At first blush, the idea of J. M. Coetzee’s use of Shakespeare as a resource seems so unpromising as to be a nonstarter. In his autobiographical sequence, *Boyhood* and *Youth*,1 Coetzee documents a lack of engagement with Shakespeare that amounts to rejection. His first encounter, through his parents, begins with the assumption that “if his father likes Shakespeare then Shakespeare must be bad” (*Boyhood* 104). The effort “to discover why people say Shakespeare is great” (104) is soon abandoned. Subsequent contact with *Julius Caesar* in school in Mr. Whalen’s English class is equally uninspiring (138–39). Later, in England, Shakespeare is merely a source of income through tutoring (*Youth* 2). Ultimately arriving at point of active dislike—“he is in the process of losing his taste for Shakespeare” (21)—Coetzee records his criticism of Shakespeare’s “declamatory pitch”: “But Chaucer keeps a nice ironic distance from his authorities. And, unlike Shakespeare, he does not get into a froth about things and start ranting” (21).
However, Coetzee’s negative response is low-key: just as his initial contact with Shakespeare is perfunctory, so is his subsequent rejection. The routine performed by these dismissive remarks ranges in tone from mildly amusing to mildly annoyed, but never rises to the level of highly charged, deeply energized passion. At the outer reaches of his apparently negative line on Shakespeare, Coetzee entertains speculations about the disappearance of Shakespeare. He takes sardonic pleasure in the response to his computer-generated poems: “For a day or two, back in Cape Town, he is notorious as the barbarian who wants to replace Shakespeare with a machine” (Boyhood 161). His studies in linguistics prompt him to contemplate the conscious deselection of Shakespeare: “If a latter-day ark were ever commissioned to take the best that mankind has to offer and make a fresh start on the farther planets, if it ever came to that, might we not leave Shakespeare’s plays and Beethoven’s quartets behind to make room for the last speaker of Dyirbal, even though that last speaker might be a fat old woman who scratched herself and smelled bad?”

But these provocative gestures seem just that: gestures designed to provoke rather than proposals with real substance.

There is a striking divergence between the negative account of the past given in autobiographical retrospect and Coetzee’s actual practice in current fiction. In Boyhood Coetzee presents a slightly mocking description of his mother’s reverent but stumbling attempt to recite a passage from Macbeth (105). Yet as the author of The Master of Petersburg, Coetzee the novelist draws on the same point in the play: “If there were a newborn babe here at this moment, he would pluck it from its mother’s arms and