In August 2003 I attended the first bi-annual conference of the British Shakespeare Association in Leicester, England. It had attracted the foremost European scholars and many international names in Shakespeare Studies and the sessions were well-attended and lively. Yet, while participating in the seminar on Cultural Exchange I had the strong sense that several people present were resistant or expected a different focus to the discussion than the panel members—a focus that they opposed. The discussion was harnessed on deck and never seemed to really get off the ground. Whereas we, the panel members, came prepared to discuss the ethos of Shakespeare’s texts in light of new ethical perspectives, there seemed to be a more or less general assumption that what we wanted was to focus on the ethicality of the texts or to deal with the relationship of morality to the texts. The confusion that resulted led to a desire on my part to define my own position on literature and ethics and to consider, on a more general level, what the attitudes of different researchers are in relation to distinguishing an interest in ethics and texts that focuses on ethos from one that focuses on ethicality.

The different perspectives on ethics that are present in texts are both worth exploring and important to try to understand, and it is not surprising that the concern with ethics is receiving renewed force in discussions of representation, especially in relation to gender and ethnicity, in an academic environment that has shown itself more than willing to engage with political issues on varied fronts. The focus on textual ethics can be seen in particular in the growing concern with the links between material and discursive forms of repression and usurpation. Ethics is recognized as deeply embedded in discussions of power, of voice and agency, and in textual concerns with the effects of presence and absence, as well as aporias—points at which a final interpretation is foreclosed in a text. As a field, modern ethical criticism is defined as this explicit concern with the relationship between ethics and texts. Critics interested in this relation usually focus on one of four things—and sometimes on more than one of the four at the same time: the overall ethics of reading; the ethics of writing; on how a text promotes or contributes to a positive ethics; and/or on how ethics is operative in the text. In this
collection, our aim is specifically to highlight the fourth concern within ethical criticism because it is often obscured in theoretical discussions, which tend to focus either on meta-critical concerns or positive ethical value in relation to texts.1 This fourth current can usefully be defined as a concern with the operational ethos of texts because the emphasis is on the peculiarities of the text as much as on how it participates in the production or reproduction of a specific ethical universe. There is a basic recognition that a text’s ethos can be multiple and/or contradictory, and that in texts ethos is—in at least one of its incarnations—invariably textual. In this collection, even those essays that focus on the ethics of criticism or writing, or on positive ethical value in texts they have chosen, emphasize how the ethos position(s) in their texts are specifically represented.

A second aim with this collection is to emphasize the inclusiveness of ethical criticism with reference to type of texts and to their ethics. The idea has been that it is not only the different but the heterogeneous qualities—including the negative, questionable, non-realistic and non-rational—that are available in literature, and in texts more generally, that make many of them significant as objects of critical study. In reading about ethical criticism and the relationship of ethics to texts it is easy to come away with the impression that somehow what is being sought after or produced—at least in relation to literature—has to be, or ought to be, positive. Whether it is to assume and focus on the morally educative power of the aesthetic specifically or that the emphasis is placed on cultural texts that can be seen as, to at least some extent, participating in ethical discourse, i.e. in the promotion of a positive ethics, the opening statement in Aristotle’s Nicomachaen Ethics seems to implicitly permeate the theoretical landscape. His work seems to have posited the baseline for what ought to be studied and how texts should be discussed (or read) both in the Anglo-American and in the continental tradition of ethical criticism: “Every skill and every inquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice, is thought to aim at some good; and so the good has been aptly described as that at which everything aims” (2000: 3). This presupposition of the desirability of a positive value in the relationship between a study of literature and ethics can be seen in, for example, Wayne C. Booth’s focus on “good literature” and Martha Nussbaum’s project of bringing novels into moral philosophy with the purpose of searching in them for a viable ethics.2

1 The term “text” in relation to this collection is broadly defined as a narrated unit, as a text is not an objective description, but represents a series of linguistic and structural choices in the construction of an account. This is as true whether the text is non-fictional or fictional.