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Andrew Hadfield
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Introduction I: Was Shakespeare a republican?

Was Shakespeare a republican? Does it matter whether he was? And what do we mean by republicanism? These are the main questions that I want to answer in this book. What I wish to show is that Shakespeare's work emerged out of a culture that was saturated with republican images and arguments, even if these were never clearly defined or properly articulated, as many historians have argued.¹ Shakespeare produced literary works of republican significance at key points in his career: the *Henry VI* plays (late 1580s, early 1590s); *The Rape of Lucrece* (1593); *Titus Andronicus* (1594); *Julius Caesar* (1599); *Hamlet* (1601); *Othello* (1602?); and *Measure for Measure* (1603), to name only the most obvious examples. However, this history has disappeared from view for a variety of reasons, resulting in an impoverished and distorted understanding of the nature of Shakespeare's achievement. My hope is that this book will enable readers to revisit the issues that Shakespeare raises in many of his works, even if they do not agree with my particular interpretations of the plays. It is little short of a scandal that the vigorous and lively political culture of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, one that no writer would have wished to avoid, has become so obscured that debates over Shakespeare's politics have all too often either been concerned with his allegiance and affiliation, or considered a minor question of specialist interest rather than a central issue that, if ignored, will diminish our understanding of English Renaissance culture. Before the central issues that this book seeks to explore can be analysed the reasons for such serious neglect need to be explained and the nature of early modern English political culture outlined. It is my contention that republicanism is not simply one of many subjects we might wish to use to contextualise Shakespeare's work. Rather, it is one of the key problems that defined his working career.

HISTORICAL PROBLEMS

Shakespeare's political culture has been seriously misrepresented and misread by a whole variety of critics and historians who are more closely connected to popular, mass perceptions of Shakespeare than they often realize.² This symbiotic relationship, amounting to collusion at times, should not surprise us, given Shakespeare's overwhelming, often stifling cultural authority.³ Shakespeare has become part of our intellectual furniture, so much so that his presence can serve to preclude thought rather than to encourage it.⁴ Yet Shakespeare assumed his cultural dominance only after his death. The rise of Shakespeare was only just beginning in the early seventeenth century; he would assume his unassailable position in England after the Restoration, and, in European letters, towards the end of the eighteenth century.⁵ As Brian Vickers has recently argued, it is likely that many of his plays were co-written, either with other working dramatists such as George Peele, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher and George Wilkins, or with various members of his company.⁶ However, when his fellow actors Henry Condell and John Heminge collected together plays that Shakespeare had written to cash in on his name with the posthumous publication of the first folio in 1623, they undoubtedly realized that it was the title *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* that would sell the large, expensive volume, not the scrupulous inclusion of others who had lent a hand.⁷

The point is that if we are seriously interested in recovering the archaeology of Shakespeare, of reconstructing the contexts in which he existed and wrote, and in trying to understand the culture in which his work developed, then we have to put to one side most of Shakespeare's dramatic tradition.⁸ The records of early performances of Shakespeare's plays are scanty, as all scholarly editions inform their readers. There is a picture in one of Henry Peacham's surviving manuscripts which may be a scene from *Titus Andronicus*.⁹ The Swiss traveller Thomas Platter has left a record of the first run of performances of *Julius Caesar* at the Globe Theatre in 1599.¹⁰ The astrologer and physician Simon Forman has left records of a number of performances, but these often raise as many questions as they answer. His accounts of *Macbeth*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* all diverge significantly from any surviving texts and call into question his reliability as a witness.¹¹ The first substantial records of performances date from the Restoration, after the reopening of the theatres in 1660 when they had been closed for eighteen years.¹² This hiatus marks the end of one dramatic tradition, separating it from the

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start of another, characterized by the accepted rule of Shakespeare. In fact, as David Scott Kastan points out, the closure of the theatres resulted in more plays being published, enlarging and changing the dramatic canon.¹³ The first age of commercial theatre in England existed from the 1560s until 1642.¹⁴

