

# 1. Introduction: What do we Bring to Shakespeare?

## I

SHAKESPEARE is nowadays pretty well beyond criticism. By ‘criticism’ I don’t necessarily mean downright adverse judgment: I mean any sort of discussion that doesn’t start from the premise, and work on the assumption, that his works (or almost all of them) are perfect, and that the task of criticism is simply to find out, in each case, that principle in a play which ensures it is so and not otherwise. Such a principle, people believe, exists in every Shakespeare play just because it is a Shakespeare play. All we’re doing is looking for something that is bound to be there; and all that is required is hard work, patience, and an indefinite suspension of judgment.

The making of this assumption can have some rather unfortunate consequences. For one thing, it means that we – readers, teachers, students – are reduced to illustrating perfections, and inhibited from asking whether they are really perfect. All sorts of interesting questions about Shakespeare cannot then be posed, because if they are we may find that the answers aren’t at all reassuring, or even that there aren’t any answers. Our minds are not free; our attitudes are restricted to undifferentiated deference. And of course by putting all of Shakespeare on the same plane of excellence, we may be not only manacled our minds but also promoting poor writing and loose feeling beyond their merits; so that we shall be doing a grave disservice to the very excellence we are concerned with. What is more, if we bring bad writing up to the level of good, we shall by the same token be bringing down the good things, not to mention the great ones, to the level of the rest.

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I'm not saying Shakespeare is a bad writer, of course. All I'm doing at the moment is to ask the reader to grant the possibility, not the fact, of inequalities and unevennesses in Shakespeare's plays: the object being to free our minds from assumptions about his perfection and allow us to ask all kinds of questions which, if we think he never nodded, sound merely impudent. And to ask such questions doesn't mean that we shall – or that we shan't – find answers to them; it is indeed essential to what I am suggesting that we should make no assumptions of any sort about what we're going to discover.

Perhaps I should now be more specific and ask the reader to ponder some queries about the plays I am going to discuss in this book. Is there, for example, any extant account of *Hamlet* which takes full cognisance of *all* the data of the play, leaving nothing out and not getting anything in by distorting it? Different people will give different answers, naturally; but if you talk to the answers you find that they disagree flatly and finally about what the data are; so the reason why they cannot agree about how to organise them is that they are talking about organising different things. The extraordinarily various and (often) wildly contradictory things people have found in *Hamlet* may lead us to suspect that a play which has provoked so many responses can't be said to have *an* ascertainable meaning; and perhaps the first problem is not so much to decide whether all the data can somehow be fitted in to an account of it, as to see whether it has anything that can properly be called data. Later in this chapter I shall be suggesting that Shakespeare had a great deal of freedom when he wrote his dramas; at the moment I want to suggest that we, as critics, must claim our freedom of action too.

Again, we might ask a naive question about *Othello*: why does the hero become jealous of his wife? (I leave on one side the question of where exactly he does so; and by asking 'why?' I don't mean we should look for some ultimate cause – I just mean a plausible proximate cause.) Now, some people say he gets jealous because of Iago's insinua-

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tions; others that he does so because he is a jealous sort of man whose interest in Desdemona is largely possessive. Others again take an intermediate position, and say that Othello is, because of his colour, alienated from the society he is living in and therefore particularly liable to the insecurity upon which jealousy feeds. (This last notion is popular among students, who are understandably worried about race-relations in their own society.) It may be that there are in the play hints of all these views and that Shakespeare never commits himself to any one of them; but what seems to me to be lacking from the published critiques (or most of them) is a full consideration of the evidence. Even Dr Leavis's classical essay at times makes its points rather too easily, particularly about the temptation scene, and doesn't ask whether a play that shows a man becoming jealous with no more pretext than his own egotistical temperament isn't perilously close to being a melodrama (and it may be a melodrama – that also is a possibility). Bradley, on the other hand, quibbles about the word 'jealousy' and in any case projects all the evil onto Iago – thus making the play a melodrama of another kind. It seems to me significant that whereas Bradley sentimentalises Desdemona and makes her into the worst sort of Dickens heroine, Leavis barely mentions her at all: that is, neither critic asks whether her part in the relationship mightn't be a factor of some importance in making Othello rise to Iago's improbable bait. Both critics leave me feeling that the jealousy is inadequately motivated in dramatic terms; that may be the play's fault, but we ought to take a searching look at it before saying so. And of course we have to be careful about what we mean by 'adequately motivated' and 'in dramatic terms'.

