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IN MEMORIAM  
Y. H. SUBRAHMANYAM,  
MY FATHER

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# The Shakespeare play as poem

a critical tradition in perspective

S. VISWANATHAN

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521129183](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521129183)

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First published 1980

This digitally printed version 2009

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-22547-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-12918-3 Paperback

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## Acknowledgements

I record my gratitude to Professor R. A. Foakes for his advice and encouragement with regard to this and other work by me; and to the 'readers' and the editorial staff of Cambridge University Press and to Mr Michael Black. I am grateful for their valuable suggestions for improvement. My debt to the Shakespeare critics and scholars, whom I undertake to criticise in this volume, especially to Wilson Knight, L. C. Knights and Wolfgang Clemen, is deep and beyond repayment.

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## Preface

This study examines some aspects of a dominant school, if not the dominant trend, of Shakespeare criticism in the twentieth century; namely the poetic interpretation of Shakespeare, sometimes referred to as the school of Knight and Knights, or more loosely as the school of the 'imagists'. The advent of this critical approach is not merely a matter of reaction against the character-criticism of Bradley and Coleridge and its extreme manifestations in the nineteenth-century commentators like Anna Jameson and Mary Cowden Clarke. Early twentieth-century developments in Shakespeare scholarship as well as in Shakespeare criticism, related to developments in modern literary criticism and literature in general, made available new perceptions about what may be called the ontological status or mode of existence and also the function of Shakespearian drama. The rise of the poetic approach has more to do with these developments than with a revolt against Bradley. Placed in this context, the school of the poetic interpreters can be seen to have a double relationship, not only of rivalry, antagonism and at times conflict with the school of theatrical and historical scholarship and interpretation, but of more or less tacit and unconscious collaboration, even of indebtedness.

There is no denying the basic difference between scholarship and criticism – between the scholarly-interpreter's 'then-meaning' and the critic-interpreter's 'now-meaning'. As the following study tries to show, one regrets that the critic-interpreter does not make as much use of historical scholarship as he might. Yet when the study of Shakespeare is viewed historically, it appears that the poetic interpretation has, in a number of ways,

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been indirectly fostered by scholarship in this century. There are many instances of the 'imaginative intuition' of the critic and the 'practical sagacity' of the scholar (to use the phrases employed by C. H. Herford in *A Sketch of Recent Shakespearian Investigation* (1922)) providing mutual corroboration. At any rate, the poetic critics' basic attitudes and assumptions, and their idea of what Shakespearian drama is, are such that their rise and currency can be seen to be promoted by the contributions of the scholar-interpreters, especially when a historical if not a historicist view is taken of the contributions of these critic-interpreters and of the causes and consequences of their critical ventures. So the interplay between the commentaries of these critics and the findings of historical scholars and scholar-interpreters claims particular attention.

Chapter 1 considers the circumstances in Shakespeare studies in which the poetic interpretation arose, and attempts to place the school of Wilson Knight and L. C. Knights in the history of Shakespeare criticism. The chapter shows how earlier scholarly discoveries and critical findings made the time ripe for interpretation of the plays through their poetry.

The overall context of the poetic approach to Shakespeare goes far beyond Shakespeare studies, so the relevant backgrounds and governing influences in the modern literary and cultural scene have to be reckoned with. I outline this general ethos in chapter 2.

Through the perspective thus gained, the interpretative commentaries of Wilson Knight, L. C. Knights, Spurgeon and other 'poetic' critics are studied in chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6. Given the importance of his commentaries, Wilson Knight's 'spatial' interpretation is dealt with in two chapters, 3 and 4. I turn to the no less important and influential studies of the plays by L. C. Knights in chapter 5. In the sixth chapter I study the methods of Caroline Spurgeon and such successors as Wolfgang Clemen, and the inter-communication between imagistic analysis and historical scholarship. The last chapter contains my concluding observations.

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## Abbreviations and usages

Standard abbreviations of journal and yearbook titles have been used where appropriate, besides abbreviations for some frequently cited titles by Wilson Knight, L. C. Knights, Caroline Spurgeon and Wolfgang Clemen. Citations are from the editions specified.

BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>
CL	G. Wilson Knight, <i>The Crown of Life</i> (London, 1948, reprint of the first edition of 1947)
Clemen	Wolfgang Clemen, <i>The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery</i> (London, 1951)
CQ	<i>Critical Quarterly</i>
EC	<i>Essays in Criticism</i>
ELH	<i>Journal of English Literary History</i>
E&S	<i>Essays and Studies</i>
ES	<i>English Studies</i>
GL	<i>The Golden Labyrinth: A Study of British Drama</i> (London, 1962), reissued 1965
JAAC	<i>Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism</i>
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
IT	G. Wilson Knight, <i>The Imperial Theme</i> (London, 1954 reprint of the 1951 edition)
MLN	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
MLQ	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
MLR	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
N&Q	<i>Notes and Queries</i>

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x	<i>Abbreviations and usages</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
PQ	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
SAB	<i>Shakespeare Association Bulletin</i>
SEL	<i>Studies in English Literature 1500–1900</i>
SF	G. Wilson Knight, <i>The Sovereign Flower</i> (London, 1958)
SP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
Spurgeon	Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, <i>Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us</i> (Cambridge, 1965 paperback edition, first edition, 1935)
SQ	<i>Shakespeare Quarterly</i>
SR	<i>Sewanee Review</i>
SS	<i>Shakespeare Survey</i>
SST	L. C. Knights, <i>Some Shakespearean Themes</i> (London, 1959)
SST&AH	L. C. Knights, <i>Some Shakespearean Themes and An Approach to 'Hamlet'</i> (Harmondsworth, 1966)
ST	G. Wilson Knight, <i>The Shakespearian Tempest</i> (London, 1960 reprint of the 1953 edition, first edition 1932)
TS	<i>Theatre Survey</i>
UTQ	<i>University of Toronto Quarterly</i>
WF	G. Wilson Knight, <i>The Wheel of Fire</i> (London, 1959 reprint of the second edition of 1949, first edition 1930). It is the 1959 version to which I refer unless otherwise stated.

Quotations from the text of Shakespeare are from Peter Alexander's Tudor edition of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* (London, 1951).