Recovering involves forgetting as well as remembering.¹⁵ The very tradition that makes Shakespeare so centrally important to an understanding of our culture, and the reason why more books are written about him than any other writer, paradoxically, only serves to interfere with and distort the writing of the history of the theatre for which he wrote. It is not that we know nothing at all about Shakespeare's theatre, or that attempts to reconstruct it are doomed to failure. The task is by no means impossible, even though it is clearly difficult and problematic. Every effort has gone into making the Globe Theatre as accurate a reconstruction of the original as is humanly possible, with considerable success.¹⁶ And, if the advent of the New Globe has had any effect on the performance of Shakespeare, it has been to ensure that we approach the plays with less reverence and awe than was the case before. The Globe experiment has shown that the common playgoers standing in front of the stage are more important in the dramatic process than most theatre historians had acknowledged. Their ability to move around freely, interject and participate in the action, as well as show approval and disapproval, reveals the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre to have been a relatively democratic public space, certainly when compared to a modern theatre. If a developing consensus about the relatively wide social composition of the audience for early modern plays is also correct, then we can see that Shakespeare's theatre was a different world, one that we have to reconstruct carefully, always alert to the possibility that what we assume we know about Shakespeare may be false or misleading.¹⁷

Shakespeare wrote for the theatre at a time of great uncertainty for actors and writers, a state of affairs neatly mirrored by our own shadowy notions of why writers produced literature and drama and what function drama and literature served.¹⁸ The surviving evidence also indicates that writers entered a profession that provided them with an insecure livelihood, as they sought remuneration from aristocratic patrons such as the earl of Leicester or the Sidney family, publication, or through using their skill at writing to persuade great men and women to employ them in the capacity of secretaries and other functionaries within the household.¹⁹ Many writers of Shakespeare's generation who came to London, such as Thomas Lodge (?1557–1625), Robert Greene (c.1558–92), George Peele

(1558–96), Henry Chettle (c.1560–c.1607), and Christopher Marlowe (1564–93), wrote a variety of works – plays, poetry, prose fiction, romances, pamphlets – and were employed in different ways at different times – printer, spy, physician and sailor among them. The famous reference to Shakespeare as an ‘upstart crow’ suggests that there was a keen rivalry between such writers as they competed for scarce resources.²⁰ Shakespeare, as is well known, acquired considerable wealth through becoming a shareholder of the King’s Men, and had a hand in other business enterprises.²¹ In pointed contrast, Henry Chettle and Robert Greene produced enormous quantities of works, Chettle writing or co-authoring some fifty known plays in fourteen years (1593–1607) compared to Shakespeare’s output of about thirty-nine in some twenty-two years (c.1590–c.1612). Even so, both Greene and Chettle died in poverty.²²

In such a professional climate, dramatists – and writers in general – had to produce material quickly, take risks and hope that what they wrote appealed to a wide audience (or a few powerful and influential courtiers). One way of doing this was to be topical and to refer to recent events, whether in the main plot or more allusively and occasionally. It is hardly surprising that so much drama produced in the first age of the English commercial theatre is either political in nature, or has topical significance.²³ There was a long court tradition of drama that was inherently political in seeking to advise the monarch either forcefully, or subtly, a tradition which continued alongside the commercial theatre, either through plays being performed at court, sometimes probably adapted from their public stage productions, or in the form of specific court entertainments such as the masque.²⁴ One of the most significant court plays, Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville’s *Gorboduc*, first acted in 1561 and published in 1565, which sought to persuade the queen to marry and produce an heir for her subjects, was later adapted for the commercial stage by William Haughton in the 1590s as *Ferrex and Porrex* (now lost), undoubtedly because of its topical relevance.²⁵ One of the many things that connected the court and the London theatre was an interest in political events and issues.²⁶

Exactly how political events, problems and theories are represented in plays is a matter of considerable conjecture and is often impossible to establish with any confident certainty. Some critics argue that the theatre was seen as a powerful social institution that members of the government feared would lead to the development of either some form of opposition to the status quo, or more random subversion and sedition: specifically, rioting. Others counter that the theatre was regarded more as a form of

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escapist entertainment, possibly a safety valve for excess emotion, but hardly a serious political forum.²⁷ The issue is a complex one, but probably the truth is that the theatre played both roles at different times, or even, at the same time for different members of the audience (and those watching them). It is little wonder that the authorities would become nervous of the theatre at various times and try to close it down (generally using the excuse of the plague), given that it provided a public space where large numbers of disgruntled and unruly citizens could meet. Barbara Freedman has argued, in an article that deserves to be much more widely known by historians of the theatre, that apprentices would often meet in the theatre, energetic and aggressive young men, conscious of their relative poverty and economic exploitation, more interested in drinking and bear-baiting than watching thoughtful drama.²⁸ Such evidence cuts both ways. On the one hand, it shows that the authorities were nervous of the theatres because of the sheer number of people assembled in them; but on the other, it suggests that such fear was not generated because an articulate citizenry was being formed through observing subversive, politically astute drama.