There are naive questions too that we might ask about *King Lear*. For example: does the play show us Lear being thrown out into the storm, or does he on the contrary leave out of injured pride? If the reader objects that these questions are altogether too naive, I can only point out that the conventional account simply assumes the first of them to be

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purely rhetorical. If, however, we think of them as genuine alternatives, with neither calling for a simple answer which is wholly 'right', isn't it possible that we shall have to revise our notions about what we are to make of Lear in Acts III, IV and V? It is also possible that we shall find the play to have been offering us one view of Lear up to a certain point, and quite another later on; so that we shall be forced to ask whether the play itself has any consistent attitude to the events within it. And mightn't it be argued that some parts of the sub-plot (particularly in the last two Acts) have usually been read and written about in a very abstract way, as though all they were doing – and all they needed to do – was to work out a thematic 'pattern'? If we find that they are doing no more than working out such a pattern, we may still say that Shakespeare is fully aware that they're functioning in this way; the fact that they're inadequate is precisely their point. But we couldn't reach this conclusion without first having asked some searching questions about whether or not they succeed in the same way as the parts of the last two Acts which concern Lear and Cordelia – on the assumption that we think *they* succeed.

In the case of *Antony and Cleopatra*, we obviously need to ask questions about the mode of the play, in particular the relation of the many comic moments to the interest in love and military honour. We may or may not end up feeling, with Mr H. A. Mason, that the moments of obviously great poetry in the play have too little to do with the characters we have been seeing, and wonder whether the official hero isn't at some moments offered as a great man and at others, with equal plausibility, as a mere buffoon. But we can hardly find satisfactory solutions to such problems (assuming there are answers) if we don't ask the questions first.

It may be that we shall end up, in all these cases, by finding that our questions turn out to be unanswerable – which is no reason for not asking them. Or we may find that conventional answers don't work, and that we can

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only give satisfactory accounts of the plays by seeing them differently from the conventional ways of looking at them. And, in any case, if we approach them without the usual deference we are not very likely to find them faultless. We may find our reactions rather mixed; and, if we do, we ought to say so. Why we 'ought' to say so is suggested by Matthew Arnold's comment on a remark of Sainte-Beuve:

"In France," says M. Sainte-Beuve, "the first consideration for us is not whether we are amused and pleased by a work of art or mind, nor is it whether we are touched by it. What we seek above all to learn is, whether *we were right* in being amused with it and in applauding it, and in being moved by it." Those are very remarkable words, and they are, I believe, in the main quite true. A Frenchman has, to a considerable degree, what one may call a conscience in intellectual matters; he has an active belief that there is a right and a wrong in them, that he is bound to honour and obey the right, that he is disgraced by cleaving to the wrong.

('The Literary influence of Academies')

## II

A good many of the problems that arise in reading Shakespeare come about, as I have said, because critics habitually start from the assumption that there must be a way of 'explaining' everything that happens in a play: if there are things we can't explain that is the fault of our incompetent reading and not of Shakespeare. Put so nakedly, the assumption is obviously absurd because it prejudges every conceivable issue. And we may get rather different results if we approach the plays without any preconceptions about their faultlessness.

There are other assumptions that people also make about Shakespeare. Some of them are also questionable. For instance, it is easy and useful to think that Shakespeare shared 'Elizabethan' notions about moral, political, and psychological issues; and that we can find out what these notions were by reading the works of Elizabethan moralists, psychologists, and statesmen. Well, of course it would be

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dubious to assume that Shakespeare felt and thought on all matters exactly as we do – even supposing that we (whoever ‘we’ are) rejoiced in perfect unanimity about all moral, political and religious issues. Still, the scholarly study of ‘background’ may give us a sense of the possible modes of feeling, the available sentiments, that existed in Shakespeare’s day – on the assumption, of course, that some modes were possible and some weren’t. Background study is therefore likely to be useful and may even be indispensable.

