natural understanding evidently know, or at leastwise may know, to be beseeing or unbeseeing, virtuous or vicious, good or evil for them to do.”
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., I. viii. 3, vol. 1, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., I. xiv. 2, vol. 1, p. 216.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., III. vii. 2, vol. 1, p. 307.
those principal and mother elements of the world, whereof all things in this lower world are made, should lose the qualities which now they have; if the frame of that heavenly arch erected over our heads should loosen and dissolve itself; if the celestial spheres should forget their wonted motions, and by irregular volubility turn themselves any way as it might happen; if the prince of the lights of heaven, which now as a giant doth run his unwearied course, should as it were through a languishing faintness begin to stand and to rest himself; if the moon should wander from her beaten way, the times and seasons of the year blend themselves by disordered and confused mixture, the winds breathe out their last gasp, the clouds yield no rain, the earth be defeated of heavenly influence, the fruits of the earth pine away as children at the withered breasts of their mother no longer able to yield them relief: what would become of man himself, whom all these things now do serve? See we not plainly that obedience of creatures unto the law of nature is the stay of the whole world?  

The imagery of a loss of nurturance may be expressive of anxieties on behalf of the church, but what this apocalyptic passage most deeply conveys is a fear of social disorder. Loosening, dissolution, and forgetfulness of due order are linked with “irregular volubility”; and the “stay” that prevents weakness, disorder and confusion is the “obedience of creatures” to law. “Equality,” C. S. Lewis observed, “is not a conception that has any charms for Hooker,” who as he notes found “no equality within  

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us; the first Law of Nature is the law of internal hierarchy: that ‘the soul ought to conduct
the body, and the spirit of our minds the soul’.”31

But if “irregular volubility”—speech that escapes the control of institutions and of
hierarchies, whether internal or macrocosmic—is a source of deep anxiety for Richard
Hooker, it is on the other hand a constitutive principle of Leon Rooke’s fictional dog.
The canine Hooker shares with his Anglican namesake a revulsion from what he calls
“the conscience that called it moral to uphold that we owed nothing to each other.”
Unlike Richard Hooker, however, he is keenly aware of social injustice and
immiseration, and of the violence inflicted upon an Elizabethan underclass of vagrants,
beggars, women persecuted as witches—and dogs. Openly scorning dogma, conformity
and social hierarchy, he declares: “I wanted railing and ranting. I wanted hot
revolution.”32

This Hooker’s affinities, should we wish to trace them, are with radicals and
heretics—with the late-medieval pantheist Brethren of the Free Spirit, who believed the
soul’s vastness to be such that “It fills all things,” and asserted that “Every rational
creature is in its nature blessed”;33 or with their sixteenth-century spiritual descendents,
the Anabaptist radicals who developed a “mystical ‘gospel of all creatures,’ referring to
suffering, the way of all creatures in their kingdom of blood,” and who in Elizabethan
England became known as the Family of Love.34

Something much like this is the burden of Mr. Hooker’s differences with “Young
William”:

31 C. S. Lewis, English Literature of the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama (1954; rpt. London, Oxford,
32 Rooke, Shakespeare’s Dog, pp. 34-35.
33 Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of
Bend an ear, Shaxpoot, I tell him. Listen to Hooker. Your soul is rotten, but it is immortal....

Soul's immortal. A dog's eyes and nose knows it's there. And it seemed to me it was now at play in our backyard. Something was at gnaw under the latticework and I thought that's where it had gone. Then there was a rustle on the snake tree and I reasoned it was searching that space. Dust swirled a small funnel in the yard. Soul again? Getting desperate? Or was it only wind?....

No matter. Soul goes where it goes. Taking its greatest strength, I'd say, from dog.  

The young Shakespeare holds instead to a doctrine of hierarchical order that has strong affinities with the other Hooker's theology:

There was a chain of being, Will was like to lecture me, that went from God on high to rocks and reptiles down below. Dog was with brute beast, a shade up. This, the natural hierarchy, as he put it. Reading it off, as he would read a sign on the tavern door. Questioning nothing....

Potty, the lad was, licking up his time's dogma as I would lick scented stick or glide my tongue over leg of mutton.  

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36 Ibid., pp. 33-34.
The dog’s lesson is that writerly greatness can be achieved only by those who liberate themselves from such commonplaces and align themselves with the radical pantheism of egalitarian justice:

...for what worth was a scribbler if his weight was not put in with the long march of impugned humanity? Soul endured the ravages of fate; soul was immortal. Soul gets by by hook and crook, by quill and by quiver; it seeks out all manner of things, showing its plume in flower bed or grass or animal or even a limestone field.... The soul’s plume lays the grandeur over all of life....

