CHAPTER 1

“NOT SHAKESPEARE”: ACTS OF QUOTATION IN NADINE GORDIMER’S MY SON’S STORY

Quotations play an unusually prominent role in organizing and driving the narrative development in My Son’s Story.1 The question for this study is: What impact does the network of three key quotations—from Shakespeare’s play As You Like It, Rosa Luxemburg’s prison letter, and John Donne’s poem “The Good Morrow”—have on Shakespeare’s status in Nadine Gordimer’s novel? My method is to elucidate patterns of cumulative meaning in the quotational sequence by tracing how individual quotations, in their order of appearance, modify and build on one another.

At the outset, however, it should be noted that engagement in quotational activity occupies only a particular subset of characters. Quotations serve to mediate and facilitate the extramarital relationship between Sonny, the colored South African activist, and Hannah, the white human rights representative who visits him in prison; Sonny’s son Will, named by his father after Shakespeare, is drawn in as filial witness to their affair. Standing conspicuously outside and apart from the quotational circuit are Aila and Baby, Sonny’s wife and daughter, whose political growth unfolds without reference to Shakespeare.
The singular *My Son’s Story*—instead of the plural *Our Son’s Story*—promotes an either/or tension in which the title can be heard as indicating either Will’s father or his mother. The father’s claim registers Shakespeare’s presence; the mother’s claim registers Shakespeare’s absence. Initially, propelled by the novel’s epigraph from Sonnet 13, the father’s Shakespeare orientation dominates. Yet in the novel’s overall trajectory, the gradual emergence of the mother opens up a counternarrative that has no affiliation to a Shakespeare-centered culture.

This division within the novel is reflected in a sharp split between Michael Neill’s criticism and Homi Bhabha’s. In Neill’s view, the novel preserves and vindicates Shakespeare as “an unchallenged master text.” Yet Neill’s reading is radically incomplete, because it leaves Aila and Baby out of consideration. Focusing on Aila, Bhabha is able to write convincingly with no mention of Shakespeare whatsoever, because from the standpoint of Aila’s motivation Shakespeare is irrelevant. A major obstacle to combining these two critical perspectives is that the structure of Neill’s analysis is limited to a polar opposition: either Shakespeare is “jettisoned” or he remains “unchallenged” (177). I argue that neither of these two options is true and that deeper investigation demonstrates additional interpretive possibilities: Shakespeare’s honorific status is not rejected outright but is challenged, revised, and permanently disrupted under the pressure of a different historical moment. In the terms provided by the novel, the new situation involves “disruption, disjunction—circumstances in people’s lives that cannot be met with the responses that serve for continuity” (89).

Neill’s validation of Shakespeare’s positive role in the novel concludes with the link he establishes between