Yet one might be pardoned for wondering whether there aren’t dangers in the study of background which are at least as great as those resulting from its neglect. An obvious danger is that we may be allowing Elizabethan divines or statesmen to read Shakespeare for us, thus putting him on a level with them. One reason, I suspect, why the *Henry VI* plays have been neglected is that they are believed to be no more than illustrations of Tudor political orthodoxies, derived from not very interesting chroniclers like Hall. So firmly established is this interpretation of the plays that few critics have troubled to take a careful look at the evidence. Or again, take *Hamlet* – which is admittedly a difficult play. Some people read it in the light of Elizabethan notions of Melancholy, as set out by Timothy Bright, for example; and they make it into a mere illustration of some rather crude theories about human behaviour. One can’t help feeling, whatever one makes of the play in the end, that it is more complex and interesting than that. Other critics see the interest of *Hamlet* as centring upon the ethics of Revenge: some say that the Ghost is proved to be a disguised devil by the very fact that it commands Hamlet to take private revenge; others claim that, while the Elizabethan attitude to revenge was certainly disapproving, a man was allowed to pursue it if the crime to be avenged was sufficiently grave and if no other way was open to him – Hamlet, in effect, is at war with Claudius. Other critics, again, make out Elizabethan notions about ghosts to be very important; and most readers, over

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the incest between Claudius and Gertrude, are happy to take Hamlet's and the Ghost's word for it that it is indeed incest. Now, all of these matters are important; and if we can discover what his patrons might have expected of Shakespeare, so much the better – though a good artist is presumably a man who is constantly breaking down established habits of thought. There is no excuse for our ignoring information if it is available, but equally there is no excuse for applying it lazily and unintelligently.

*Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra* both involve our thinking about love, marriage, and war, all of which bring us to various notions of what is meant by that complicated word 'honour'. But it seems to me to be throwing up the sponge if we go to *Othello* expecting that it will move within 'known' Elizabethan views about the rights of women and the behaviour of husbands. Indeed, the argument cuts the other way: to a man accustomed to think of his wife as a chattel, *Othello* would probably have seemed deeply subversive and highly offensive. And both *Othello* and *Antony* raise awkward questions about 'love'.

*Lear* makes us think about the duties of children to parents and of subjects to kings; armed with what we take to be Elizabethan notions about The Family, and with the Commandment 'Thou shalt honour thy father and thy mother', it is easy enough to reduce the play to a homily. Or, armed with a mixture of Elizabethan and modern Christianity, it is not difficult to see Lear as being on a pilgrimage to redemption, a pilgrimage during which he discovers many important truths. But it is worth at least seeing what happens if we approach the play without easy assumptions as to what Shakespeare thought and what his audience expected. There is, as I've said, no reason to suppose that 'the Elizabethans' all thought the same thoughts, any more than 'the English' today are like-minded about war or sex. If we aren't careful, we may when reading Shakespeare find ourselves taking only one of the possible views as being 'representative', and crediting Shakespeare with it to the exclusion of all others; so that

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we may end by being quite as wrong about his plays as we could be if we hadn't looked into the background at all.

Some people will object that this kind of anti-historicism is actually rather orthodox; the historicists, it will be said, were pretty thoroughly defeated some years ago, and we nowadays take it more or less for granted that we have to read Shakespeare's plays as we find them instead of importing dubious assumptions exhumed by scholars. I can only envy such people the company they keep and the books and journals they read. And I should like to teach the students they teach and have my students read the same books as their students. It may be true that, among some academics, historicism has had its day; but among students it is still rife because they read what is written for them by the editors of paperback editions or included by the compilers of paperback anthologies of critical essays. I take down from my shelves the Penguin *Three Jacobean Tragedies*, and on the first page of the Introduction I read about a 'whole genre of plays, sometimes called Revenge Tragedy (itself a subdivision of a wider group, "the tragedy of blood") which appeared during the last few years of the sixteenth century and the first decade or so of the seventeenth'. Or I take down the Signet Classics edition of *2 Henry IV* and read in the introduction (p. xli): 'Today... we recognise that Shakespeare's histories embody Elizabethan political views...' I open John Holloway's *The Story of the Night* and learn, of Othello, that his 'affronted indignation should be seen against the background of the Elizabethan prayer-book, where in the marriage service the husband promises to cherish and comfort his wife, but the wife to serve and obey the husband' (p. 39). Evidently, the Elizabethan World Picture, though banished from the stage, still mutters audibly in the cellarage. One could go on for pages accumulating evidence of this kind, but that would be merely tedious. What I would rather do is to look at a couple of Shakespeare plays which appear to invite us to make conventional assumptions, and to decide whether and in what spirit we ought to accept the invitation.