Moreover, his dog-theology incorporates and finds its end in a level of the natural that was also explored by Adamite and Familist religious radicals in Shakespeare’s time, but that is necessarily repressed in any orthodox natural theology:

... there stood my bloodmate Terry, stirring up all manner of memories pleasant and unpleasant. She was making my dogger yearn to plug up life, to cork up the whole of it so that I might stand back from my tongue-hang and verily ask, What is dog? What is a dog’s life? Whereof has he come and whither will he go? .... So fill up the hole, I thought. Let dogger and hole become one and let time quit.... Plugging takes a dog back to where it was dog began....

4. Richard Hooker and Shakespeare

37 Ibid., p. 36.
38 Ibid., p. 129.
Although there is little evidence of connections between the writings of William Shakespeare and his older contemporary Richard Hooker, the latter was regularly deployed by conservative Shakespeare scholars of the mid-twentieth century as a tool for locating and fixing the bard’s opinions on matters social and political. Hardin Craig, for example, in his often-reprinted study *The Enchanted Glass* (1935), was in no doubt as to Shakespeare’s view of social class divisions. Using Hooker to frame the question, Craig assimilates Shakespeare to Hooker’s position on class; he then cites Ulysses’ speech on degree in *Troilus and Cressida* (treated as though this unpleasantly devious character’s opinions could be unambiguously equated with those of the playwright, and as though the text were a political treatise rather than a play) as confirmation of the substantial identity of the thought of Shakespeare and Hooker—who are finally trotted out together to endorse and legitimize the inequities of social class in Craig’s century as well as of their own.

Another classic of mid-twentieth-century Shakespeare scholarship, E. M. W. Tillyard’s *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943), which was written as a by-product of his larger study of Shakespeare’s history plays, deploys Richard Hooker in a parallel (if more subtle) manner. Passages from the first book of Hooker’s *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, the Church Homily *Of Obedience*, Elyot’s *Book of the Governor*, the preface to Raleigh’s *History of the World*, and Spenser’s *Hymn of Love* are used, along with the


[40] Ibid., pp. 72-73: “We may still see the social classes that Hooker and Shakespeare saw. We may explain them economically as resulting from control over the necessities and possibilities of life, or socially as resulting from dominance in matters of opinion. We may think biologically of the social degrees and orders of the world as degrees of advantage in environment; or traditionally these orders of society may seem to be religious or political interpretations of man’s sense of his own inferiority or superiority…. Hooker accepted, explained, and in minor ways improved a wide hypothesis to account for the universe about us, namely, as the plan of the Creator. That hypothesis rested squarely on unchanging fact then as now.”
inevitable long quotation from Ulysses' speech on degree from the third scene of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, to establish the contours of a conception of order and hierarchy that "must have been common to all Elizabethans of even modest intelligence."

Hooker, it turns out, is the central figure: "He has the acutest sense of what the ordinary educated man can grasp and having grasped ratify. It is this tact that assures us that he speaks for the educated nucleus that dictated the current beliefs of the Elizabethan Age. He represents far more truly the background of Elizabethan literature than do the coney-catching pamphlets or the novel of low life."\(^{41}\) Hooker also provides Tillyard with powerful evidence that "If the Elizabethans believed in an ideal order animating earthly order, they were terrified lest it be upset, and appalled by the visible tokens of disorder that suggested its upsetting:"\(^{42}\): he quotes in full the passage about nature intermitting its course and "irregular volubility" that I have quoted above. Finally, Hooker's remark, at the end of Book One of *Ecclesiastical Polity*, that the voice of law is "the harmony of the world" is identified by Tillyard with the metaphor of harmony in Ulysses's speech: "Take but degree away, untune that string, / And hark what discord follows...."\(^{43}\)

That there is much more than this to the historical and literary record might be deduced from Keith Thomas's documentation of the behaviour in church of Elizabethans who "jostled for pews, nudged their neighbours, hawked and spat, knitted, made coarse

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\(^{41}\) E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943; rpt. London: Chatto & Windus, 1956), p. 10. The slide, within the space of a single page, from the claim that all but the stupidest of Elizabethans shared the orthodox view of social order to an acknowledgment that what is being discussed is the hegemonic ideology of a social elite ("the educated nucleus that dictated the current beliefs...") is typical of Tillyard’s mode of arguing.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., p. 15.