However, we need not assume that Freedman's analysis transforms the theatre into a place of endless carnivalesque riot; rather, that it complicates an already complicated picture. Further evidence of the attitudes of powerful courtiers, churchmen and members of the government – specifically those in the Privy Council, the inner circle of the monarch's advisers – is provided by the history of censorship.²⁹ Once again, the evidence is hotly disputed by scholars. On the one side are those, following in the footsteps of F. S. Siebert, who argue that an authoritarian and nervous government tried to control what was produced on the stage and published as carefully as possible, scrutinizing material sent to it when the play was entered in the Stationers' Register, and then calling in subversive works which had somehow slipped through the net.³⁰ On the other are scholars who argue that actually very little censorship of literature, drama and historical writing took place during the reigns of Elizabeth and James. The office of Master of the Revels, the overseer of drama in the capital and at court, collaborated with playing companies so that they did not run into any trouble and was not a simple agent of repression.³¹ A great deal of comment and criticism was permitted on the stage particularly, and only when a book or a play threatened to create a diplomatic incident, or seriously undermined the stability of the regime – as was the case with the publication of John Stubbs's *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf Whereunto England Is Like to be Swallowed* (1579), which attacked Elizabeth's

proposed marriage to the French duke François, duke of Alençon, or the scandalous criticisms made of the Spanish ambassador and the proposed match of Prince Charles and the Spanish Infanta in Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess* (1624) – was the power of the regime deployed to silence its opponents.³²

The latter view appears to be gradually establishing itself as the prevailing orthodoxy among scholars.³³ However, we still need to know far more about the impact of censorship and the fear it produced, whether writers felt the need to encode their messages and how far allegorical readings were generated as a result of a few spectacular acts of brutality, such as the severing of John Stubbs's right hand when he was convicted of sedition, or the Privy Council's interrogation of Doctor John Hayward after he dedicated his history of *The Life and Raigne of King Henrie IIII* (1599) to Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex.³⁴ A 'cat and mouse' game was undoubtedly in progress, but how clear were the rules to each side? And how much did either side want to play by them?³⁵ Moreover, it is still very hard to know whether omissions of passages from some plays in certain editions, such as the absence of the deposition scene from the first quarto of Shakespeare's *Richard II* (1597), which was restored in the folio, was the work of censorship, fear of censorship, editing or even memory loss.³⁶ Equally, it is hard to know whether subsequently controversial works such as Edmund Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, entered into the Stationers' Register in April 1598, but not published until 1633, were censored or failed to appear in print for other reasons.³⁷

It is clear that whatever the truth about the practice of censorship in early modern England, various political opinions and arguments did enter the public sphere, whether by default or design. Evidence also shows that those involved in high-profile cases of censorship often went on to enjoy successful careers and were sometimes generously rewarded by the crown. John Stubbs, his physical mutilation a vivid testimony of his transgression, was an MP for a number of years after his punishment; John Hayward went on to become a successful civil lawyer in James's reign; the tactless Edmund Spenser managed to offend both Elizabeth's chief minister, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and James VI of Scotland, but was still one of the few poets to secure a pension from the queen.³⁸ Rebecca Lemon has made the persuasive case that Hayward was a royalist opponent of the crown and that he has been cast as a more significant political transgressor than he really was by subsequent commentators.³⁹ Yet it is also possible that Hayward simply modified his political views after James assumed the throne in 1603 and became more confident in the

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process and stability of hereditary monarchy. After all, Shakespeare's first patron, Henry Wriothesley, earl of Southampton, who was quite fortunate not to be executed after the attempted coup of the earl of Essex in 1601, became a steady and unremarkable supporter of the crown's initiatives when he was released from imprisonment by James soon after he took up residence in London.⁴⁰ Not everyone shared the fate of Sir Walter Raleigh, who waited some fifteen years before he was finally executed.⁴¹