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Suppose, for example, that we could find some act which was, beyond question, considered deeply sinful in Shakespeare's day; and suppose we could show that Shakespeare in fact treats it in a variety of ways, running the whole gamut from disapproval through indifference to approval. Shouldn't we then not merely have cast doubt on whether, on that issue, there was *any* one 'Elizabethan' attitude, but also have gone some way further in our grasp of how vital it is not to approach Shakespeare with preconceptions? For 'historical' assumptions are only a type of any and all assumptions, and if I can convince the reader on this score I may have laid the groundwork for some of the more curious things I'm going to say later in the book. I may have suggested both Shakespeare's freedom, and also what I think should be our freedom, from received ideas.

Take suicide. Everyone knows that in the seventeenth century it was thought sinful; not till 1823 did Parliament abolish the practice of burying suicides at the crossroads under a pile of stones. In Shakespeare's day the Church of England, like the Catholic Church, rigidly forbade the burying in consecrated ground of anyone who had taken his own life. Now in Shakespeare there is a sharp contrast between the view taken of suicide in the Roman plays and what we find in plays whose background is more or less Christian. In the Roman plays there is no superstitious horror of suicide and frequently, indeed, it is thought of as being rather honourable (Brutus, Cassius; Antony). Elsewhere, however, a very different note is sounded. In *Hamlet*, for example, we have the 'doubtful death' of Ophelia, and the whole scene in which she is buried (v.i) is filled with references to the conventional Elizabethan abhorrence of suicide. The Church authorities have apparently been dubious about accepting the coroner's finding of 'accidental death' and will only bury her with 'maiméd' (much truncated) rites. The officiating cleric grumbles that Ophelia really, he thinks, ought to have been buried as a suicide, under a heap of 'Shards, flints and pebbles' (v.i.225). We recall that earlier in the play Hamlet himself

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has talked about how the Almighty has ‘fixed / His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter’ (I.ii.131). There is a good deal of eschatological terror in *Hamlet*, too, about where a man goes after death if he hasn’t made a proper end.

The background in *Romeo and Juliet* is also straightforwardly Christian and, as befits a play set in Italy, it is Catholic. The Friar, who marries the lovers and gives Juliet the potion, is a Franciscan, and Juliet twice goes to him ostensibly for ‘shrift’ (confession). Romeo, hearing he has been banished for his killing of Tybalt, says:

There is no world without Verona walls,  
 But purgatory, torture, hell itself. (III.iii.17)

*Banished*, he says, is a word that ‘the damnéd use . . . in hell’ (47). On the other hand, the Friar remarks of Juliet’s supposed death, ‘Now heaven hath all’ (IV.v.67), and on the same subject Balthasar believes that ‘her immortal part with angels lives’ (v.i.19). Romeo calls the Friar ‘a divine, a ghostly confessor, / A sin-absolver, and my friend professed’ (III.iii.49). And there are plenty of references to common Christian ideas like sin and the honourable estate of marriage. The Friar will not leave the lovers alone together

Till holy church incorporate two in one. (II.vi.37)

It is against this backdrop that we must see the catastrophe of the play.

Now, the catastrophe is not unprepared for: both Romeo and Juliet have earlier threatened, in the violence of their passion, to take their own lives. Romeo offers to stab himself at III.iii.108 but is restrained by Friar Laurence, who cries

Hold thy desperate hand . . .  
 Hast thou slain Tybalt? Wilt thou slay thyself?

He goes on to argue that, after all, Romeo has only been banished, so he and Juliet may well be reunited later on. Juliet, after her father has been pressing her to marry Paris, goes to the Friar’s cell.

If, in thy wisdom, thou canst give no help,  
 Do thou but call my resolution wise,  
 And with this knife I’ll help it presently . . . (IV.i.52)