remarks, told jokes, fell asleep and even let off guns, or from a sampling of such earthy, dialogical, insubordinate writers as Thomas Nashe, who in defending the memory of Robert Greene (author of “coney-catching pamphlets” and many other things) against the slanders of Gabriel Harvey, Tillyard’s academic predecessor at Cambridge, wrote that Hee had his faultes, and thou thy follyes. Debt and deadly sinne who is not subject to? With any notorious crime I never knew him tainted.... A good fellowe hee was..., and in one yeare hee pist as much against the walls, as thou and thy two brothers spent in three.45

But as I have argued elsewhere, Tillyard’s reduction of a rapidly evolving culture, a complex mixture of residual, dominant, repressed, and emergent elements, into a static and unitary “picture,” an authoritarian shadow of the whole, is achieved by deliberately ignoring everything in that culture that contradicts his own heavy investment in authority and submissiveness. The result is what I have termed a “subtractive politicizing” of Elizabethan literature, and a right-wing appropriation of Shakespeare as its central figure.46

This Tillyardian subtractive politicizing has enjoyed a remarkably wide and durable success. In 1983, the year in which Shakespeare’s Dog won the Governor-General’s award for fiction, Nigel Lawson, Margaret Thatcher’s plump Chancellor of the Exchequer, was quoted in The Guardian as fondly citing the familiar lines from Troilus and Cressida (“Take but degree away, untune that string, / And hark what discord

45 Thomas Nashe, Strange Newes, Of the intercepting certaine Letters, and a Convoy of Verses, as they were going Privilie to victuall the Low Countries (London, 1592), sig. E4r-v. (I have made some small changes to the spelling.)
follows”), and as commenting that “The fact of differences, and the need for some kind of hierarchy, both these facts, are expressed more powerfully there than anywhere else I know in literature…. Shakespeare was a Tory, without any doubt.” As Margot Heinemann remarks,

To hear Shakespeare cited directly in the context of cutting the health service and reducing taxation on the well-to-do is unnerving…. We see more clearly what the struggle over the meanings of Shakespeare is really about: or at least it concentrates the mind.47

5. Mr. Hooker and the Shakespeareans

The history of criticism shows us too ready to indulge a not wholly inexplicable fancy that in Hamlet we behold the frustrated and inarticulate Shakespeare furiously wagging his tail in an effort to tell us something. (Stephen Booth, 1969)48

Can we now define the central joke of Shakespeare's Dog? Ralph Waldo Emerson declared, in the mid-nineteenth century, that Shakespeare wrote the text of modern life; the text of manners: he drew the man of England and Europe; the father of the man in America; he drew the man, and described the day, and what is done in it: he read the hearts of men and women, their probity, and their second thoughts


and wiles; ... he knew the laws of repression which make the
police of nature.\(^{49}\)

As Michael Bristol suggests, Emerson was responding both to "Shakespeare's extraordinary transumptive power, his ability to appropriate everything that precedes him," and also to his "extraordinary proleptic and anticipatory power"; the former "creates an appearance of striking and sudden emergence," while the latter gives his work "an absolutely convincing but altogether precocious modernity."\(^{50}\) In similar terms, one might describe Leon Rooke's novel as a response to the transumptive power of the twentieth-century institutions associated with the reproduction and transmission of Shakespeare: a response to their extraordinary ability to sanitize and prettify the poet, to reduce his writings to the dimensions of an ideology of hierarchy and submission—and, having subtractively politicized them, to make them available for use by a mean-spirited neoconservatism.

Rooke's joke is at once a prolepsis, an inversion, and a decentring. Hooker, the theologian whom conservative mid-twentieth-century Shakespeareans had made the basis of their transumptive or metaleptic appropriations of Shakespeare as the figurehead of an unambiguous orthodoxy, is proleptically inserted into the formative stage of the poet's development—as a confirmed politico-religious radical, an active egalitarian, and a dog—and this canine consciousness becomes the centre of the story. Rooke concedes to the Hardin Craigs and Tillyards a Shakespeare who is "strict in his conformity," but at the price of identifying this orthodoxy with immaturity, and of exposing their own favourite proof-text as the young poet's misprision of canine irony:


\(^{50}\) Bristol, *Shakespeare's America*, p. 125.
“Untune the lute,” under breath I’d utter, meaning it ironical.
“Take but degree away and hark Jupiter’s bolts that would follow.”
He’d hike up his ears at the syllable-roll but stand dumb to their subtlety. “Chaos is odious, Hooker,” he’d say. “Better a thousand vagabonds perish for bread than one strand of our Queen’s hair be ruffled.”