English literature – especially drama – emerged as a discipline in the late sixteenth century within a culture of political argument.⁴² Sometimes political references were carefully disguised and signalled only obliquely, as is perhaps the case with works such as John Lyly's prose romance *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578), or Shakespeare's comedy *Love's Labour's Lost* (c.1594).⁴³ But there was a long tradition of more forceful and direct representation of issues and debates, often in works which reached either the eyes of the monarch or those of his or her nearest councillors and advisers, such as *Gorboduc* and Philip Sidney's *The Lady of May* (1578), an unsubtle pastoral playlet which urged the queen to intervene more vigorously in the war with the Spanish in the Netherlands.⁴⁴ It was not simply a case of writers producing political allegories or choosing to incorporate political material into works of imaginative fiction at strategic points – although both of these processes did take place. Rather, literature was an especially important form for advancing political debate, given that the key issue of sixteenth-century England, the succession, could not be discussed easily or straightforwardly. Early on in her reign, Elizabeth effectively banned any mention of who might succeed her and how the matter could be resolved.⁴⁵ Eventually the Jesuit Robert Parsons published a lengthy discussion of the candidates, under the pseudonym Robert Doleman, *A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of England* (1594), concluding, hardly surprisingly, in favour of the Spanish Infanta.⁴⁶ This work caused a considerable scandal and serious discomfort for the earl of Essex to whom it was dedicated, and it was deemed treason to be caught with a copy.⁴⁷ Peter Wentworth, an MP with Puritan leanings who had previously been imprisoned for demanding that parliament preserve its right to freedom of speech, defended the principle of hereditary monarchy and declared his hand in favour of James in a treatise designed to refute Parsons, *A Pithie Exhortation to Her Majestie for Establishing her Successor to the Crowne* (1598).⁴⁸ This exchange draws attention to the fact that most discussion of the succession question took place in literary and dramatic texts and not official political discourse.⁴⁹

MODERN CRITICAL ORTHODOXY

An analysis of the political history of sixteenth and seventeenth century England makes little sense if literary texts are ignored, as many historians have realized.⁵⁰ The same is true of the history of art and architecture.⁵¹ Much of this will, of course, be familiar to students of early modern literature, and suggesting that literary texts had a political significance, or, going further, proposing that they played an especially important role in the development of political argument, will not strike many readers as a revelation.⁵² What is notable is that a tiny canon of political texts, many of them secondary works, dominate and often determine the discussion of political discourse for students of English literature.⁵³ The diffuse critical movements, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, have produced many exciting new avenues for literary critics to explore, and helped banish an arid formalism that refused to see literature as inherently political.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the notion that we ought to regard culture as an interactive whole, rather than seeing contexts as background information (sometimes) necessary for the proper study of the literary (or artistic) object, has also transformed our understanding of early modern literature. Nevertheless, it ought to be widely acknowledged that such arguments have been won and that new historicist modes of scholarship have more or less triumphed in literary departments, dominating the forms of study in universities and the ways in which the curriculum is decided.⁵⁵

The explosion of theory in the early 1980s happened because numerous intellectuals and academics wanted to mount a challenge to a previous series of moribund, unexamined and unintellectual assumptions that had become enshrined in university and school pedagogy.⁵⁶ In Renaissance studies the principal villain was E. M. W. Tillyard, whose 1943 book, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, was still taught as useful contextual material for students in the 1980s.⁵⁷ Tillyard claimed that English Renaissance writers had a faith in a static, hierarchical universe, 'some kind of order or degree on earth having its counterpart in heaven', a belief that every educated Elizabethan shared.⁵⁸

Cultural materialists exposed such assumptions as historically false – historians saw a much more contested picture of the age – and politically suspect – a Tillyardian Shakespeare was used to promote a reactionary agenda both inside and outside the classroom.⁵⁹ A 'materialist' agenda was proposed to replace this 'idealist' one, seeking to articulate and bring into the open the assumptions and terms of debate that often remained hidden and mystified. Again, the arguments are familiar enough but they are

