

Introduction

Michael Carelse

Although the essays in this issue are methodologically diverse, they all share a preoccupation with the historical and cultural contexts that inform the literary texts they analyze. Erin Donoghue Brooke and Faith Ryan focus on Edenic contexts surrounding Shakespeare and *Frankenstein* respectively; Katie Yakovleva on the context of feminist scholarship on Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*; Sonja Pinto and SD Pitman on politically problematic Victorian cultural contexts; Emma Stens on the devastating context of World War I in interwar shell-shock narratives; Isabelle Carré-Hudson on the linguistic contexts that inform the dialogue of *The Great Gatsby*; and Kelsey Kilbey on the politically portable context of the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE and its reverberations in modern literature and society. To better foreground this persistent attention to historical and cultural contexts, we have ordered the essays in this issue not alphabetically by author but instead in chronological order of their primary texts. Thus, we begin in Eden (Donoghue Brooke, Ryan), and we end in the international literatures of the modern world (Kilbey), along the way stopping in the simultaneously medieval and Renaissance worlds of Shakespeare's plays (Donoghue Brooke), the Regency era (Ryan), the Victorian period (Yakovleva, Pinto, Pitman), interwar England (Stens), and Jazz Age New York (Carré-Hudson).

Our first two essays look back to the Garden of Eden. Donoghue Brooke examines the Edenic contexts surrounding the gardeners and gravemakers of William Shakespeare's *Richard II* (c. 1595) and *Hamlet* (c. 1599–1602), reminding us of the significance of Adam as the first gardener of the Western world. The gardeners and gravemakers of these plays, Donoghue Brooke argues, “are simultaneously elevated and debased by their connection to their ancestor, owing to his curious position as both the original

sinner and the first progenitor of mankind" (16). In the following essay, Ryan argues that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) figures its monster as a type of Eve in the tradition of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674), "analyzing Victor as a type of Adam, discussing the similarities between Eve's and the monster's creation stories, and assessing Eve's and the monster's eventual identification with Satan" (25).

The next three essays investigate the fraught political contexts surrounding three canonical Victorian novels. Analyzing the significance of sheep in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), Yakovleva argues that the novel is not purely one of male domination, as some feminist critics have traditionally understood it, but rather one that ambivalently attributes "not only the weak but also the surprisingly powerful characteristics of the novel's sheep" to its heroine, Bathsheba Everdene (33). In our second Hardy essay, Pinto examines the symbolic function of milk in *Far from the Madding Crowd* as well as in Hardy's later *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), arguing that "milk functions dually in both novels to symbolize a Victorian ideal of femininity while also problematically likening Bathsheba and Tess to farm animals" (43). In our third Victorian studies essay, we move beyond Hardy's pastoral novels and into the speculative fiction of H.G. Wells. In this essay, Pitman investigates Wells's seminal Martian-invasion novel *The War of the Worlds* (1897) as an allegory of British colonialism that critiques colonial violence yet upholds Victorian stereotypes of colonized peoples "as less advanced cultures" (50).

Following our Victorian studies essays are two very different works on the literature of the interwar period. Stens compares depictions of shell shock in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), arguing that both texts "demonstrate the inherently flawed logic of a society that demands men go to war only to punish them for experiencing the natural consequences of witnessing such horror," as well as "form a critique of the heteronormative ideals that also tie themselves to the institution of war" (60). Carré-Hudson then analyzes F. Scott Fitzgerald's use of dialogue in *The Great Gatsby*

(1925) from the perspective of sociolinguistic theory, providing a linguistic vocabulary to identify the conversational techniques at play in the novel so that “we can more fully appreciate the significance of Fitzgerald’s relatively sparse dialogue in shaping our perceptions of the novel’s characters” (69).

Our final essay brings us full circle, analyzing the literatures of the modern world in the context of ancient myth. In this study of modern German, South African, and American representations of the Battle of Thermopylae, Kilbey considers Theodor Plievier’s novel *Stalingrad* (1948), Heinrich Böll’s short story “Stranger, Bear Word to the Spartans We...” (1950), Douglas Livingstone’s poem “After Thermopylae” (pub. 2004), and finally Kieron Gillen, Ryan Kelly, and Jordie Bellaire’s graphic novel *Three* (2014), arguing that “each of these works deploys the ‘myth’ of Thermopylae—that is, the longstanding representation of the Battle of Thermopylae as a heroic defence of the civilized West against the barbaric East—subversively, thereby challenging the xenophobia inherent to this myth and also pervasive in each writer’s immediate sociopolitical context” (76).

As is already apparent from these summaries, the essays in this issue consistently return to questions of identity and equity, scrutinizing both the social criticism that their primary texts produce and the social contexts in which their texts are undeniably implicated. Indeed, our authors have much to say about the time periods relevant to their texts. More importantly, however, our authors’ considerations of these eras’ discourses surrounding class, gender, and racial identities are strikingly pertinent to the discourses of the twenty-first century, given the extent to which we have inherited our own cultural values from these past eras.