Proleptic in another respect as well, Rooke’s novel anticipates several features of the cultural materialist work on Shakespeare that began to appear in the mid-1980s and quickly established itself as a dominant interpretive tendency. Like Jonathan Dollimore, whose Radical Tragedy appeared in 1984, Rooke sets his forehead against “a politically conservative way of doing criticism,” seeking to be “intellectually challenging rather than academically stifling, politically engaged rather than spuriously impartial.” Like Dollimore again, and like Catherine Belsey in The Subject of Tragedy (1985), he playfully interrogates established notions of originary subjectivity and authorship. Like Francis Barker, who published The Culture of Violence in 1993, he brings to light the complicity of high culture in the perpetuation of oppression and injustice. Rooke anticipates Simon Shepherd’s whimsical play with variant spellings of the name “Shakespeare”: there are by my count thirteen variants of the name in Shakespeare’s Dog (from “Shagsbier” to “Shakespizzle”) and fully forty-five in Shepherd’s 1991 essay

51 Rooke, Shakespeare’s Dog, p. 34.
53 Catherine Belsey, The Subject of Tragedy (London and New York: Methuen, 1985).
“Acting against bardom” (prize forms include “Shapesqueer” and “Shikespewer”). Finally, his joking prolepeses most definitely anticipate Patricia Parker’s discovery, in her essay “Preposterous Estates,” of a near-obsessive concern throughout the Shakespeare canon with inversions of temporality and sequence—and hence with disruptions and reversals of the rhetoric that authorizes a particular order as natural, and exposures of “the authority [this rhetoric] creates and the histories it forges.”

Shakespeare is not merely displaced from the centre of the narrative in Rooke’s novel; he is also decentred in the subtler sense of being revealed, not as a unified transcendent self, the originary source of his own discourse, but rather as a subjectivity summoned into being as an effect of pre-existing discourses. Hooker’s initial bitterness, his “dogly vinegar” as he calls it, arises from his recognition that the mental limitations of the “addled” Marr and the “slackard” Wolfsleach proceed (as Michel de Montaigne would say) from custom rather than from nature; or, in more contemporary terms, that they are discursively produced social constructs:

Oh, the mean blindness of [Marr]: that she didn’t know, could never see (or care at what she saw), that Wolf, herself, and every other dog came to their cribs already maimed. In their spirit, in their stringy brains. Maimed by falsehoods, their own deceits, by

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treachery of blood and power of tick, by the canon of Canutus and expedition's knock-kneed curse—by man's inhumanity to dog. Shakespeare is similarly maimed. Thanks to the orthodoxies that have been whacked into him, he lacks understanding of the centreless soul moving through the natural world that is the basis of Hooker's theology, and lacks sympathy for the suffering and misery through which this unindividuated soul moves:

He'd had ushering at Free School, he'd had Hunt and Jenkens and even Cotton that had turned out a Jesuit—all trying to thrash-whip the classics into him. He'd had red-nosed Alex Aspinall, said to be master of art and a man of steep learning, pounding his britches. But what had soaked in was all slime and sludge, to a dog's true belly. The strutter knew no Latin and less Greek, but in these areas he smoked like a chimney compared to what he knew of suffering and misery, of the soul and its plumage....

Half the earth on doom's boat, I thought, and it is sailing right by him.

Yet thanks to his exposure to canine discourse--thanks to "the advantage of a dog's wide learning," and to Hooker's willingness to "give good ear to [his] mush and sprinkle on it a syllable or two of form"—Shakespeare has potential for development.

One of Hooker's memories of his and Terry's puppyhood is of the disappearance of their "Mam," and their subsequent discovery in a ditch of "what looked like Mam":

58 Rooke, Shakespeare's Dog, pp. 52-53.
59 Ibid., pp. 47, 9.
The pile had her fur. It had what was left of her nose.

"Is that Mam?" asked Terry. She haunched down to whimper whilst I made the vultures spin.

"Is that Mam?"

Well, it had her tail. It had her knees. The eyes had been plucked out, but the sockets had Mam’s laconic way of seeing things.

Although we are not told as much, it can be deduced that this experience, along with the young dogs’ subsequent diet—"Bateless in our hunger as the tick was in his, we did the sneak on deserted thatchtop, barn, and pigeoncote, ate bugs and weech, ate the mossy bark of trees, chawed at log vermin and field rat, pounced on lame hare and burrowing mole"—was imparted to Shakespeare, to become the basis of Edgar’s marvellous poetry of nature in *King Lear*:

Poor Tom, that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall newt and the water; that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cow dung for salads, swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog, drinks the green mantle of the standing pool....