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worth revisiting because crucial aspects appear to have become obscured over the course of time.⁶⁰

In their foreword to *Political Shakespeare*, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield argued that Cultural Materialism ‘insists that culture does not (cannot) transcend the material forces and relations of production. Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and *political* system, but nor can it be independent of it. Cultural Materialism therefore studies the implications of literary texts in history, (my emphasis).⁶¹ A key aspect of the cultural materialist agenda insists that literary texts need to be read in terms of a ‘political system’, which must, of course, refer to political structures, events and theories. Dollimore and Sinfield also insist that acts of literary criticism cannot avoid being acts of political thought, and it is the duty of the critic to try to articulate his or her political position: ‘cultural materialism does not pretend to political neutrality. It knows that no cultural practice is ever without political significance’ (p.viii).

A few years later, in what is probably the best work of cultural materialist criticism, *Faultlines* (1992), Alan Sinfield was open enough to respond to what he felt were inadequately formulated aspects of cultural materialist theory. In seeking to find a space for ‘dissident’ reading, Sinfield argued, following orthodox Marxist lines, that ‘groups with material power will dominate the institutions that deal with ideas’ and then posed the question: ‘if we come to consciousness within a language that is continuous with the power structures that sustain the social order, how can we conceive, let alone organize, resistance?’ He then considered the criticisms of feminist critics who accused ‘both new historicism and cultural materialism of theorizing power as an unbreakable system of containment, a system that positions subordinate groups as effects of the dominant, so that female identity, for instance, appears to be something fathered upon women by patriarchy’.⁶²

It is at this point that I would argue that Cultural Materialism is in danger of losing a vital aspect of its political significance and, while properly foregrounding the problem of subjectivity, this is at the expense of an analysis of politics. Few would dispute that powerful groups dominate cultural production, but it does not follow from this that they can determine consciousness as straightforwardly. Everyone exists within ideological formations, but there is still room for argument, including political argument. Of course, Sinfield realizes this problem and his book contains numerous references to a variety of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political theorists: Buchanan, Calvin, Hotman, Languet, Machiavelli, Ponet, and so on. His model of dissident reading is formulated

as a means of breaking free from the stultifying limitations of the subversion/containment debate.⁶³ But even so, there is a danger that the dominant-subordinate model tends to fix political positions as ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ the establishment when they may not fit into this binary model so easily.

A brief survey of some rather broad political issues would seem to indicate that we need to consider certain key political realities in terms other than subversion/containment and dominant/dissident binary oppositions. Given the existence of two queens within the British Isles for three-quarters of Elizabeth’s reign, Mary Stuart and Elizabeth, how should we reconstruct and analyse the dominant political paradigm, which troubled and confused most people’s notions of hierarchy and order? Each had roughly equal claims to the throne and attempts to exclude Mary were made on the basis of her Catholicism. Should we then see her supporters as dissident? Or reactionary followers of an older order? Furthermore, was opposition to a queen always simply and straightforwardly misogynist? Or did the fact that a queen would have to give her nation away to a foreign monarch or a subordinate subject provide more reasons for fear of female rule, especially after the marriage of Mary Tudor to Philip II of Spain? And was opposition to Elizabeth herself in the last years of her reign dissident or simply misogynist?⁶⁴

Questions such as these have most often become the province of historians rather than literary critics writing in the wake of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. There are, of course, some honourable exceptions, but these are in a minority and are often ignored by theoretically minded critics who discuss political and historical material. In his afterword to the revised edition of his groundbreaking monograph, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance*, David Norbrook noted sadly that that a ‘sharp opposition, between a Dark Ages of simple-minded positivism and a Golden Age of theoretical progress – a moment of inexorable “post”ness, whether labelled poststructuralist or postmodern – has become taken for granted in much current discussion’.⁶⁵ Such a division, as Norbrook rightly argues, is a disaster for those who are interested in political – and politicized – literary criticism. On the one hand, there is a debate among ‘theoretical’ critics as to whether Shakespeare is relevant in the present; on the other, there are historically informed literary critics who talk to historians.⁶⁶

Why has this division happened? The most obvious reason is that it is simply hard to do everything, to be genuinely interdisciplinary with all the skills available to read and contextualize texts.⁶⁷ But perhaps another