6. *R[h]ooke[r] and the Bard*

Mr. Hooker is not just the narratorial consciousness of the fiction; he is also made directly responsible for Shakespeare’s escape from Stratford domesticity to the London theatres. According to a tradition that surfaced in the early years of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare in his youth was "much given to all unluckiness in stealing venison

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60 Ibid., p. 133.
and rabbits, particularly from Sir [Thomas] Lucy, who had him oft whipped and sometimes imprisoned and at last made him fly his native country to his great advancement....”62 But in Rooke’s version, Hooker is the deer-thief, and he and his master set out for London under the noses of the Regarders, the enforcers of the Forest Laws who are in Stratford to maim and kill canine poachers. (Natural law, one might say, impels dog to slay deer; the Forest Laws are part of the same repressive human apparatus that produces hungry beggars and witch-persecutions—and against which Hooker has taken direct action by rescuing the accused witch Moll Braxton from a Stratford mob, and by stealing a leg of mutton for a family of starving vagabonds.)

Rooke plays with another tag of Shakespeare legend to rather different purpose. In 1794-95 William-Henry Ireland, son of the antiquary Samuel Ireland (and in his father’s eyes a blockhead), deceived his father and most of the literati of London with an extraordinarily bold sequence of forgeries. Beginning with a mortgage deed and a promissory note bearing Shakespeare’s signature, he moved on to forge letters to and from Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton, a Shakespearean profession of faith, a love-letter from the poet to his “Anna Hatherrewaye,” enclosing a lock of hair and doggerel verses (“Is there onne Earthe a Manne more trewe / Thanne Willy Shakespeare is toe you”), authorial manuscripts of the Tragedye of Kynge Leare and of Hamblette (both heavily bowdlerized), and a previously unknown tragedy, Vortigern, which got as far as dress rehearsals at Drury Lane before being exploded by the publication of Edmond Malone’s An Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Miscellaneous Papers, two days before its projected first performance on the morrow of April Fools’ Day, 1796.63 Even

62 Schoenbaum, Shakespeare’s Lives, p. 69. This version of the story was noted down by a Gloucestershire clergyman before 1708; a parallel version was printed by Nicholas Rowe in his 1709 edition of Shakespeare.
63 Ibid., pp. 135-61.
when William-Henry produced letters to his father from the purported source of these
documents, in which the mysterious benefactor, a necessarily anonymous nobleman,
declared that “If your Son is not a second Shakespeare I am not a Man,” Samuel Ireland
did not tumble to the forgeries. Having swallowed these very fishy documents, he was
able at last to engorge the final whale—a Deed of Gift in which Shakespeare, gratefully
acknowledging the manner in which in 1604 his “goode freynde Masterre William
Henyre Irelande,” none other, had rescued him from drowning in the Thames, gives to
him and to his heirs “for everre inn his lyne” the manuscripts of five plays, including
Henry IV (both parts?), Henry V, and the previously unknown “kyng henry thyrde of
Englande.”

Malone thought that the narrative of this happy rescue should be preserved, along
with “the old Satire of Cocke Lorelles Bote” and the later Tale of Two Swannes, under
some such title as The Tale of a Boat, or The Tale of the Swan of Avon Half Drowned in
Thames. The proposed anthology must now include a further text—for fully two
decades before Shakespeare made the acquaintance of “Masterre Irelande,” the Swan of
Avon more than half drowned in the river of his home town, and was dragged from a
watery grave by his dog Hooker.

What is to be made of this proleptic imitation of the most bizarre of Ireland’s
forgeries? William-Henry impudently inserted himself into the life of the idol whose
private self he had already been impersonating; wearing the transparent mask of an
invented ancestor, he made himself at once the Bard’s preserver and his heir (and also, in

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64 Ibid., p. 148.
65 Edmond Malone, An Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Miscellaneous Papers and Legal
Instruments, Published Dec. 24, 1795 and Attributed to Shakspeare.... (1796; facsimile rpt. London and
passing, a forebear of the father who, while praising the forgeries as works of genius still thought his son a dullard).

Hooker (or shall we say R[h]ooke[r]?) is with equal impudence but simpler motives confessing to a lifetime of forgery, of factitious invention, of fiction-spinning. But the Shakespeare family, gathered around the damp shivering dog and their resuscitated Will, the poet-to-be, don't get it:

"Good dog, good dog," they kept repeating, affirming it till my ears grewed like beanstalks and my eyes swelled up like soup pots and I all but wept tears....

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68 Ibid., p. 117.